AGRIPRENEURSHIP AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN CONFLICT–AFFECTED RURAL NIGERIA: DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF THE RURAL WOMEN AGRIPRENEURSHIP EMPOWERMENT INDEX (RWAEI)

Fidelis Freda Ijanada[1], Adeyeye Mercy Modupe[2], Alabi Jacob Abu[3]

[1,2,3]Department of entrepreneurship, faculty of Management science. National open University of Nigeria

[1]Corresponding author e-mail address: fareeunique@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Rural Women Agripreneurship Empowerment Index (RWAEI), a multifaceted instrument for assessing the empowerment results of agripreneurial engagement among rural women in Northeastern Nigerian regions affected by conflict, is introduced in this study. The study examines how access to mechanization, farm production, hired labor, and market engagement contribute to long-term economic inclusion, decision-making authority, and community leadership in addition to job creation. It is framed within Sen's Capability Approach and Gendered Institutions Theory. The study uses confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), mediation analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to validate the empowerment pathways and build the RWAEI model using data from 1,146 rural women in Gombe, Bauchi, and Adamawa. The findings show that the relationship between agripreneurship and empowerment is significantly mediated by labor employment and machine access. The index provides a context-specific metric for evaluating the agency and resilience of rural women, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.812. The results back up the combination of focused capacity-building initiatives and gender-sensitive agricultural policies to increase the effect of agribusiness. By shifting from output-based models to capability-focused empowerment assessment, the study advances the conversation around agripreneurship and has wide ranging implications for poverty alleviation, post-conflict recovery, and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

Keywords: *Agripreneurship, Women Empowerment, Capability Approach, RWAEI, Conflict Affected Regions, Poverty Alleviation*
(JEL code: B54)

INTRODUCTION

Job creation has remained a key driver of economic stability, particularly in developing countries with high unemployment and poverty rates. In recent years, global policy initiatives such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021) have mobilized significant resources to create jobs through infrastructure development (Zhan and Santos-Paulino, 2021). Despite economic growth, Africa continues to face a persistent employment challenge; over 63% of the population is still in subsistence work, despite the creation of 37 million wage-paying jobs in the last decade (Cieslik et al., 2022). This challenge is particularly acute in Nigeria. According to the Nigeria Labour Force Survey (2024), the working-age population's participation rate fell from 79.5% in Q3 2023 to 77.3% in Q1 2024, with the employment-to-population ratio falling by 2.4 percentage points.

Hence in the context of Nigeria's post-insurgency recovery, particularly in rural northeastern regions, job creation is not only an economic imperative, but also a tool for stability and empowerment (Ali and Ali, 2024). Poverty, entrenched gender inequality, and institutional fragility are all prevalent in these areas. Although agriculture continues to dominate rural livelihoods, traditional efforts to integrate women into the agricultural economy frequently fail to address the deep-rooted structural and capability-based constraints that prevent them from truly achieving economic empowerment (Kapiamba, 2024). Emerging research suggests that agripreneurship, or the entrepreneurial approach to agriculture, has transformation potential. It can promote inclusive growth, create jobs, and boost women's autonomy and community leadership (Singh et al., 2022; Sathiyabama et al., 2023). Initiatives like the National Centre for Agricultural Mechanization (NCAM) show that access to agricultural technology boosts produc-

