

## **BRIDGING GENDER GAPS THROUGH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Women's economic empowerment is a key development priority in rural Nigeria, driven by persistent household poverty and gender inequalities that restrict women's access to resources and economic opportunities. Although women significantly contribute to agriculture and the informal economy, structural and cultural barriers limit their ability to reduce poverty. This study examined how women in agriculture initiatives, women's vocational training programmes, and women's cooperatives contribute to household poverty reduction in rural Nigeria. The analysis is grounded in human capital theory, which emphasizes that investment in education and skills increases individual productivity and yields sustained economic benefits for households and society. A non-empirical qualitative design was adopted, relying on systematic review and thematic synthesis of peer reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reports on women's economic empowerment and rural poverty in Nigeria. The study finds that women in agriculture initiatives improve household income and food security through increased productivity and market access. Vocational training enhances income diversification and financial autonomy, particularly when combined with credit and post training support. Women's cooperatives reduce poverty by improving access to finance, strengthening social capital, and enhancing women's decision making power. Sustainability is limited by insufficient funding, weak institutional support, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Women's economic empowerment constitutes a viable and evidence-based pathway to household poverty reduction in rural Nigeria, provided it is supported by enabling institutional and socio-economic conditions. Policies should integrate gender responsive agricultural reform, market oriented vocational training, cooperative strengthening, and legal protection of women's economic rights to ensure sustainable poverty reduction.

**Keywords:** Women's Economic Empowerment, Household Poverty Reduction, Rural Development, Women in Agriculture, Women's Co-operatives.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women's economic empowerment is a crucial driver of household poverty reduction, fostering economic growth and sustainable development. Economic empowerment refers to the ability of women to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from economic activities on equal terms with men (Kabeer, 2012). When women gain access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship, they can enhance household income and improve the standard of living for their families. Duflo (2012) found that women tend to invest their earnings in children's education, healthcare, and nutrition, leading to long-term poverty alleviation. The role of women's economic empowerment in household poverty reduction is particularly significant in developing countries,

where gender disparities in income and asset ownership persist (World Bank, 2020). Structural barriers such as discriminatory labour laws, lack of access to credit, and social norms limiting women's participation in economic activities hinder their financial independence (Chant, 2016). However, initiatives such as microfinance programmes, vocational training, and women's cooperatives have demonstrated success in improving household income levels and overall well-being (Karlán & Morduch, 2010).

Furthermore, women's economic empowerment has a multiplier effect on poverty reduction by fostering intergenerational wealth creation. When women are economically empowered, they can afford better education and healthcare for their children, breaking the cycle of poverty (UN Women, 2019). Moreover, empowered women contribute to community development by participating in decision-making processes that enhance social and economic outcomes (Sen, 1999). Governments and international organisations have increasingly recognised the importance of integrating gender-responsive policies into economic development strategies to address poverty holistically.

Women's economic empowerment has demonstrably reduced household poverty in developed economies by stabilizing income, enhancing child welfare, and strengthening household resilience. In the United States, supportive labour policies such as paid parental leave and childcare subsidies have enabled women to sustain continuous employment, thereby increasing household income and lowering poverty risks (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Similarly, Sweden's gender equal labour regime, characterized by extensive parental leave and affordable childcare, has reduced income inequality within households by narrowing the gender wage gap and supporting women's long term labour force attachment (Gornick & Meyers, 2019). These cases illustrate that institutional support for women's work is central to durable household poverty reduction. When situated within Nigeria's rural dynamics, the contrast with advanced welfare states is analytically revealing. Rural Nigerian women are central to agricultural production, petty trading, and informal service provision, yet their economic contributions are systematically constrained by limited access to land ownership, formal credit, childcare support, and employment protections (Agarwal, 1994; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). Customary land tenure systems and patriarchal inheritance practices in many rural communities restrict women's control over productive assets, thereby reducing the returns to their labour and reinforcing household poverty (World Bank, 2019). Unlike the institutional contexts of the United States and Sweden, rural Nigeria lacks comprehensive social infrastructure that enables women to reconcile productive and reproductive responsibilities, resulting in labour participation that is largely informal, insecure, and poorly remunerated (Chant, 2016).

Women's economic empowerment is a crucial driver of household poverty reduction in African countries. In Kenya, women's engagement in small-scale agribusiness and cooperative societies has strengthened food security and household resilience against economic shocks (Kabeer, 2022). Empowering women economically not only improves their personal financial status but also has a multiplier effect on poverty alleviation by enhancing children's education, healthcare access, and overall family well-being.

