RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT NARRATIVES OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN IPETU-IJESHA

Olukemi Aluko
Department of Local Government and Development studies
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile- Ife

Hammed Adefeso[2]
Department of Local Government and Development studies
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile- Ife

Ayodeji Temitope Oyekunle[3]
Southern Illinois University Carbondale USA

Abstract

This paper explored the resilience and empowerment narratives of women entrepreneurs in small-scale businesses in Ipetu-Ijesha, a southwest community in Nigeria with a view to examine the strength and determination exhibited by these women as they confront various challenges while striving for a better future.An in-depth qualitative interviews were used through semi-structured interviews on women who have thrived in the same business for over 15 yearsand content analysis was used to analyse the interviews. The findings revealed that the participants' perceptions of empowerment varied, encompassing financial independence, stability, freedom, and the ability to make choices for oneself. Each woman's journey towards empowerment was unique, involving the negotiation of societal norms, surmounting barriers, and confronting systemic inequalities and access to emotional support was identified as a crucial element in their empowerment journey.These women, as agents of change, shaped their destinies, overcame adversity, and contributed to the betterment of their communities.

Keywords: Empowerment, Resilience**,** Community dynamics**,** Gender equalityandsocial progress.

Introduction

"Behind every successful woman is herself." This popular saying encapsulates the strength, resilience, and empowerment demonstrated by

women across the globe and Nigerian women are no exception. Despite challenges such as poverty, insecurity, and limited access to education and healthcare, which disproportionately affect women, and are associated with the patriarchal nature of their society, women in Nigeria are creating their own narratives of resilience and empowerment (Nwokeafor, 2020). Their efforts have led to the spread of women's rights, property ownership, greater access to education, andincreased employment opportunities among women (Edgar, et al, 2022; Ekezie, 2022). Thus, building and enhancing the confidence level of women across the world.

Scholars have argued that the achievements being made by women can be attributed to their continued resilience and economic empower thus making women to be voices of democratic sanity (Nathaniel, 2017). The economic empowerment of women has its foundation in the emotional resilience of women which is essential for them to overcome trauma and adversity (Smith, Tooley, Christopher, & Kay, 2010). It is alsoin how social support networks and coping mechanisms contribute to women's resilience in the face of trauma and adversity (Platt, Brown, & Hughes, 2016; Wilson & Davis, 2019).The effect of cultural norms and gender stereotypes in shaping women's experiences of empowerment and its effect on their resilience cannot be overemphasized (Huang & Chen, 2017; Patel et al., 2020). Studies suggest that when women are empowered, they are more likely to seek out support networks and resources to cope with structural and cultural challenges in society, leading to greater resilience (Douglas, 2012).

In Nigeria, scholars have explored how access to education, economic resources, and social networks contributes to empowering women in rural contexts (Okeke & Omoruyi, 2017). These studies have found that improved access to education can enhance women's knowledge and skills, which in turn increase their decision-making power and economic opportunities (Okeke & Omoruyi, 2017). The availability of economic resources such as microcredit loans has been shown to positively impact women's financial independence and self-esteem (Nwokeafor, 2020). Furthermore, the presence of strong social networks provides women with emotional support, information sharing, and collective mobilization for advocacy purposes (Ekezie, 2022).

However**,** despite significant progress, gaps remain in the understanding of empowerment dynamics, especially in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.The experiences and stories of women have often been overlooked or overshadowed by dominant narratives that focus on their vulnerabilities and limitations. In addition, studies seem to have focused more on empowerment than resilience and investigated the former by means of quantitative than qualitative data. Hence, the need for an in-depth understanding of lived individual experiences, socio-cultural dynamics that shape the empowerment and resilience narratives of womenthe intricacies of their resilience strategies, coping mechanisms, and empowerment journeys. This paper explored the resilience and empowerment narratives of women in small scale businesses in Ipetu-Ijesha, a southwest community in Nigeria. It highlights their strengths as they navigate through various challenges and strive for a better future. The paper is organized into four sections. The first section is the introduction; the second section is a review of existing literature on women's empowerment and resilience. The third section covers the research methodology, and the fourth, presents the findings and themes that emerge from the narratives, and the conclusion.

