

Gender-Specific
Entrepreneurship
Programs: Understanding
The Lived Experiences
Of Rural Women
Entrepreneurs In
Amolatar Sub-Region,
Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Women constitute a significant portion of the global population and play vital roles in economic development through entrepreneurial activities. Despite their potential, female entrepreneurs, especially in developing countries like Uganda, face numerous challenges including limited access to capital, education, and support networks. This study investigates the impact of gender-specific entrepreneurship programs on rural women in the Amolatar Sub-Region, Uganda, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and contributions to economic development. A phenomenological research design was employed to capture the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs. The study was conducted in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda, involving 26 beneficiaries of the Uganda Women Empowerment Program (UWEP), two focus group discussions (FGDs), and two key informant interviews with cultural leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, FGDs, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Five main themes emerged from the analysis: Economic Empowerment and Impact, where women reported significant improvements in their economic status through participation in UWEP, resulting in increased income and financial stability; Skill Development and Acquisition, where participants acquired essential business skills such as financial management and record-keeping, enhancing their ability to run and sustain their enterprises; Challenges and Resilience, where women faced obstacles including poor infrastructure, cultural barriers, and resistance from husbands but demonstrated resilience through group cohesion and adaptability; Gender Dynamics and Family Support, where support from husbands and family members varied, with a gradual shift in cultural attitudes towards women's economic participation; and Community Perception, Support, and Future Aspirations, where there was an evolving positive perception of women's roles, increased community support, and optimism about future business expansion and community development. Gender-specific entrepreneurship programs like UWEP significantly contribute to the economic empowerment of rural women in Amolatar, Uganda. The programs help women acquire crucial business skills, overcome challenges, and gain support from their families and communities. These initiatives are essential for fostering sustainable economic development and gender equality in rural areas.

Keywords: Rural Women Entrepreneurs, Gender-Specific Programs, Economic Empowerment, Uganda Women Empowerment Program

1. INTRODUCTION

Given that women make up the majority of the world's population and are often associated with nurturing instincts, one might expect that their active participation in entrepreneurial endeavors would have a significant impact on the economy (Mashapure et al., 2022). However, their contribution is not always prominently visible, particularly in many developing and some developed nations (Nsengimana et al., 2017). Ishak and colleagues (2021) noted that despite the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of female entrepreneurship in

financial development, its progress has been stagnant or declining (Ishak et al., 2021). A harsh global reality is that women constitute a significant portion of most economies yet often face discrimination and prejudice, being relegated to second-class citizen status in many cultures (Jones & Clifton, 2018). Abdullah and colleagues (2014) also affirm that female entrepreneurs encounter numerous challenges throughout their business journey (Abdullah et al., 2014). Recognizing and understanding these barriers is crucial for enhancing women's contributions to the business community. Existing literature underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts from female entrepreneurs themselves, government agencies, development organizations, societal norms, households, scholars, and other stakeholders to address the challenges hindering the sustainability of women's entrepreneurship in modern business environments (Kabonga et al., 2021).

Women's economic empowerment plays a pivotal role in accelerating and fortifying Uganda's journey towards inclusive and sustainable economic development (World bank, 2022). In this endeavor, women's entrepreneurship stands as a cornerstone, particularly amid the ongoing challenges posed by various global and domestic crises (World bank, 2022). Nevertheless, there exist notable gaps in programming that, if addressed, could substantially bolster the growth and productivity potential of women entrepreneurs. The 18th edition of the Ugandan Economic Update: Putting Women at the Center of Uganda's Economic Revival emphasizes that investing in women's job skills and fostering growth-oriented entrepreneurship not only benefits women themselves but also yields dividends for the entire Ugandan populace (World Bank Group, 2021). As highlighted in the Uganda Jobs Strategy for Inclusive Growth, micro, small, and medium enterprises established within the past five years now account for over 50% of formal employment, with household enterprises offering livelihoods to 3.1 million households (Merotto, 2020). Despite these strides, the 2020 Mastercard Global Index of Women Entrepreneurs indicates that women own nearly 40% of businesses, yet they typically experience 30% lower profits than their male counterparts (Pramanik & Mitra, 2023). Moreover, women business owners in Uganda encounter gender-specific barriers, including limited access to capital and being disproportionately relegated to lower-value sectors.