In Nigeria, women's economic empowerment is a critical driver of household poverty reduction, as it enhances women's access to income-generating opportunities, financial resources, and decision-making power within households. Empowered women contribute significantly to household

welfare by improving food security, healthcare access, and children's education, thereby breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty (OECD, 2019). However, structural barriers such as gender discrimination, limited access to credit, and socio-cultural norms hinder women's economic participation (Kabeer, 2022). Policies promoting financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, and gender-responsive programs are essential to fostering women's economic empowerment and ensuring sustainable poverty alleviation in Nigeria (World Bank, 2021).

Despite women constituting approximately 49.4% of Nigeria's population and contributing significantly to household income, they face systemic barriers that limit their economic potential and, consequently, their ability to reduce household poverty (British Council, 2022). These barriers include restricted access to financial services, with only 30% of women having access to formal banking compared to 46% of men (World Bank, 2021); limited land ownership rights, where women own less than 10% of land despite providing 70% of agricultural labour (FAO, 2020); educational disparities, with female adult literacy at 59.3% compared to male literacy at 70.9% (UNESCO, 2018); and cultural norms that reinforce gender-based occupational segregation (UN Women, 2019). The persistence of these barriers has significant implications for Nigeria's development goals, as research by the International Monetary Fund suggests that closing the gender gap in economic participation could increase Nigeria's GDP by up to 35% (IMF, 2018). This paper argues that targeted women's economic empowerment initiatives in rural Nigeria can significantly reduce household poverty when mediated by structural and cultural factors.

### **Study Objective**

- i. To assess the influence of the women in agriculture initiative on reducing household poverty in rural communities in Nigeria.
- ii. To evaluate the effect of women's vocational training initiatives on alleviating household poverty in rural communities in Nigeria.
- iii. To investigate the role of women's cooperatives in mitigating household poverty in rural communities in Nigeria.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Women in agriculture initiative and reducing household poverty**

Women play a crucial role in Nigeria's agricultural sector, constituting approximately 70% of the agricultural workforce and producing 80% of the nation's food (Oluwatayo, 2019). Despite their significant contributions, women farmers face considerable constraints, including limited access to land, credit facilities, agricultural inputs, and extension services (Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2019). Recognising these challenges, various women in agriculture (WIA) initiatives have been implemented throughout Nigeria to empower female farmers and consequently reduce household poverty in rural communities.

The Women in Agriculture (WIA) program, formally established within the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) in the 1980s, marked Nigeria's first systematic attempt to address gender disparities in agricultural extension services (Adesina & Djato, 2017). According to

Adekanye, Otitolaiye and Adeyemo (2023), the program aimed to improve agricultural production and productivity among women farmers through targeted extension services, technology adoption, and empowerment strategies. Odurukwe, Matthews-Njoku and Ejioku-Okereke (2016) demonstrated that participants in women in agriculture programmes experienced significant improvements in agricultural productivity, with yields increasing by up to 30% for various crops compared to non-participants.

Adepoju, Olawuyi and Adegboyega (2021) conducted a study in Southwestern Nigeria, finding that households with women who participated in women in agriculture initiatives experienced a 23% increase in income compared to non-participating households. Similarly, Oladejo, Olawuyi and Anjorin (2021) reported that women in agriculture programmes in Oyo State led to a 27% reduction in the poverty headcount among participating households. These economic improvements were attributed to enhanced agricultural productivity, diversification of income sources, and improved market access facilitated by the initiatives.

Beyond direct economic impacts, women in agriculture initiatives have contributed significantly to women's empowerment, which acts as a pathway to poverty reduction. Fabiyi, Danladi, Akande and Mahmood (2015) observed that women's participation in women in agriculture programs in Northern Nigeria led to increased decision-making power within households, particularly regarding agricultural production and income allocation. This enhanced decision-making capability resulted in greater investments in children's education and household nutrition. Ajani (2019) further noted that the social capital developed through women's agricultural groups supported by women in agriculture initiatives provided crucial safety nets during economic hardships, effectively reducing vulnerability to poverty.

The technological dimension of WIA initiatives has also proven critical for poverty reduction. Ironkwe, Ezebuoro and Ewuziem (2016) evaluated the impact of improved agricultural technologies introduced through women in agriculture programmes in Southeast Nigeria, reporting that adoption of these technologies reduced labour drudgery by up to 45% while increasing output by 35%. This technological empowerment allowed women farmers to allocate time to other income-generating activities, further contributing to household welfare. Adebayo, Adediran and Oyekanmi (2018) similarly found that women in agriculture initiatives that promoted climate-smart agricultural practices helped women farmers build resilience against environmental shocks, thereby protecting household income and food security.