Literature Review
Women Empowerment
According to Kabeer (2005), empowerment for women goes beyond personal empowerment and extends to their communities. It is seen as a transformative experience where women gain control over their own lives as well as have an impact on their communities. Women's empowerment involves enabling women to make beneficial life choices when they have been denied that ability by providing opportunities that were previously inaccessible (Sen, 2001). Kabeer, (2011) argued that women's empowerment involves two changes: the individual change and structural change in the community and how these changes challenge and dismantle entrenched gender inequalities. Corroborating, Ackerly, & True (2018) explain empowerment as a process of change that involves challenging and reconfiguring power relations to enable women to exercise rights, voice, and choice in all spheres of their lives.

Dimensions of Women's Empowerment
Researchers have identified various dimensions of women's empowerment, including economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions. Economic empowerment is a critical dimension that involves women's

access to and control over financial resources, assets, and income (Duflo, 2012). It includes opportunities for skill development, entrepreneurship, and improved livelihoods. Economic empowerment enables women to break free from poverty's constraints and enhances their bargaining power within families and communities (Kabeer, 2005). Social empowerment revolves around women's participation in social networks, community, organizations, and public spheres. It involves the ability of women to engage in collective actions, voice their opinions, and influence decisions that affect their lives (Kabeer, 1999). This encourages social support, nurtures support networks, and amplifies women's influence on broader societal issues. Political empowerment focuses on women's participation in formal and informal political processes, including voting, running for office, and influencing policy decisions. It challenges gender-based disparities in political representation and enables women to contribute to governance and policy making (Duflo, 2012). Psychological empowerment is an internal dimension related to women's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence to assert their rights and voice (Zimmerman, 2000). It involves transforming mindsets, challenging self-limiting beliefs, and fostering a sense of self-actualizationthat drives action.

Women's Empowerment: A Global Perspective

The history of women's empowerment has undergone substantial transformations, reflecting the evolution of cultural norms, obstacles, and notable achievements. Historically, patriarchal conventions and legal structures that restricted women to domestic domains frequently impeded women's empowerment. The ability of women to obtain an education, exercise property rights, and participate in political activities was restricted (Offen, 1988). In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the emergence of feminist movements marked a turning point in history. Significant progress was made in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom because of the suffrage campaigns (Flexner,& Fitzpatrick 1996). Initiating dialogues for greater gender equality, these social movements questioned traditional systems of authority. However, subsequent phases of feminism have brought attention to the concept of intersectionality, recognising that women's interactions are influenced by factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1989).

In addition, the United Nations' proclamation of the Decade for Women in the 1970s, along with subsequent conferences such as the one held in Beijing in 1995, facilitated an extensive international dialogue regarding the advancement of women's rights and their empowerment. These efforts led to the incorporation of women's empowerment in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda (United Nations, 2015). Despite the progress made, there remain persistent obstacles, such as gender-based violence, employment discrimination, and disparities in political representation. (Moser, 1993) The existing corpus of literature also emphasizes the importance of contextually applicable empowerment strategies that effectively address cultural nuances and local circumstances.

Resilience: A Review
Resilience is a multidimensional concept that cuts across various fields of research. Various studies have explored resilience in gender studies, focusing on various aspects such as violence against women, leadership, and economic empowerment. These studies have shed light on the protective factors and coping strategies that contribute to gendered resilience. For instance, research has shown that social support plays a crucial role in enhancing the resilience of individuals facing gender discrimination and violence (Bott et al., 2005). Additionally, self-sufficiency has consistently emerged as an important factor contributing to gendered resilience. Women who possess a strong sense of self-worth and confidence are more likely to overcome gender-based barriers and persevere in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1997). Such sense of self-worth and confidence constitute identity formation for the assertion of self (Nathaniel, 2016) Furthermore, some studies have investigated the nature of resilience by examining the experiences of marginalized gender identities. These studieshave highlighted the significance of community support, self-advocacy, and resilience-building initiatives for promoting well-being and empowerment (Poteat et al., 2016).