The prevailing literature suggests that while entrepreneurship could serve as a catalyst for economic development and poverty reduction, rural women face multifaceted barriers, including limited access to capital, education, and support networks (Ishak et al., 2021). Moreover, existing interventions and policies often overlook the specific needs and challenges faced by rural female entrepreneurs, hindering their ability to thrive in business ventures (Abdullah et al., 2014). Therefore, there is a critical need to understand the unique trials and opportunities encountered by rural female entrepreneurs in the Amolatar sub-region to develop targeted strategies that foster their socio-economic inclusion and contribute to the overall prosperity of rural communities. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of gender-specific entrepreneurship programs on rural women in Amolatar, Uganda, shedding light on their experiences, challenges, and contributions to economic development.

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a multifaceted endeavor encompassing both individual pursuit and collective innovation within societal frameworks (Kabagerayo et al., 2022). Despite this acknowledgment, women's entrepreneurship remains a marginalized area in rural development discourse, particularly in regions like Uganda (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). Rural women often face significant barriers to accessing development resources and opportunities, including limited employment options, constrained career paths, and restricted social engagement (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). In today's era of global economic uncertainty, women are increasingly compelled to take charge of their own destinies, shaping their lives through education, career choices, and lifestyle decisions (Epstein, 2022). The pursuit of self-realization and empowerment becomes central to this process, involving active participation in the global marketplace and the deliberate crafting of individual life trajectories. In Uganda's rural context, traditional gender roles persist, reflecting historical norms such as the notion of men as primary providers and women as homemakers, reinforcing gender disparities in economic participation and opportunity (Neema, 2015). Gender-specific entrepreneurship programs have emerged as a significant intervention aimed at promoting economic empowerment and gender equality in rural communities worldwide (Lwamba et al., 2022). In the context of Amolatar sub-region, Uganda, where gender disparities persist and rural communities face unique challenges, such programs have gained attention as potential catalysts for socio-economic development. Understanding the impact of these programs on rural women entrepreneurs is crucial for informing policy and practice in the region.

This study draws on social capital theory to provide a theoretical framework for interpreting its findings. Social capital theory posits that the relationships, networks, and social norms within a community contribute to its economic development and overall well-being (Putnam, 2002). It suggests that the connections and bonds between individuals, groups, and communities can generate resources, support, and opportunities that contribute to social and economic outcomes (Putnam, 2002). Social capital encompasses various dimensions, including trust, reciprocity, norms, and networks, and it can manifest at different levels, from interpersonal relationships to broader community or societal structures (Putnam, 2002). The theory posits that the quality and quantity of social capital within a given context can influence factors such as economic development, political participation, health outcomes, and overall well-being (Putnam, 2002). In the context of entrepreneurship, social capital theory suggests that entrepreneurs can leverage their social networks and relationships to access resources, information, and support, which can enhance their entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. By applying this theory, the study aims to analyze how gender-specific entrepreneurship programs influence women's empowerment and community development in rural Uganda. By contextualizing the research within broader theoretical debates and scholarly discussions, the study seeks to offer insights into the mechanisms through which gender-specific entrepreneurship initiatives can contribute to sustainable development and empowerment at the individual and community levels in the Amolatar sub-region of Uganda.