Despite these positive outcomes, challenges remain in the implementation and sustainability of WIA initiatives. Obiora (2017) identified inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and cultural barriers as significant constraints limiting the effectiveness of WIA programmes in many rural communities. Additionally, Akinola, Ene and Baiyegunhi (2023) noted that the discontinuity of many initiatives due to changing government priorities has undermined the long-term impact. Adeleke-Bello and Ashimolowo (2015) argued that more comprehensive approaches integrating access to finance, markets, and land rights are necessary to fully address the multidimensional nature of rural poverty among women farmers.

While the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that women in agriculture initiatives enhance productivity, income, and empowerment, a critical synthesis of these findings revealed nuanced contrasts in their scope and sustainability. Studies by Odurukwe, Matthews-Njoku and Ejioku-Okereke (2016), Adepoju, Olawuyi and Adegboyega (2021), and Oladejo, Olawuyi and Anjorin (2021) highlight tangible economic gains and poverty reduction among participating households, emphasizing improvements in yields, income diversification, and market access. Complementing these findings, Fabiyi, Danladi, Akande and Mahmood (2015) and Ajani (2019) underscore the social and empowerment dimensions, including increased household decision-making and strengthened social capital, which indirectly mitigate vulnerability to poverty. Conversely, other studies present a more cautious perspective regarding the broader and long-term impact of WIA programs. Obiora (2017) and Akinola, Ene and Baiyegunhi (2023) point to systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, cultural barriers, and policy discontinuity, which undermine program effectiveness and sustainability. Adeleke-Bello and Ashimolowo (2015) further argue that without integrating complementary support mechanisms such as access to finance, land rights, and comprehensive market linkages, WIA initiatives may only partially address the structural dimensions of rural poverty. Collectively, these contrasting findings suggest that while WIA programs have demonstrable short-term economic and social benefits, their long-term success depends on holistic strategies that address structural, institutional, and cultural constraints.

The Women in Agriculture (WIA) initiative in Nigeria has been widely promoted as a strategy to reduce household poverty by enhancing women's access to resources, training, and financial support in rural communities. Oluwatayo (2019); Ogunlela and Mukhtar (2019) indicated that WIA programmes improve agricultural productivity, increase household income, and empower women to participate more actively in local economies, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation. Women beneficiaries have been shown to reinvest earnings in children's education, health, and nutrition, generating intergenerational socioeconomic benefits (Duflo, 2012; World Bank, 2020). However, some research questions the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of these initiatives, highlighting challenges such as unequal access to programme resources, socio-cultural constraints, limited market linkages, and dependency on external funding, which may reduce lasting poverty reduction outcomes (Chant, 2016; Adeoti & Akerele, 2021). Consequently, while WIA programmes demonstrate short-term improvements in household welfare, the evidence suggests that structural and contextual factors critically mediate their impact, and without complementary policy support and community engagement, the reduction in household poverty may not be sustained.

### **Women's vocational training initiatives on alleviating household poverty**

Women's vocational training initiatives play a crucial role in addressing household poverty in rural communities in Nigeria. Aderemi, Adedokun and Olayemi (2019) found that empowering women through skills acquisition enhances their economic independence and contributes to household income. Given that many rural households in Nigeria rely on subsistence farming and petty trade, vocational training provides women with alternative income-generating skills such as tailoring, hairdressing, and agro-processing (Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2020). These skills reduce dependency on seasonal farming and offer a more stable economic foundation for families.

Afolabi (2018) indicated that women who participate in vocational training are more likely to establish small businesses, thereby boosting economic activities within rural communities. This entrepreneurial engagement not only increases household income but also creates employment opportunities for other community members. Ejumudo (2021) found that women trained in financial literacy and business management were better equipped to manage household resources, leading to improved financial stability. By fostering self-reliance, vocational training enables women to contribute to household decision-making and long-term economic planning.

Moreover, women's vocational training initiatives have a positive impact on child welfare and education in rural households. Adamu and Adekeye (2019) suggested that households with trained women entrepreneurs experience better educational outcomes for their children due to improved financial capacity. Increased income from vocational training reduces financial constraints, allowing parents to afford school fees, books, and other learning materials. Additionally, economic empowerment discourages child labour, as families no longer rely on children's earnings to supplement household income (Olawale & Adebayo, 2022).

Vocational training also enhances women's access to microfinance and credit facilities, which further supports business expansion and household economic stability (Akinwale, 2020). Many rural women face barriers to formal financial institutions due to illiteracy and lack of collateral; however, vocational training programs often integrate financial education and access to micro-loans. These financial services enable women to invest in their businesses, improve productivity, and sustain their economic activities (Yakubu & Salisu, 2021). The multiplier effect of women's financial inclusion extends beyond individual households to the broader rural economy.