Measuring Resilience
Measuring resilience in gender studies requires utilizing appropriate scales and surveys that reflect the complexities of gender-related challenges. The Gender and Resilience Scale (GRS) developed by Johnson and Zlotnik (2009) is one such instrument. The GRS assesses five dimensions of resilience: individual, relational, collective, structural, and cultural. These dimensions allow for a comprehensive analysis of resilience by considering

both individual and contextual factors that influence gender-related experiences. The GRS is a valuable tool in examining how individuals navigate and respond to gender-related challenges within their personal lives, interpersonal relationships, communities, and broader societal structures.

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, provide a nuanced understanding of individuals' resilience strategies, coping mechanisms, and experiences of empowerment. Qualitative research allows for a deeper exploration of gendered power dynamics and the implications for resilience. By examining personal lives, interpersonal relationships, communities, and broader societal structures, gender studies can uncover the complex ways in which gender shapes individuals' experiences and opportunities. Qualitative research methods offer a valuable tool for understanding these dynamics by delving into the lived experiences of individuals and capturing the intricacies of their resilience strategies, coping mechanisms, and empowerment journeys. This deeper exploration helps shed light on how power dynamics influenced by gender affect individuals' ability to navigate and overcome challenges in their lives.

Empowerment and Resilience: The Nexus

Several studies have examined the relationship between empowerment and resiliencefrom different perspectives. For instance, these studies have highlighted how empowered women are better equipped to cope with adversity and contribute to family and community well-being (Kabeer, 2005) and how empowered women are more likely to adopt adaptive strategies and mobilize resources in the face of challenges, ultimately enhancing their resilience against shocks (Sen, 1999).

The connections between resilience and women empowerment are multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing. Firstly, empowering women contributes to building their resilience. When women have access to education, healthcare, and economic resources, they are better equipped to cope with and navigate through challenging situations. For instance, studies have shown that educated and economically empowered women are more likely to seek help, make informed decisions, and effectively manage stress (Chen, 2012).Secondly, resilience is a critical factor in women's empowerment process. Women facing adversity and discrimination often

need to draw upon their resilience to overcome obstacles and assert their rights. Resilient women are more likely to challenge gender norms and stereotypes, advocate for their needs and interests, and engage in collective action for social change (Peek & Fothergill, 2014).

Moreover, both resilience and women empowerment are influenced by contextual and structural factors. The social, cultural, and political environments in which women live greatly impact their resilience and ability to exercise agency. For instance, women living in societies with strong patriarchal norms and limited opportunities, may face greater challenges in developing resilience and achieving empowerment (Johnson, Edwards, Gardner, & Diduck, 2018.).Conversely, gender inequalities and discrimination can undermine women's resilience and hinder their empowerment. Women facing various forms of gender-based violence, such as domestic abuse or sexual assault, may struggle to develop resilience and navigate their paths towards empowerment (Ellsberg et al., 2015). Hence, addressing gender inequalities and promoting women's rights are essential for enhancing their resilience and enabling their empowerment. Furthermore, both resilience and women empowerment are intimately tied to social networks and support systems. Research has consistently shown that social support is a crucial factor in building resilience and promoting well-being (Ungar, 2011). Similarly, women's empowerment is often facilitated through supportive networks, such as women's groups or non-governmental organizations that provide resources, information, and mentorship (Neuman & Dahlberg, 2020).Therefore, efforts to promote resilience and women empowerment should be comprehensive and address the interconnected nature of these concepts. By investing in the resilience and empowerment of women, societies can reap numerous benefits, including increased social cohesion, economic growth, and the realization of human rights for all.