There have been persistent gender disparities in access to entrepreneurial opportunities and economic resources within rural areas of Uganda (Gavigan et al., 2023). Despite efforts to promote gender equality, women continue to face significant barriers to entrepreneurship, including limited access to financial capital, market information, and support networks (Kyalo & Kiganane, 2014). Gender-specific entrepreneurship programs, such as the Uganda Women Empowerment Program (UWEP), have been implemented to address these challenges (Christopher, 2021). However, there remains a gap in understanding the effectiveness of such programs in fostering women's economic empowerment, promoting community development, and challenging entrenched gender norms within rural communities. In the context of the Amolatar sub-region of Uganda, where rural communities often grapple with economic challenges and poverty, fostering entrepreneurship, especially among women, holds significant potential for both economic and social advancement. Despite comprising a substantial portion of the population and possessing innate nurturing instincts, women's participation in entrepreneurial activities remains limited, reflecting broader inequalities in access to economic opportunities (Nsengimana et al., 2017).

Historically, rural women in Amolatar sub-region, like many other parts of Uganda, have faced systemic barriers to economic participation, including limited access to resources, education, and market opportunities (Bamanyaki, 2020). Traditional gender roles and cultural norms have further constrained women's ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities outside the household (Bamanyaki, 2020). Over time, efforts have been made to address these challenges through various development initiatives, including gender-specific entrepreneurship programs. Existing research on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs in rural settings offers valuable insights into their impact on women's empowerment, economic development, and community resilience (Christopher, 2021). However, gaps in the literature remain, particularly regarding the specific context of Amolatar sub-region, Uganda. While some studies have explored similar programs in other regions, there is limited research focusing specifically on the experiences and outcomes of such initiatives in this particular rural context. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the impact of gender-specific entrepreneurship programs on rural communities in Uganda, aiming to provide insights that can inform more targeted and effective interventions to address gender disparities in entrepreneurship and advance sustainable development goals.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 STUDY DESIGN

The current study employed a phenomenological research design. This choice is particularly well-suited to the topic as it seeks to deeply understand and interpret the personal experiences and perceptions of rural women entrepreneurs. Phenomenology aims to explore and describe how individuals experience a particular phenomenon—in this case, the gender-specific entrepreneurship programs. By focusing on the lived

experiences of rural women in Amolatar, the study captures the essence of their interactions with these programs, how they perceive and interpret their entrepreneurial journeys, and the impact on their lives.

2.2 STUDY SETTING

The study was conducted in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda, an area renowned for its diverse landscapes and cultures. Located in the northern part of the country, Amolatar boasts fertile lands along Lake Kyoga, which support agriculture and fishing (Kabunga & Muya, 2014). Its rural setting, characterized by small villages and bustling marketplaces, offers a unique backdrop for research. This region exemplifies rural and marginalized communities that face socio-economic challenges and cultural constraints, particularly affecting women's economic participation. The study aims to shed light on the experiences of women in these settings and to understand how economic empowerment initiatives, like UWEP, meet their needs.

Additionally, Amolatar's rich cultural diversity provides valuable insights into how cultural dynamics intersect with economic interventions to influence women's empowerment (Kabunga et al., 2016). As a beneficiary of UWEP, Amolatar offers firsthand perspectives on the program's effectiveness, which can help policymakers and practitioners refine similar initiatives. Overall, the study in Amolatar seeks to uncover the complexities of women's economic empowerment within a culturally rich and diverse environment.

2.3 PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

The study involves a diverse group of thirty participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of gender-specific entrepreneurship programs in the Amolatar Sub-Region. The primary participants are 26 women who are beneficiaries of the UWEP. These women were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with the program. The selection criteria included factors such as age, type of business, duration of involvement with UWEP, and geographical representation within the sub-region. This approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives, providing insights into how the program impacts different aspects of their entrepreneurial journeys. The focus on UWEP beneficiaries allows the study to capture detailed, firsthand accounts of the program's effectiveness, challenges, and the overall experiences of rural women entrepreneurs.