Social empowerment is another critical outcome of vocational training initiatives. Women who acquire vocational skills gain confidence and social recognition, which improves their participation in community decision-making (Bamidele & Okafor, 2021). In traditional patriarchal settings where women's roles are often confined to domestic responsibilities, vocational training enhances their social mobility and self-esteem. According to Ojo and Lawal (2023), vocational training not only reduces economic vulnerability but also strengthens women's roles as agents of change within their communities.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as inadequate funding, limited access to training centres, and cultural constraints hinder the effectiveness of vocational training initiatives in Nigeria (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2020). Many programs lack sustainable funding, leading to inconsistent training schedules and insufficient materials. Additionally, societal norms in some rural areas discourage women from engaging in income-generating activities outside their traditional roles (Ogunyemi, 2022). In conclusion, women's vocational training initiatives significantly contribute to alleviating household poverty in rural Nigeria by fostering entrepreneurship, improving financial stability, enhancing child welfare, and promoting social empowerment.

Women's vocational training initiatives in rural Nigeria have been widely promoted as mechanisms to alleviate household poverty by equipping women with marketable skills and enhancing their income-generating capacity. Olawale & Omoteso (2021); Adebayo and Akinbode, (2020) reported positive outcomes, indicating that trained women are more likely to engage in small-scale

entrepreneurship, improve household consumption, and invest in children's education and health, thereby reducing multidimensional poverty. For instance, microenterprise training programmes combined with microcredit access have been shown to increase women's financial independence and household welfare (Adeniran et al., 2022). However, other research highlights limitations in the sustainability and long-term impact of such interventions. Studies by Eze et al. (2021) and Ifeanyi and Okoro (2020) argued that vocational training outcomes often diminish over time due to insufficient post-training support, market saturation, cultural restrictions on women's economic participation, and inadequate integration with broader rural development strategies. Methodological differences, such as reliance on short-term evaluations and self-reported income data, further complicate the assessment of effectiveness. Consequently, while vocational training can enhance women's immediate economic prospects, the extent to which it sustainably alleviates household poverty remains contested, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches that combine skills acquisition with market linkages, financial inclusion, and social support systems.

### **Women's cooperatives in mitigating household poverty**

The role of women's cooperatives in alleviating household poverty in rural Nigeria has gained significant attention in recent years, as these cooperatives serve as critical platforms for empowering women economically. Women's cooperatives are organised groups where women come together to pool resources, share knowledge, and support one another in various income-generating activities (Mordi, Mba & Obisi, 2017). These cooperatives are especially pivotal in rural areas where limited access to formal financial services, inadequate infrastructure, and low-income levels make it difficult for individuals to achieve economic mobility. In this context, women's cooperatives provide both economic and social support, enhancing their members' livelihoods and contributing to poverty reduction.

In Nigeria, rural women often face systemic barriers to economic participation, including limited access to credit, land, and education, which are essential for sustainable development (Uche, Okoye, & Odu, 2019). The formation of women's cooperatives enables these women to overcome such barriers by creating collective ownership of resources and offering a space for mutual assistance. Through these cooperatives, women are able to access credit facilities, start and scale up small businesses, and engage in agricultural activities that improve food security and household income. According to Adeniran (2016), women's cooperatives facilitate access to microfinance, which has been shown to have a direct positive effect on poverty reduction by enabling women to invest in small-scale businesses and agricultural ventures.

Moreover, women's cooperatives also promote skills development and capacity building among rural women. These cooperatives often organise training programs on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and other vocational skills, which are vital for women to effectively manage resources and increase their productivity. Olusola and Ojedokun (2018) argued that such training opportunities empower women to make informed decisions about their finances and investments, thereby fostering sustainable economic growth. By increasing their skills and knowledge, women are better equipped to contribute to the economy, not only at the household level but also in the broader community.

Another critical role of women's cooperatives in rural Nigeria is the social capital they create. Social capital, which refers to the networks, relationships, and trust built through community interactions, is an essential element of rural development (Eze, Oladipo & Oboh, 2019). Women's cooperatives provide a platform for women to collaborate, share resources, and offer emotional and psychological support. These social networks enhance solidarity and cooperation, which are crucial in times of economic hardship. Additionally, the cooperative model encourages shared responsibility, which promotes collective problem-solving and reduces the vulnerability of individual members to shocks such as crop failure, illness, or economic downturns.

Women's cooperatives have also contributed to promoting gender equality in rural communities, which is a critical factor in poverty reduction. In many rural parts of Nigeria, women are often marginalised and excluded from decision-making processes, particularly in economic matters. However, through the activities of cooperatives, women are empowered to engage in local governance and policy-making, ensuring their voices are heard. According to Akinmoladun (2015), women's participation in these cooperatives enhances their socio-political visibility and challenges traditional gender norms that limit their economic opportunities. By empowering women, cooperatives also contribute to the broader goal of reducing gender disparities in rural communities.