Theoretical Framework
This study adopted both the feminist empowerment theory and resilience theory in providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving women's entrepreneurial success in Ipetu-Ijesha. These theories were selected due to their ability to capture the intricacies of gendered experiences and portray the strengths and strategies employed by women entrepreneurs to overcome obstacles; thus the combination of feminist empowerment theory and resilience theory helped in providing a

framework for understanding the narratives of resilience and empowerment among women entrepreneurs in Ipetu-Ijesha while recognizing the social support, and adaptive strategies narratives that fostered enabled women's economic empowerment.

Resilience theory vital in understanding how women entrepreneurs navigate the challenges and setbacks they encounter in their economic empowerment journey. Resilience is a multi-faceted in nature and it encompasses personal strengths, coping strategies, and a positive mindset. According to Masten (2018); 'resilience is not merely the absence of adversity but encompasses the capacity to adapt positively in the face of setbacks. Therefore, this implies that resilience involves the ability to persist, innovate, and thrive despite the gender-specific challenges prevalent in entrepreneurial environment.

Weldon, (2013) stated that 'feminist empowerment theory emphasizes the importance of empowering women in all aspects of life, including economic endeavors. This implies that it is a lens through which one can understand how the societal structures impact women's empowerment and resilience in entrepreneurship. In addition, feminist empowerment theory recognized the fact that empowerment is a collective process that goes beyond individual achievements thus by engaging in entrepreneurship, women in Ipetu-Ijesha challenge societal expectations, create economic independence and autonomy.

It is worth noting that resilience and empowerment theories are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other in understanding the narratives of women entrepreneurs in Ipetu-Ijesha. Resilience theory explored the individual strengths and coping mechanisms employed by women entrepreneurs, whereas feminist empowerment theory highlights the collective nature of empowerment and the importance of challenging societal norms. Together, these theories provided a comprehensive framework to analyze the experiences and strategies used by women entrepreneurs in Ipetu-Ijesha.

Methodology
A descriptive research method was adopted for this paper. This study was conducted in Ipetu-Ijesha, an agrarian rural community in the southwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study population comprised women who

have thrived in the same business for more than 15 years. In a pilot study conducted on a non-market day, 64 businesses owned by women were identified however, only 22 women were found to have lived in Ipetu-Ijesha and been in the same business for over 15years.From this population, only20 women agreed to participate in the study.Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate in-depth conversations with the women while thematic analysis was utilized to extract patterns and themes from the narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Findings and Discussions
Comprehensive Thematic Analysis of Interview Responses
The provided interview transcripts revolve around the themes of empowermentand resilience, within the context of rural living in Nigeria. These themes shed light on the participants' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and goals. Here is a comprehensive thematic analysis of the interview responses:

1 a. Empowerment
Women's perspectives on empowerment, encompassing its definition, the journey towards it, and the factors associated with it can provide a vital lens through which we can understand the dynamics of gender equality and social progress. Women often define empowerment in various ways based on their cultural, societal, social, and personal contexts. Consequently, understanding women's perspectives to defining empowerment is crucial for designing effective policies and initiatives that promote gender equality.
The participants of this study expressed their understanding of empowerment in various ways. Some perceived empowermentsas having financial independence, stability, and freedom. Others thought it was the ability to make choices for one. For instance, according to one of the participants, empowerment meant "*having money and deciding on how to spend it without explaining to anybody*" (37, divorced, technical education, food vendor). To support her claim, the participant explained further that the first time she felt empowered was when she got a shop for her trade.

They also highlighted the importance of using one's skills and resourcefulness to achieve this empowerment. According to one of the participants, "*having money answers to all things, but having the brain to make money is more important*" (63, widow, primary education, artisan).