tivity and income (Mahmood et al., 2025). Furthermore, agripreneurship is viewed as a platform for both livelihood generation and gendered transformation, providing women with new capabilities, resources, and decision-making power (Adeyanju, et al., 2023). However, a significant limitation of many rural development programs is the lack of rigorous, multidimensional tools for measuring women's empowerment in addition to income gains (Quisumbing et al., 2023). Most programs focus solely on linear economic indicators, ignoring the broader spectrum of empowerment, such as resource access, decision-making agency, social mobility, and market participation (Ferdous, 2024). Despite the recognition of agripreneurship as a rural and gender-inclusion strategy, the existing literature has largely leveraged unconnected, income-outcome, and quality indicators of empowerment. These approaches fail to aptly capture and encompass the complex underpinnings of women's empowerment, particularly in a rural and conflicted context where a lack of institutional stability, social norms, and adequate capabilities are complex and intricately interconnected. More urgently, existing strategies of women's empowerment are rarely grounded on any comprehensive theoretical underpinnings and supported by robust quantitative approaches, leaving policymakers and practitioners of development with no reliable, contextual, and specific instrument by which a significant empowerment outcome of agripreneurship can be measured, vis-à-vis income generation as a simplistic outcome. This study tackles this essential gap by establishing and empirically validating the Rural Women Agripreneurship Empowerment Index (RWAEI) a novel, multidimensional measuring methodology anchored in Sen's Capability Approach and Gendered Institutions Theory. Unlike previous empowerment metrics, the RWAEI rigorously integrates economic, human, social, and market capital dimensions and specifically incorporates the intermediary roles of mechanization access and labor employment. The study applying Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), and mediation variable to analyse large-scale field data from conflict-affected rural communities in Northeastern Nigeria, the study provides one of the first rigorously validated, context-specific tools for measuring agripreneurship driven empowerment among rural women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sen's Capability Approach (1999) and Gendered Institutions Theory (Mackay et al., 2009) serve as the foundation for this study and offer a potent lens through which to examine empowerment in addition to labor participation and income gains. When taken as a whole, these theories allow for a more thorough comprehension of how agripreneurship changes rural women's lives by increasing their capacity, agency, and access to decision-making processes.

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

According to Sen's framework, development is the growth of people's capacities and their actual freedoms to live the lives they choose. Agripreneurship can give rural women actual options, such as having access to land, owning tools,

running cooperatives, or taking part in market decisions. The capability approach shifts the focus of the study to the underlying freedoms rather than measurable outcomes (like income or employment). Gendered Institutions Theory investigates how formal and informal institutional norms perpetuate gender inequality by limiting women's access to economic resources, leadership positions, and decision-making power. In many Nigerian rural communities, gender roles are institutionalized, limiting land ownership, financial inclusion, and access to agricultural technology. Agripreneurship thus serves not only as a source of income, but also as a mechanism for breaking down institutional barriers and promoting gender equality.

Justification for Theory Integration

The Capability Approach conceptualizes the ultimate goals of empowerment (freedoms, capabilities, and functioning), whereas Gendered Institutions Theory explains the structural constraints that women face. This study captures the dynamic relationship between access (to resources and opportunity), agency (autonomy and leadership), and achievement (measurable empowerment outcomes), the three core components of the Rural Women Agripreneurship Empowerment Index (RWAEI).

Women empowerment

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted process that includes access to resources, control over income, leadership, and the ability to make life-changing decisions. Traditional metrics, on the other hand, have focused primarily on income, ignoring intangible but critical dimensions such as autonomy, community status, and decision-making power (Kabeer, 2021; Wei et al., 2021). Recent studies (Chelliah and Bagavan, 2023; Bihari and Priya, 2024) show that women agripreneurs have improved their access to land, skills, and markets, but the empowerment processes are still poorly measured and theorized.

Agripreneurship

Agripreneurship, which combines agriculture and entrepreneurship, has emerged as a promising platform for women's economic inclusion, particularly in rural areas. It promotes innovation, self-employment, and leadership in the agricultural value chain (Karaca and Ince, 2023). However, one significant gap in the literature is the lack of localized empowerment indices that capture how agripreneurship affects women's agency and capabilities over time.

Machine operation

Access to machinery and mechanized tools reduces labor intensity and time poverty for women, allowing them to take a more active role in higher-value agribusiness activities. Studies such as (Danda, 2022 and Daudu et al. 2020) discovered that women-led mechanization increased productivity and participation in rice farming cooperatives in South Asia and Nigeria. However, such studies frequently focused on productivity metrics and lacked a framework for assessing long-term empowerment.

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Hired farm labour

Women who grow agribusinesses large enough to hire workers not only increase local employment, but also advance to positions of leadership and decision-making. Adeyanju et al. (2024) discovered that youth agripreneurs in the ENABLE-TAAT program hired an average of four more workers per enterprise. However, the gender disaggregated impact of such job creation, particularly on empowerment outcomes, is understudied.