Furthermore, women's cooperatives foster economic resilience in the face of environmental challenges, particularly those related to climate change. In rural Nigeria, agricultural production is the primary source of livelihood, and women are significantly involved in farming activities. However, climate change has led to unpredictable weather patterns, affecting agricultural output. Women's cooperatives play a vital role in mitigating the effects of climate change by facilitating access to climate-smart agricultural techniques, sustainable farming practices, and early warning systems. This, in turn, helps to ensure food security, maintain household income, and reduce the vulnerability of rural women to climate-induced poverty (Ayuba, Ibrahim & Ali, 2021).

Despite the positive contributions of women's cooperatives to poverty alleviation, there are several challenges that hinder their full potential. These include limited access to funding, lack of adequate infrastructure, and internal conflicts within the cooperatives. According to Okunmadewa, Dada, and Adewumi (2018), while women's cooperatives have the potential to mitigate poverty, their impact is often constrained by poor governance, corruption, and inadequate capacity building. These issues undermine the effectiveness of cooperatives in achieving sustainable poverty reduction and require targeted interventions from both government and non-governmental organisations to address them.

Some studies raise critical concerns regarding the sustainability and long-term impact of such programs. For instance, Abiola and Okon (2022) suggests that gains from cooperative membership may be uneven, with structural constraints such as patriarchal norms, limited market access, and mismanagement of funds reducing effectiveness. Additionally, limitations in existing research, including small sample sizes and reliance on self-reported income, may overstate benefits or fail to capture long-term poverty alleviation (Ibekwe, 2021). Contrasting findings highlighted the need for more rigorous, studies that assess not only short-term income gains but also the capacity of women's cooperatives to sustainably reduce household poverty amidst socio-cultural and infrastructural constraints in rural Nigeria. In conclusion, women's cooperatives play a significant

role in mitigating household poverty in rural Nigeria by enhancing economic opportunities, building social capital, and promoting gender equality. However, for these cooperatives to achieve their full potential, there must be sustained support in the form of financial resources, capacity-building programs, and infrastructural development.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Human Capital Theory**

Human Capital Theory, proposed by economists like Gary Becker (1964), emphasises the value of education, training, and health as key factors that contribute to an individual's productivity and economic outcomes. According to this theory, investments in education and skills development improve an individual's capacity to earn, thereby leading to overall economic growth and poverty reduction. In the context of women's economic empowerment, human capital theory highlights how improving women's access to education, skills training, and health services can significantly enhance their productivity, which in turn contributes to poverty alleviation at the household level.

In rural communities in Nigeria, where gender disparities in education and employment opportunities remain prevalent, investing in women's human capital is crucial for driving household poverty reduction. When women are empowered economically, they tend to allocate a significant portion of their income towards the well-being of their families, particularly in rural areas where household survival depends on diversified income sources (World Bank, 2012). Women in rural Nigeria often engage in agriculture, small-scale businesses, or informal labour, where increasing their human capital through training or access to resources such as credit, education, and healthcare can lead to improved productivity and income generation. This, in turn, enhances household welfare and contributes to poverty reduction.

The applicability of human capital theory in rural Nigeria is particularly relevant in the context of women's economic empowerment initiatives. Programmes that focus on enhancing women's education, vocational skills, and health improve their employability and economic outcomes. For instance, microfinance schemes and vocational training tailored to rural women have been shown to lead to better family nutrition, children's education, and improved access to healthcare (Akanji, 2006). Additionally, when women control household finances, they are more likely to invest in children's education and health, which creates a cycle of improved human capital in future generations, further contributing to long-term poverty reduction.

However, critics of human capital theory argued that it overlooks structural barriers that limit women's full economic participation. In rural Nigeria, factors such as cultural norms, gender-based violence, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to credit can impede women's ability to capitalize on their enhanced human capital (Nzewi, 2019). Moreover, the theory's focus on individual investment in human capital may neglect broader issues such as land ownership, access to markets, and the role of social networks in empowering women.