In addition, the study includes two focus group discussions (FGDs) and two key informants who are cultural leaders in the community. The FGDs, composed of women entrepreneurs, were also selected through purposive sampling to facilitate rich discussions and uncover common themes regarding their experiences with the UWEP program. These discussions provided a platform for participants to share collective insights and challenges, enhancing the depth of qualitative data. The inclusion of two cultural leaders as key informants adds another layer of understanding, offering valuable perspectives on the social and cultural context that influences women's entrepreneurship in the region. Their selection, also guided by purposive sampling, was based on their authority and deep understanding of local customs and societal norms. Together, these participant categories ensure a holistic view of the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs, capturing both individual and communal insights essential for understanding the impact of gender-specific entrepreneurship programs.

3. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND PROCEDURE

The study utilized a combination of key informant and in-depth interviews, FGDs, and document analysis to gather comprehensive data on the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda. Key informant interviews with cultural leaders provided crucial insights into the local socio-cultural context and how it affects women's economic activities. These interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' views and experiences. Similarly, in-depth interviews with 26 beneficiaries of the UWEP were employed to capture detailed personal narratives. The open-ended nature of these questions enabled participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely, yielding rich qualitative data essential for understanding the nuances of their entrepreneurial journeys and the impact of the UWEP.

The FGDs played a vital role in validating and enriching the findings from the individual interviews. By facilitating group conversations among women entrepreneurs, FGDs allowed for the identification of common themes and shared challenges, while also highlighting the diversity of experiences within the community. This method fostered a collaborative environment where participants could discuss and reflect on their experiences, thereby providing a broader perspective on the effectiveness and challenges of the UWEP. Additionally, document analysis was conducted to scrutinize relevant documents, such as program reports, policy documents, and local economic data. This analysis enriched the contextual understanding of the region's socio-economic landscape and the specific conditions under which these entrepreneurship programs operate. Together, these data collection tools provided a robust framework for comprehensively exploring the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in Amolatar, ensuring that the study's findings are well-rounded and deeply informed by multiple perspectives and sources of information.

3.1 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

In this study data management and analysis were meticulously handled to ensure the integrity and depth of the findings. A transcriber, who had signed a confidentiality agreement, recorded and transcribed verbatim every interview and focus group discussion. This transcription process was critical for maintaining the accuracy of participants' narratives and ensuring that their voices were authentically represented in the analysis. The data were analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach, which involved an interactive and inductive process to identify recurring patterns and key concepts related to the experiences of rural women entrepreneurs participating in the UWEP. Rather than imposing pre-determined themes onto the data, the researchers employed an inductive approach, allowing themes to naturally emerge from the participants' narratives. This approach ensured that the themes were grounded in the data and reflective of the participants' perspectives.

Initially, the data were coded line-by-line, with each segment of text assigned a code that captured its essential meaning. These codes were then grouped into broader categories based on similarities and relationships.

Through iterative analysis and constant comparison, these categories were refined and consolidated into overarching themes that encapsulated the main findings of the study. The themes emerged through a systematic process that involved organizing and interpreting the data to identify patterns related to economic empowerment, skill development, challenges, gender dynamics, and other key aspects of the women's entrepreneurial experiences. The researchers engaged in extensive discussions and debates to develop and refine the emerging major themes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the findings. This collaborative process contributed to the production of a solid draft analysis, which accurately reflected the complex and multifaceted experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region. By adhering to a rigorous thematic analysis process, the study provided nuanced insights into how gender-specific entrepreneurship programs impact the lives of rural women, highlighting both the successes and challenges they face in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

3.2 TRUSTWORTHINESS

In the present study, trustworthiness was meticulously ensured through various strategies aimed at enhancing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The collaboration among multiple researchers facilitated a rigorous analysis process. Each step was thoroughly documented, and thematic categories were established through consensus reached in regular meetings. This collaborative approach ensured a robust and credible analysis, as different perspectives were considered and integrated into the final themes.