Market Access and Economic Mobility

Market integration is critical for sustaining rural agribusinesses. According to research, marketing capabilities, particularly digital, cooperative, and value-added sales, boost women's income and economic standing (Ouko et al., 2022; Mishra, 2024). However, there has been little research into whether increased market access leads to social empowerment, such as influence in community decisions or land negotiations.

Empirical Review on the effect of job creation and rural women empowerment

Chelliah, and Bagavan (2023) in their study, empowering women agripreneurs through precision agriculture technology adoption. The objectives of the study were to analyses existing literature on PAT adoption theories, uncover barriers faced by women agripreneurs, and provide recommendations for overcoming these challenges. A systematic review method was employed to gather insights from diverse sources, focusing on social, policy, and educational implications. Findings reveal that barriers to PAT adoption among women agripreneurs include digital literacy, access to training programs, and limited institutional support. Social norms, inadequate resources, and policy shortcomings exacerbate the disparity. The study also highlights innovative approaches, such as peer mentorship programs connecting technically skilled young women with less technologically literate older women farmers, as an effective strategy to bridge the digital literacy divide. The study concludes that addressing the technological gap requires multi-pronged interventions involving tailored training programs, supportive policies, and enhanced access to resources for women agripreneurs. It recommends policymakers prioritize mentorship initiatives, create accessible PAT training programs, and foster inclusive digital agriculture strategies. The recent research address these gaps, women agripreneurs aree empowered to adopt precision agriculture technology, ultimately benefiting rural farming communities and contributing to sustainable agricultural practices.

Adeyanju et al., (2024) studied, harnessing the job creation capacity of young rural agripreneurs: A quasi-experimental study of the ENABLE program in Africa's growing investments in youth agribusiness empowerment programs underscore the potential of youth-led agribusinesses in creating employment and revitalizing rural economies. However, the extent to which these programs unlock job creation capacity remains under explored. This study examines the evolving role of youth and small agribusinesses in employment generation in rural areas and evaluates the impact of the African Development Bank's (AfDB) Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation (TAAT) Empowering Novel Agribusiness-Led Employment (ENABLE) program implemented in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. A survey of 1,435 respondents, including 737 program participants and 698 non-participants, was conducted across the three countries. Using an Endogenous Switching Regression (ESR) model, the study analyzed determinants of program participation, factors influencing job creation, and the program's impact on employment outcomes. The findings reveal that youth-owned agribusinesses significantly contribute to job creation, hiring an average of four employees per business. The ESR results confirm the positive impact of ENABLE-TAAT on participants' job creation capacity, with non-participants showing potential for increased job creation if they had participated. Key factors influencing job creation include socioeconomic characteristics such as age and marital status, as well as business attributes like agribusiness experience, business level, income, and access to land. The study concludes that targeted agribusiness empowerment initiatives have substantial potential to enhance youth employment and reduce rural unemployment. It recommends increased investments in youth agribusiness programs to strengthen their job creation impact. Policymakers should focus on addressing barriers to program participation and supporting young agripreneurs with resources and capacity-building initiatives to expand their businesses and create sustainable employment opportunities. These efforts will contribute to reducing unemployment rates and fostering rural economic growth in the study countries and across Africa. Bihari and Priya, (2024) Economic Development of Women Agripreneurs Through Interventions of Government Livelihood. This study evaluates the impacts of these interventions on the socio-economic conditions of rural beneficiaries, forming part of a Ph.D. thesis. The study surveyed 260 beneficiaries selected from 13 blocks across three districts in Jharkhand. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including paired t-tests and Principal Component Analysis (PCA), were employed to analyze the data. The findings indicate that all respondents were beneficiaries of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), followed by JOHAR (92.7%) and JHIMDI (14.2%). Substantial improvements were observed in asset ownership, including poly houses, vermi pits, poultry sheds, and micro-drip systems. Statistically significant increases were also noted in income, expenditure, and savings related to these assets, except for expenditure on poultry sheds. Additionally, the income from agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and agribusiness activities significantly improved post-program participation. PCA identified three principal components with an Eigen value greater than 1.0, collectively explaining 71.03% of the variance in the data. Principal Component 1 (PC1), accounting for 29.6% of the variance, was strongly associated with entrepreneurial traits such as innovation, risk-bearing ability, self-confidence, and planning orientation. The study concludes that targeted interventions have significantly enhanced the economic empowerment of rural women by improving their incomes, asset ownership, and entrepreneurial capacities. It recommends scaling up successful interventions

like NRLM and JOHAR while focusing on capacity-building efforts to foster entrepreneurial behaviors among beneficiaries. Policymakers should also consider integrating additional training and support mechanisms to sustain the socioeconomic benefits and foster long-term rural development.