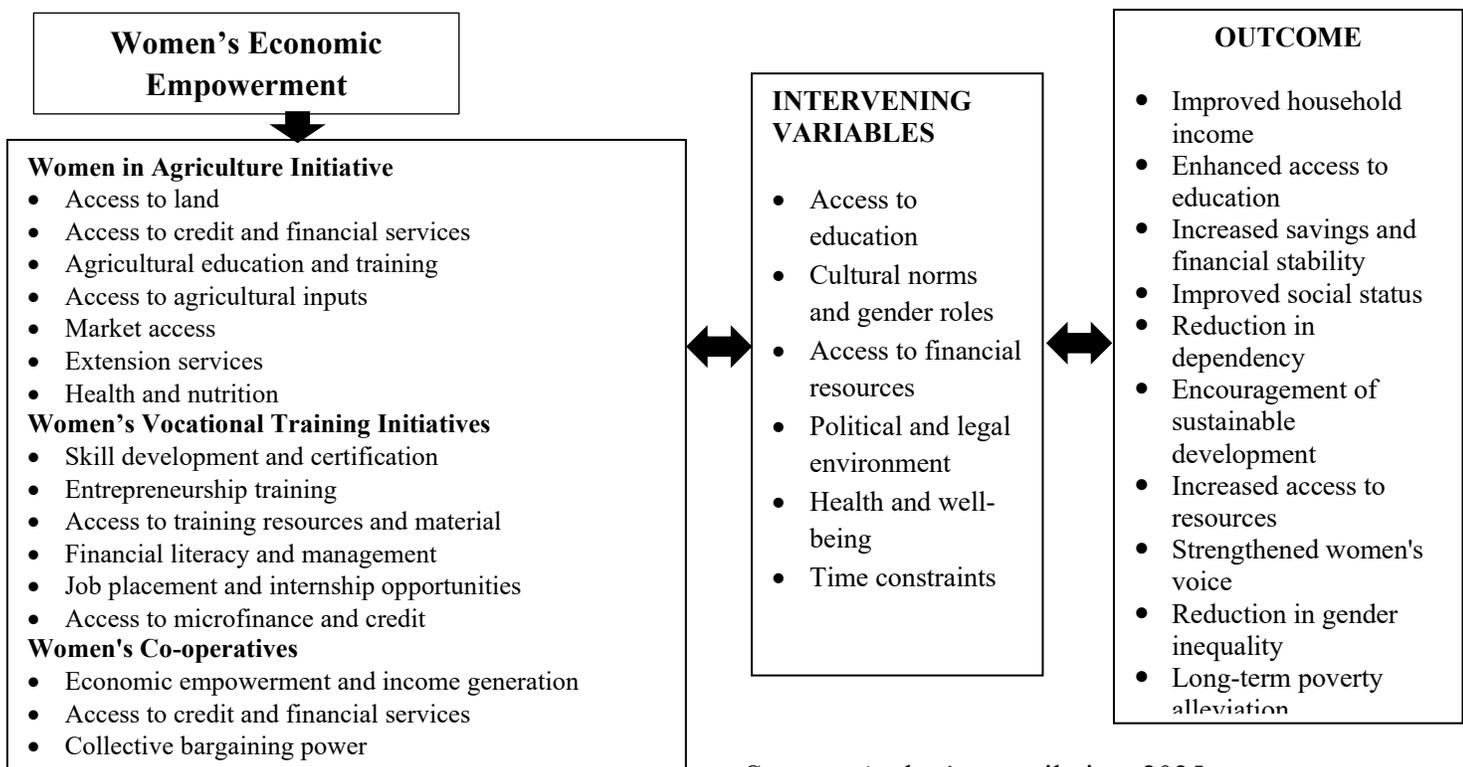
**METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a non-empirical, qualitative approach. Data were sourced exclusively from secondary literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and statistical data from reputable organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Food and Agriculture Organization, and the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics. Selection criteria prioritized relevance, credibility, and recency, focusing on works addressing women’s economic activities, rural livelihoods, and poverty reduction outcomes. Literature was identified through database searches using keywords such as women’s economic empowerment, household poverty reduction, rural Nigeria, and gender and development. Selected publications were screened for relevance and synthesized to extract themes. Ethical rigor was maintained through proper attribution of all sources and reliance on credible publications. Limitations include potential contextual variability in rural Nigeria and reliance on existing literature, which may constrain the generalizability of findings. Nonetheless, the study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the gendered dimensions of economic empowerment and its implications for household poverty reduction.

**Conceptual Framework**

A causal model of women’s economic empowerment on household poverty reduction in rural communities in Nigeria.

Independent variable



Source: Author's compilation, 2025

The diagram presents a conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between women's economic empowerment and household poverty reduction in rural Nigeria. It identifies key factors influencing this process, categorising them into independent variables, intervening variables, and outcomes.

The independent variables are structured into three main initiatives that drive women's economic empowerment: the women in agriculture initiative, women's vocational training initiatives, and women's cooperatives. The women in agriculture initiative focuses on providing women with access to land, credit, financial services, agricultural education, training, inputs, market access, extension services, and health and nutrition resources. The women's vocational training initiatives include skill development, entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, job placement, and access to microfinance. Women's cooperatives emphasise economic empowerment through income generation, financial services, and collective bargaining power.

Intervening variables play a crucial role in shaping the impact of these initiatives. Factors such as access to education, cultural norms, gender roles, financial resources, political and legal environments, health and well-being, and time constraints influence the extent to which women can benefit from empowerment initiatives.