To enhance transferability, the study methodology was meticulously described, including detailed participant selection criteria and data analysis procedures. Rich contextual descriptions were provided to give readers a clear understanding of the setting and participants' experiences, enabling them to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Extensive documentation of the research process, including data collection methods, coding decisions, and analytical memos, established dependability by allowing for an audit trail. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted to ensure consistency and rigor in the data analysis, providing an additional layer of scrutiny and validation.

Reflexivity was a crucial component of the study, with researchers engaging in reflexive journaling to acknowledge and mitigate personal biases that could influence the research process. Negative case analysis was employed to address and integrate contradictory evidence, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Finally, the thematic findings were detailed with supporting quotes from the participants, including translations for original quotes in Luo. The forward-backward translation approach, conducted by bilingual researchers, ensured the accuracy and authenticity of the translated quotes, enhancing confirmability. This rigorous approach to trustworthiness ensured that the study's findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable, providing a robust understanding of the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in Amolata.

3.3 ETHICAL APPROVAL

In conducting this study, we followed the ethical guidelines outlined in the Helsinki Declaration. Each participant provided written informed consent prior to their interview. For minors, consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian, along with the minor's assent. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Lira University Research Ethics Committee (Ref/RG/2023/10). All participants were informed that their anonymized responses would be used in publications, and they consented to this use

4. RESULTS

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

A total of thirty participants were involved in the current study. These participants were comprised of 26 beneficiaries of the UWEP, two FGDs, and two key informants. Table 1 provides descriptive characteristics of the respondents in the study, including age, education level, and duration of participation in the UWEP program.

Table 1: Demographic information

Participants	Age Range	Education Level	Duration in UWEP (Years)
Beneficiary 1	30-35	No formal education	2
Beneficiary 2	40-45	Primary School	4
Beneficiary 3	25-30	No formal education	3
Beneficiary 4	35-40	Tertiary Education	2
Beneficiary 5	50-55	Primary School	5
Beneficiary 6	28-33	Secondary School	2
Beneficiary 7	45-50	No Formal Education	3
Beneficiary 8	30-35	No formal education	4
Beneficiary 9	35-40	Primary School	3
Beneficiary 10	40-45	Tertiary Education	2
Beneficiary 11	25-30	Secondary School	4
Beneficiary 12	50-55	No Formal Education	1
Beneficiary 13	28-33	Primary School	3
Beneficiary 14	45-50	Vocational Training	2
Beneficiary 15	30-35	Secondary School	5
Beneficiary 16	35-40	Tertiary Education	3
Beneficiary 17	40-45	No Formal Education	4
Beneficiary 18	25-30	Primary School	2
Beneficiary 19	50-55	No formal education	5
Beneficiary 20	28-33	Secondary School	3
Beneficiary 21	45-50	No formal education	4
Beneficiary 22	30-35	No Formal Education	1
Beneficiary 23	35-40	Primary School	5
Beneficiary 24	40-45	No formal education	2
Beneficiary 25	25-30	Secondary School	3
Beneficiary 26	50-55	No Formal Education	4
FGD Participant 1	35-40	NA	N/A
FGD Participant 2	50-55	NA	N/A
Key Informant 1	56-60	Bachelor's Degree	N/A
Key Informant 2	50-55	Bachelor's Degree	N/A

4.2 THEMES

In our research on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs and the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region, Uganda, we identified five overarching themes: economic empowerment and impact, skill development and acquisition, challenges and resilience, gender dynamics and family support, and community perception, support, and future aspirations.

Theme 1: Economic Empowerment and Impact

Economic empowerment encompasses the improvements in women's economic status through starting businesses, generating income, and supporting their families financially. This theme highlights the broader economic transformation resulting from women's participation in UWEP, leading to increased economic activity and financial stability among the participants.

One key informant noted,

"Since joining UWEP, I've been able to start a small retail shop that brings in steady income, allowing me to pay school fees for my children and improve our living conditions."

Echoing this sentiment, Beneficiary 26 shared,

"Before UWEP, we struggled to make ends meet, but now I have a goat rearing business that has significantly boosted our household income."