Another participant supported this view stating that "*empowerment is having money and having good health to move around ... and not having anything to worry about*" (65, widow, primary education, mat weaving). Others believed empowerment is when one has the capacity to impact other people's life. One of the participants explained that "*empowerment is the ability to make a difference in other people's lives*" (40, married, secondary, tailor). Other participants see it as independence from spouse's financial dominance. Those that lost their husband's support due to accident or death described empowerment as being able to cope with the financial challenge resulting from husband's absence or incapacity. Furthermore, empowerment was explained by another participant as being dutiful in labour to enjoy sedentary lifestyle. In her words, empowerment was about "*working hard to enjoy the things of life*". She further stressed that "*it is waking up to a stress free, without debt life*". (51, married, secondary education, trader).

Most participants expressed their understanding of empowerment as having control over their finances, making independent decisions, and being self-reliant. They associated empowerment with achieving financial stability and contributing positively to their families and communities. Empowerment arises as a central motif, resonating with each participant's desire for economic autonomy, decision-making authority, and positive contributions to their families and communities. Their narratives illustrate instances of self-empowerment in which they overcame obstacles and attained personal milestones, often with the aid of determination and support networks.

1 b. Empowerment Journey

The journey towards empowerment is unique for each woman. It involves navigating through societal norms, breaking through barriers, and often confronting systemic inequalities. This journey is marked by personal growth, resilience, and the building of self-confidence. The study participants shared personal experiences where they felt empowered and these often involved overcoming financial challenges, taking control of their lives, and achieving personal goals. Responding to the question about when they feel empowered, the participants claimed to feel empowered when they are financially self-sufficient or when they had accomplished a project on their own. This was especially the expression of a participant

whose spouse had deprived her financial support. According to the study participant:

> *"When I was able to buy the cloth, I wanted for my marriage and when I was able to survive financially and emotionally when my husband and his family were not treating me well. In those days when you are married your husband relatives come to stay in the house. I had a fight with my sister-in-law so my husband was angry with me, he refused to eat my food and also refused to drop money in the house, but he would give his siblings money to eat secretly and then leave me and my brother to starve. So, I too will take money from my business buy food 'make' a special kind of beans and eat with my brother and then pretend that we have not eaten. He will not give us money until he feels he has disciplined me enough."*
> (63, widow, primary education, mat weaving)

Another participant narrated that her empowerment journey involved her desire to accomplish a set project, which included her house and business. She said, *"I felt empowered when I completed my house and my business was still standing"* (51, married, secondary education, trader).

- **Termination of spousal financial domination**

Another participant who, probably, had been financially humiliated by her spouse strangely felt empowered when she took over her husband's financial role. According to her, she felt empowered

> *"... when my husband had financial problems and I was able to take care of the home. My husband work was not going on well and I was able to pay the school fees and give the children pocket money"* (49, married, tertiary education, trader)

- **Access to timely emotional support**

The responses of the study participants indicate that the feeling of being empowered is not only based on economic or social factor but also on emotional factors. For instance, a participant claimed to have felt

empowered when she had access to timely emotional support when she was bereaved. According to her,

> *"When my husband died, he was young, and his death was sudden. I thought of dying because I wasn't sure of how I was going to cope., But when another widow visited me and shared her experience, I felt empowered because I knew I was better than her and if she coped, so can I"* (49, widow, secondary education, trader)

1 c. Key Empowerment Factors

The interviewees identified various factors and resources that contributed to their sense of empowerment. These factors included education, skills training, family support, community networks, and personal determination.

- **Education and family support**

Education has often been a major empowerment indicator. One of the study participants attesting to this and claimed, *"My education and training I received by helping my mother sell when I was young and my mother supported me by putting cloths in my shop to sell"* (49, married, tertiary education, trader).