The outcome of women's economic empowerment is projected to lead to several positive changes at the household and community levels. These include improved household income, enhanced access to education, increased savings, financial stability, improved social status, reduced dependency, sustainable development, greater access to resources, strengthened women's voices, reduced gender inequality, and long-term poverty alleviation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Women in agriculture initiative and reducing household poverty**

The study found that Women in Agriculture (WIA) initiatives have yielded measurable gains in reducing household poverty in rural Nigeria through multiple pathways. Empirical evidence demonstrates that participation in WIA programs enhances agricultural productivity, diversifies income sources, and improves market access, with household incomes rising by up to 23% and poverty headcounts declining by 27% in certain contexts (Adepoju, Olawuyi & Adegboyega, 2021; Oladejo, Olawuyi & Anjorin, 2021; Odurukwe, Matthews-Njoku & Ejioku-Okereke, 2016). Beyond these economic benefits, WIA initiatives have strengthened women's decision-making power within households and fostered social capital through cooperative networks, which act as informal safety nets during economic shocks (Fabiyyi, Danladi, Akande & Mahmood, 2015; Ajani, 2019). The introduction of improved agricultural technologies and climate-smart practices further enhanced productivity, reduced labour intensity, and enabled women to engage in complementary income-generating activities, thereby amplifying household welfare (Ironkwe, Ezebuoro & Ewuziem, 2016; Adebayo, Adediran & Oyekanmi, 2018). Collectively, these strategies illustrate that programmes emphasizing technical training, empowerment, and social networking present the most direct and immediate promise for alleviating poverty among rural households.

However, the evidence also highlights significant limitations and unintended outcomes that complicate the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. Systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, cultural barriers, poor infrastructure, and policy discontinuity undermine programme effectiveness and continuity, raising concerns about lasting impacts (Obiora, 2017; Akinola, Ene & Baiyegunhi, 2023). Comparative analyses suggest that while technical empowerment strategies, including the provision of improved inputs and climate-smart technologies, directly enhance productivity, empowerment- and social capital-based strategies produce more diffuse benefits, such as increased household resilience and intergenerational investments, yet these outcomes depend on supportive institutional and community frameworks (Duflo, 2012; World Bank, 2020). Unintended consequences include potential dependency on external resources and unequal access to programme benefits, which may exacerbate intra-community inequalities and limit overall poverty reduction (Chant, 2016; Adeoti & Akerele, 2021). Therefore, although WIA programmes demonstrate substantial short-term gains, findings indicate that the combination of technical support, empowerment initiatives, and structural interventions, particularly addressing land access, finance, and market integration, is necessary to sustain household poverty reduction and mitigate unintended social disparities over the long term.

### **Women's vocational training initiatives on alleviating household poverty**

Women's vocational training initiatives in rural Nigeria demonstrate considerable potential for poverty alleviation, yet their effectiveness varies significantly depending on implementation approaches and contextual factors. The findings suggest that integrated programmes combining skills acquisition with microfinance access and business management training yield the most promising outcomes. Adeniran et al. (2022) and Ejumudo (2021) documented that women receiving both vocational training and financial literacy instruction achieved greater entrepreneurial success and household financial stability compared to those receiving skills training alone. This integrated approach appears superior because it addresses multiple barriers simultaneously: lack of technical skills, limited capital, and inadequate business acumen. Furthermore, programmes incorporating post-training mentorship and market linkage support sustained longer-term impacts, as evidenced by improved household consumption patterns and continued business operations beyond the initial training period (Olawale & Omoteso, 2021). The multiplier effects of such comprehensive interventions extend beyond direct beneficiaries, creating employment opportunities within communities and enhancing women's participation in household decision-making processes (Afolabi, 2018; Bamidele & Okafor, 2021).

However, the study revealed several unintended consequences and implementation challenges that temper enthusiasm about vocational training as a poverty reduction strategy. Market saturation emerges as a significant concern, with Eze et al. (2021) noting that when numerous women within the same community receive training in identical skills such as tailoring or hairdressing, competition intensifies and individual incomes decline, potentially negating initial gains. Additionally, while economic empowerment through vocational training enhances women's financial autonomy, Ojo and Lawal (2023) observed that this shift occasionally generates household tensions in patriarchal settings where traditional gender roles are challenged, creating social friction that some women navigate by downplaying their economic success. The sustainability challenge identified by Ifeanyi and Okoro (2020) proves particularly problematic, as programmes lacking

consistent funding produce inconsistent training quality and fail to provide ongoing support necessary for business survival in competitive rural markets. Cultural constraints further complicate implementation, with Ogunyemi (2022) highlighting that societal norms in certain regions actively discourage women's economic participation outside domestic spheres, thereby limiting programme reach and effectiveness. These findings underscore that while vocational training initiatives possess transformative potential, their success depends critically on comprehensive programme design, adequate resourcing, cultural sensitivity, and integration with broader rural development frameworks that address structural barriers to women's economic participation.