Additionally, during an FGD, participants emphasized,

"Many of us were dependent on subsistence farming, but with the loans and support from UWEP, we've ventured into diverse businesses like produce selling and hair salons."

THEME 2: SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND ACQUISITION

Skill development and acquisition refer to the enhancement of business skills such as managing finances, saving, accessing banking services, and agricultural skills. Participation in UWEP has equipped women with the knowledge and abilities needed to effectively run and sustain their businesses.

A key informant explained,

"UWEP has taught us crucial skills in financial management and saving, which were previously unknown to many of us."

Beneficiary 2 added,

"Through the training sessions, I learned how to keep proper business records and manage my inventory, which has helped my business grow."

Reflecting a similar experience, participants in an FGD stated,

"The program provided us with valuable training on accessing banking services and handling money, which has been instrumental in running our businesses smoothly."

THEME 3: CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE

This theme captures the various challenges faced by women, including unreliable weather patterns, poor infrastructure, domestic violence, bureaucratic processes, cultural barriers, and resistance from husbands. It also highlights the resilience demonstrated by women in overcoming these obstacles through group cohesion, decision-making, and adaptability.

A key informant remarked,

"One major challenge is the poor road infrastructure, which makes it difficult for us to transport our goods to the market."

Beneficiary 6 noted,

"We face resistance from our husbands who believe women should not be involved in business, but we are slowly changing these perceptions."

Despite these hurdles, participants in an FGD expressed resilience:

"Despite the bureaucratic delays in loan disbursement, we support each other in finding solutions and making our businesses thrive."

THEME 4: GENDER DYNAMICS AND FAMILY SUPPORT

This theme addresses the role of gender dynamics in women's entrepreneurial activities. It includes the varying levels of support from husbands and family members, changing cultural attitudes towards women's economic participation, and the importance of addressing gender dynamics within households to support women's economic independence.

A key informant observed,

"Initially, there was a lot of skepticism from the men in our community, but as they saw the positive changes, many have become supportive."

Beneficiary 20 shared a personal story:

"My husband was resistant at first, but after seeing the benefits of my business, he now helps me with some of the tasks."

Reflecting a broader cultural shift, participants in an FGD noted,

"Cultural norms are slowly shifting, and more men are beginning to understand the importance of supporting their wives' entrepreneurial efforts."

THEME 5: COMMUNITY PERCEPTION, SUPPORT, AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

This theme reflects the community's evolving perception and support for women's participation in UWEP, positive lifestyle changes, and access to technology. It also encompasses the ongoing need for financial and training support, loan management, and participants' optimism and aspirations for future business expansion, employment generation, and community development.

A key informant highlighted the changing attitudes: "The community's perception of women's roles is changing, and there is more support for women entrepreneurs now than ever before."

Beneficiary 17 illustrated the tangible benefits:

"With the income from my business, we've been able to buy a motorcycle, which has improved our mobility and access to markets."

Participants in an FGD expressed their optimism:

"We are hopeful about the future and aim to expand our businesses further, creating employment opportunities for others in our community."

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to understand the lived experiences of rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region, Uganda, participating in gender-specific entrepreneurship programs. The research identified five overarching themes: economic empowerment and impact, skill development and acquisition, challenges and resilience, gender dynamics and family support, and community perception, support, and future aspirations. Economic empowerment revealed improvements in women's financial status through business ventures supported by UWEP, resulting in increased economic activity and financial stability. Skill development highlighted how women acquired crucial business skills, enhancing their ability to sustain their enterprises. Challenges and resilience showcased the difficulties faced, including poor infrastructure and cultural resistance, and how women demonstrated resilience through group cohesion and adaptability. Gender dynamics and family support examined the evolving support from husbands and the community, indicating a gradual shift in cultural attitudes towards women's economic participation. Finally, community perception, support, and future aspirations reflected the changing views of women's roles, the positive impact on lifestyles, and the women's optimism for future business growth and community development.