On family support, one of the participants associated her empowerment factor to her parent's support for her skill acquisition after missing an opportunity for secondary school enrolment due to her father's demise. The participant claimed:

> *"I did not have the privilege to go to secondary school because my father died and my mum could not afford the fees, so my mother took me to where I would learn the art of mat weaving. At that time mat weaving was still very popular and traders came from different places to buy them."* (65, widow, primary education, mat weaving)

In addition to the above-mentioned, an interviewee buttressed that skill acquisition through an informal learning system, as well as access to resources paved the way to her empowerment. She said:

> *"Training from my boss and the confidence assurance from family and friends. This could include education, access to resources, community support, or personal attributes."* (40, married, secondary, tailor)

Self-motivation, personal determination

Self-motivation and personal determination are important factors for the achievement of significant success in life. This was alluded to by the study participants. For instance, one of the participants associated her empowerment to her determination and doggedness. According to her,

> *"I made up my mind that me and children must not suffer again. So, I started as an apprentice, graduated and started a business with the 'ajo' contributions and the money given to me by the church. My boss really helped me with my children's feeding and the church gave my children scholarship in their school"* (57, married mother, secondary education, food vendor)

Similarly, an interviewee mentioned that she got motivated by the approach of a trader within the neighbourhood and was able to start her own business though her personal savings. From her statement,

> *"I was observing the person that was selling beside my former shop and also asking questions. Then I collected my 'ajo' to start."* (51, married, secondary education, trader)

Challenges and Resilience Strategies

The interviewees discussed challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. Common challenges included financial difficulties, unreliable utilities, low sales and unstable power supply, emotional distress and customer-related issues.

- ***Unreliable utilities***

The ability to meet up with consumer's preference for particular goods remained a challenge. This has also emanated from the scarcity of required raw materials in meeting up with these needs.

> *"Not many people buy the mats like before, and they also prefer the plastic hand fans. 'Eni' which is the materials are not close to the town like before, now you must go deep into the forest"* (63, widow, primary education, mat weaving)

- ***Customer-related issues***

Two major customer-related issues were identified by the interviewee, one of which is the issue of credit sales which is common among many customers.

> *"When they steal, they link up relatives and family to help plead on their behalf. People buy on credit and it requires a lot of patience to either get your money back or not get it. If I was in the city I will not sell on credit."* (49, married, tertiary education, trader).

Also, it was observed that there are customers who prefer to utilise services for free with no intention of making payment for service.

> *"there are people not wanting pay when they sew, they expect you to sew for free because we are relatives and people bringing torn clothes for you to amend for free,..."* (40, married, secondary, tailor)

- ***Financial difficulties***

A participant sharing about her financial hardship said

> *Having to live in poverty for years after the death of my husband and not having seller/ consumer relationship. Many of the middlemen benefited more from the profits. Many of the farmlands used in planting the material have been bought and mat weaving affects the back a lot; most times of the herbs are very deep into the forest. Old age is not favourably to this business.*

- ***Low sales and unstable power supply***

Aside the challenges above, there is also the issue of poor power supply and low sales. This in a way has affected the chances of recruiting sales personnel in promoting sales. A participant relayed that,

> *"Sales is low and light is a problem. I can't afford a salesgirl, so when I can't go to the market, I close my shop"(51, married, secondary education, trader)*

- ***Emotional distress***

Alongside the challenge faced is the emotional distress, according to a participant, who experienced separation with spouse as well as emotional blackmail from family members who should have been a source of support. This resulted in depression for her while her children experienced withdrawal from friends. In her words she said,

> *"Hmmm! It was not easy at all. When my husband left me for another woman, people were saying that my behaviour was not good that was why he left me. Some said I was giving birth to many female children, that was why he left. I was mocked and this made me depressed. My children were called names like bastard by friends, and they became withdrawn"* (57, single mother, secondary education, trader)

2 b. Strategies

The ability to navigate and find alternative solutions during challenging times demonstrates resilience in women. Some of the strategies adopted include exploring creative ideas, diversification, ensuring cost effectiveness, provision of credit services, detach from source of discouragements and adoption of improved logistics in business.

- ***Diversification***

Due to the type of occupation that most of the participants are engaged in, the need to diversify or explore more creative measures in their business endeavours were of priority. Some of the interviewees shared how they

improved on mode of sales, expanded business scope and improved on cost-effectiveness.