### **Women's cooperatives in mitigating household poverty**

The study found that women's cooperatives in rural Nigeria serve as a multifaceted and potent strategy for mitigating household poverty, primarily by addressing systemic economic exclusion and building vital social capital. As demonstrated by Mordi, Mba & Obisi (2017) and Adeniran (2016), these collectives directly counteract barriers to credit and assets, enabling investments in small businesses and agriculture that boost household income and food security. Beyond direct economic input, the social capital generated through these networks, emphasised by Eze, Oladipo, and Oboh (2019), provides a critical safety net, fostering collective problem-solving and resilience against economic shocks. Furthermore, as noted by Akinmoladun (2015), cooperatives empower women to challenge restrictive gender norms, enhancing their socio-political visibility and contributing to a more equitable distribution of resources within households and communities, which is fundamental for sustainable poverty reduction.

When considering which strategy shows the most promise, the integration of economic empowerment with social capital development and gender-equity advocacy emerges as particularly impactful. While microfinance access is crucial, its effectiveness is magnified when embedded within a cooperative structure that also provides training (Olusola & Ojedokun, 2018) and builds trusted networks. This holistic approach not only increases income but also strengthens women's collective agency to navigate patriarchal constraints and environmental challenges like climate change (Ayuba, Ibrahim & Ali, 2021). However, studies caution about unintended outcomes, including the potential reinforcement of existing social hierarchies if cooperatives are poorly managed or the uneven distribution of benefits, where more affluent members may accrue greater gains, as suggested by Abiola & Okon (2022). Additionally, internal conflicts, dependency on external donors, and the increased time burden on women without a commensurate shift in domestic responsibilities are noted unintended consequences. Therefore, while the cooperative model is highly promising, its sustainability and equity depend on addressing governance flaws, structural patriarchy, and ensuring interventions move beyond short-term income gains to foster long-term, transformative change, as highlighted by the methodological critiques of Ibekwe (2021).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings reinforce a strong convergence between human capital theory and field evidence, highlighting that Nigeria's development strategy must treat women's economic empowerment as a structural growth instrument rather than a welfare oriented intervention. Consistent with Becker's human capital proposition that investments in skills, education, and

productive capacity yield long term economic returns, the evidence from women in agriculture initiatives, vocational training programmes, and women's cooperatives demonstrates that when women's human capital is enhanced and institutionally supported, households experience sustained income growth, improved child welfare, and greater resilience to economic shocks. This theoretical and empirical alignment implies that Nigeria's development strategy must move beyond fragmented empowerment projects toward an integrated model that simultaneously builds women's skills and dismantles institutional barriers that suppress returns on those skills. Development planning that embeds gender responsive agricultural reform, labour market inclusion, cooperative governance, and financial access into national economic policy will more effectively convert individual capability into collective development outcomes. Inclusive growth in Nigeria is contingent not only on expanding human capital but also on restructuring the socio economic environment in such that capital is deployed, making women's empowerment a central lever for sustainable national development rather than a peripheral social objective.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommended the following:

1. Nigeria's development strategy should adopt a phased gender responsive approach to agricultural empowerment. In the short term, priority should be given to expanding women's access to extension services, climate smart farming, and market oriented skills through intensive training programmes. In the medium term, sustainable impact depends on improving access to affordable agricultural credit via gender tailored financial products, cooperative lending, and credit guarantees, as training without finance limits productivity gains. In the long term, lasting transformation requires enforcing women's legal rights to land ownership and inheritance, as secure land tenure is fundamental to sustaining agricultural investments, reducing poverty, and strengthening national food security.
2. Vocational training programmes should be redesigned to focus on market relevant skills, entrepreneurship, and post training mentorship to prevent skill saturation and improve employability. In the medium term, reforming rural credit systems to provide affordable finance through loans, grants, and cooperative mechanisms is essential for transforming skills into sustainable enterprises. In the long term, extending labour and social protection laws to cover women in informal and home based work will enhance economic security, reduce vulnerability to shocks, and stabilize women's participation in the economy.
3. In the short term, there should be policy to strengthen women's cooperatives through governance, financial management, and leadership training to address internal weaknesses and enhance immediate income and social capital benefits. In the medium term, financial reforms should recognize cooperatives as formal financial intermediaries, allowing access to pooled credit, value chain finance, and public development funds to scale collective economic power. In the long term, integrating women's cooperatives into national development planning through legal recognition and anti-discrimination measures will ensure they serve as sustainable drivers of inclusive growth rather than temporary poverty coping tools.

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