Gaps and contributions to literature

Despite growing interest in agripreneurship as a tool for rural development, there is little agreement on how to quantify empowerment outcomes in a structured, scalable manner. Most studies are qualitative or use disconnected indicators without an integrated framework. This study fills that gap. Developing and validating the RWAEI.; Using a multi-theoretical approach to explain empowerment pathways.; Using quantitative modeling (SEM and CFA) to determine how specific agripreneurship inputs affect empowerment dimensions

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a quantitative research technique, using a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from rural women farmers in Nigeria's Northeastern States of Gombe, Bauchi, and Adamawa, which represent the larger rural agrarian communities in Northeast Nigeria. The target population consisted of rural women who were actively engaged in agribusiness activities such as farm production, marketing, and the use of hired labor and machinery. A multistage cluster sampling method was used to select respondents from local government areas known for rural agricultural activity. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, 1,146 respondents were chosen from the three states. A structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was created to assess agripreneurial inputs (machine operation, hired labor, farm production, and marketing) and empowerment outcomes. Data were collected via the KoBo Collect mobile platform. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographics and participation rates. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is used to validate the RWAEI structure Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to test hypothesized relationships and Mediation analysis to determine the indirect effects of agribusiness inputs on empowerment via RWAEI dimensions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that agripreneurship is used to create employment at a high and consistent rate throughout the three research states. All respondents in Gombe indicated involvement in agripreneurship activities, while similarly high percentages were recorded in Bauchi (94%) and Adamawa (92.2%). These statistics show that agripreneurship has become a frequent and reliable livelihood option for rural women in Northeastern Nigeria. Rather than revealing geographical variations, the pattern indicates a shared post-conflict coping and recovery approach, through which women use farm-based activities to generate employment for themselves and for others within their communities. This study is aligned with the work of Adeyanju et (2024) suggesting that young agripreneurs in Kenya are motivated to participate in agripreneurship empowerment programs and their involvement has a causal effect on their abilities. lastly involvement in job creation activities via agripreneurship, study shows that all the rural women farmers that constituted the respondents in Gombe were involved in job creation activities, 94% of respondents in Bauchi and 92.2% of respondents in Adamawa were involved in job creation activities through agripreneurship, revealed that women create job for themselves and others in their community in Northeastern Nigeria.

Figure 1: Response Rate by Involvement in Job
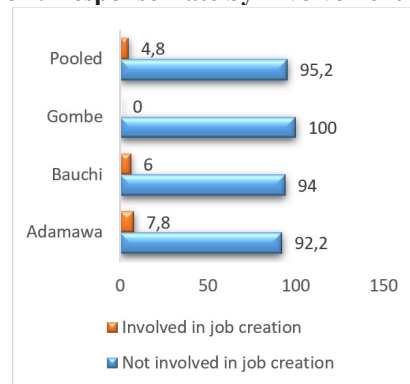
Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

	Hypothesis Statement	Coefficient (β)		Decision	Interpretation
H₁	Machine operation has significant positive effect on empowerment of rural women agripreneurs.	Positive (significant)	<	Supported	Machine operation enhances economic empowerment and autonomy of women.
H₂	Hired farm labour has significant positive effect on empowerment of rural women agripreneurs.	Positive (significant)	<	Supported	Use of hired labor supports income generation and job creation.
H₃	Farm production has significant positive effect on empowerment of rural women agripreneurs.	Positive (significant)	<	Supported	Increased productivity contributes to household and community economic growth.
H₄	Marketing has significant positive effect on empowerment of rural women agripreneurs.	Positive (significant)	<	Supported	Market engagement leads to income stability and expansion of value chains.