> *"I have decided to start making big hats, folders, and laptop bags from eni which I give to my last born to sell and also diversify into other business."* (63, widow, primary education, mat weaving)
> *"I go to neighbouring town for materials and I also make 'ogi and fufu' to sell to people. Secondly, I do not overspend on items"* (65, widow, primary education, mat weaving)
> *"When the weather is cold, I put the drinks in a drum of water, but in the evening, I put on the generator. I also sell pepper soup and pepper meat"* (51, Married, Secondary, trader)

- ***Provision of credit service***

Provision of credit service for customers was another strategy adopted to sustain business and maintain customer relationship. This also has a way of easing the burden of payment among customers as well as promote sales in the long run.

> *"I allow them to pay in installments of 3 times and I open the shop when my children are in school and anybody, that wants to buy will call me and I will go meet them with some of the cloths"* (49, married, tertiary education, trader)

- ***Detach from source of discouragements***

Discouraging words appear to be one of the extinguishers of future aspirations among women. However, in order to overcome this challenge, one of the interviewees detached herself from discouraging words from people so as to make meaningful progress in life. She said:

> *"I stopped listening to people's comments and I focused on my children and I. I went to learn a trade and I decided to allow my friends help take care of my children when I needed to go and buy items to sell. I also spend money on what is necessary like food, rents and children schooling.I get used clothes from friends and church and my kids understand that*

things are getting better" (57, single mother, secondary education, trader)

- ***Adoption of improved logistics in business***

Another specific strategy adopted in overcoming difficulties was to adopt online logistics in business. According to one of the participants, she was able to improvise on getting needed resources even from far distance. This in a way has expanded her service delivery. In her words,

> *"I now use phone to buy items from Ibadan and the seller will sent it through transport going to Akure. I now cook local food for parties"* (37, divorced, tertiary education, trader)

2 c. Support system

Regarding the support system that was available during challenges, the interviewees mentioned diverse means through which they received support. According to the interviewees, they received support from family members, children, and friends. Support also came from sales of inheritance gotten from parents.

According to one of the participants, the available support received during challenge was from her children and family members. *"my children and family"* (63, widow, primary education, mat weaving). From another perspective, an interviewee got no support from the family due to the type of business activity done, although husband and friends gave necessary support, from her statement, *"my family do not like this business, because they feel it attract the wrong people, but my husband and friends support me"* (51, married, Secondary, trader)

In line with the selling of property, a mechanism used for surviving and thriving was to raise fund which was used to start personal business.

> *"I had to sell my inheritance given to me when my father died to add to the capital of my business and I made up my mind not to spend my capital because I knew the family would still need money when they discharged him"* (48, married, secondary education, hair stylist)

Challenges faced by participants were diverse, ranging from economic hardships and limited access to resources to traditional gender roles and societal perceptions. Despite these challenges, participants displayed remarkable resilience. Their strategies included adopting innovative practices, managing resources efficiently, seeking out alternate income sources, and leveraging on support networks. Their resilience allowed them to navigate difficulties and maintain a positive outlook on their lives and businesses. Evidence of their resilience comprise their ability to adapt, innovate, diversify income sources, pursueeducation or training, and leverage community ties to surmount obstacles and flourishing despite the challenges life presented. It is evident that these women not only overcame obstacles but also found ways to thrive in their respective environments.

Limitations of the Study
The responses have been condensed, and certain nuances and details might not have been fully represented. Additionally, the analysis is based on a limited sample of interviews and does not capture the full diversity of experiences in Nigeria.

Conclusion
The narratives which comprised their experiences, aspirations, and methods for overcoming obstacles, reveal the multifaceted voyage of empowerment, resiliency, and community dynamics in rural Nigeria. Their stories demonstrate the importance of community support and the transformative potential of rural women's empowerment. As we contemplate on these insights, it becomes clear that these individuals are not mere subjects of their circumstances; rather, they are agents of change who shape their destinies and contribute to the improvement of their communities.

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