Note: The exact coefficients were not specified in the document except for an overall coefficient (β = 0.058) indicating job creation's significant positive effect on empowerment at $p < 0.05$. All hypotheses were supported based on statistical analysis using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

According to the survey, the poll found that many rural women in the Northeastern States work as farmers or live in rural regions are subjected to vicious cycles of unemployment and poverty owing to ongoing insurgent actions on farmlands., which has made the search for sustainable alternatives necessary, which is Agripreneurship. All the hypotheses earlier developed were supported based on statistical analysis.

Table 1. shows that there is no effect of job creation on rural women empowerment in North Eastern Nigeria, as per hypothesis. The Table shows that the calculated coefficient ($\beta = 0.058$) was significant at a p-value < 0.05, indicating a positive connection. Creating jobs for rural women has a big beneficial impact on their empowerment. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was supported. The high level of participation in agripreneurial activities, create job across the three states surveyed Gombe (100%), Bauchi (94%), and Adamawa (92.2%) demonstrates a clear trend of rural women actively engaging in value-added agricultural activities. These findings align with Adeyanju et al. (2024), who highlighted the capacity of agribusiness programs to foster entrepreneurial engagement and job creation, especially among the youth and women in rural areas.

The study also resonates with the literature reviewed, including Alex (2013), who emphasized the transformational impact of women-led mechanization, and Chelliah & Bagavan (2023), who identified digital and institutional barriers to women's effective participation in modern agriculture. The reliability analysis further supports the internal consistency of the research instrument, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.812 considered acceptable in social science research. This multidimensional empowerment spanning income generation, skill acquisition, and decision-making reflects agripreneurship potential to break cycles of poverty and marginalization. The integration of women into these agricultural value chains thus supports the broader objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

CONCLUSION

Shis study concludes that agripreneurship is a dynamic platform for empowering rural women in Northeastern Nigeria, especially in the post-conflict context. The introduction and validation of the Rural Women Agripreneurship Empowerment Index (RWAEI) offer a novel and robust framework for assessing multidimensional empowerment outcomes that goes beyond traditional income-based metrics. The findings confirm that access to mechanization, hired labor, farm productivity, and market participation all improve women's economic inclusion, agency, and leadership capacity. The high rates of agripreneurship in Gombe, Bauchi, and Adamawa highlight rural women's important role in local job creation and community resilience. Using a multi-theoretical lens, this study fills a critical methodological gap in empowerment assessment and provides a scalable model for policymakers, NGOs, and development actors looking to support gender-sensitive agricultural transformation in fragile regions. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating empowerment metrics into agribusiness programs

to effectively monitor impact and promote equitable economic recovery in accordance with the SDGs.

Recommendations with Policy Implications

1. Implement the RWAEI Framework: Policymakers, donor agencies, and program implementer should use the RWAEI as a standardized tool to assess the impact of agribusiness interventions on women's empowerment. This index can be used as a monitoring and evaluation benchmark for agricultural, gender, and poverty reduction programs.

2. Enhance Women's Access to Agricultural Mechanization: The study recommends targeted subsidies or credit schemes to help women own and operate agricultural machinery, which has been shown to significantly boost empowerment through increased productivity and autonomy.

3. Encourage women-led employment and agribusiness expansion: Development programs should assist female agripreneurs in growing their businesses to the point where they can hire workers, thereby increasing employment and women's leadership capacity in rural communities.

4. Facilitate market access via digital and cooperative platforms: Investments in digital literacy, mobile market platforms, and cooperative formation are critical for increasing women's access to value chains, pricing power, and bargaining power in agricultural markets.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a substantial contribution through the development and validation of the RWAEI, some limitations should be addressed. First, the cross-sectional design limits the capacity to make causal inferences or capture changes in empowerment outcomes over time. Second, although the sample size of 1,146 respondents is robust, the findings are based on three states in Northeastern Nigeria and may not be entirely generalizable to other locations with distinct socio-cultural or institutional contexts. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs and apply the RWAEI across varied geographical locations to further assess its resilience and external validity.

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