The findings regarding economic empowerment among rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda resonate with broader trends observed in studies on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs (Lwamba et al., 2022). Across various contexts, including those in Uganda and beyond, such programs have consistently demonstrated their capacity to uplift women economically by fostering business creation, income generation, and financial support for families (Daraojimba, 2024). This aligns with research by Buvinic and o'Donnell (2016), who emphasizes the transformative potential of women's economic empowerment, not only in terms of individual well-being but also in catalyzing broader economic development (Buvinic & o'Donnell, 2016). In the Amolatar Sub-Region, the current study's findings echo this narrative, illustrating how participation in the UWEP leads to increased economic activity and financial stability among rural women entrepreneurs. Such results show the significance of gender-specific entrepreneurship initiatives in not only addressing gender disparities but also driving inclusive economic growth and poverty alleviation at the grassroots level. Therefore, policymakers and practitioners should continue investing in and tailoring these programs to ensure sustained empowerment and impact among rural women entrepreneurs in Uganda and similar contexts globally.

The theme of skill development and acquisition among rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region mirrors findings from various studies on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs (Sadera et al., 2019). These programs have been shown to empower women with the essential skills required to establish and manage successful businesses (Sadera et al., 2019). This finding is in line with research by Li and colleagues (2019), who show the pivotal role of skill development in enhancing the entrepreneurial capabilities of women, leading to increased productivity and profitability (Li et al., 2019). In the Amolatar Sub-Region, the current study's results echo this trend, demonstrating how participation in the UWEP has equipped women with the necessary knowledge and abilities to navigate various aspects of business management, including financial management, savings, accessing banking services, and agricultural skills. Such findings hold significant implications for policy and practice, suggesting that gender-specific entrepreneurship programs can serve as effective vehicles for equipping women with the skills needed to thrive in the business, thereby fostering economic empowerment and sustainable development in rural communities.

The theme of challenges and resilience identified among rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda aligns with broader patterns observed in studies on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs (Li et al., 2019). Women participating in such programs encounter multifaceted challenges ranging from environmental factors like unreliable weather patterns to socio-cultural barriers such as domestic violence and resistance from husbands (Omosho et al., 2024). However, despite these challenges, women demonstrate remarkable resilience, leveraging group cohesion, decision-making skills, and adaptability to navigate obstacles and sustain their enterprises. This resilience mirrors findings from studies by Brindley (2005), highlighting the importance of social support networks and agency in mitigating the adverse effects of barriers to women's entrepreneurship (Brindley, 2005). In the context of the Amolatar Sub-Region, the study's results signify the need for gender-specific entrepreneurship programs to not only address the systemic challenges faced by women but also foster resilience-building strategies to support their sustainable empowerment.

The theme of gender dynamics and family support identified among rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda resonates with findings from diverse studies on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs. The role of family support, particularly from husbands, emerges as a critical factor influencing women's entrepreneurial endeavors (Vadnjaj & Vadnjaj, 2013). This finding aligns with research by Daffa and colleagues (2024), highlighting the significance of addressing gender dynamics within households to foster women's economic independence (Daffa et al., 2024). Moreover, the changing cultural attitudes towards women's economic participation highlight the need for gender-specific interventions that not only empower women but also engage with broader social norms and structures. In the Amolatar Sub-Region, the study's results shed light on the interplay between gender dynamics, family support, and women's entrepreneurship experiences. Therefore, policymakers and practitioners must design programs that not only equip women with entrepreneurial skills but also foster supportive environments within households and communities to enable

their sustained economic empowerment. This necessitates engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender roles, ultimately leading to more inclusive and resilient rural economies.

The theme of community perception, support, and future aspirations among rural women entrepreneurs in the Amolatar Sub-Region of Uganda aligns with broader trends observed in studies on gender-specific entrepreneurship programs (Nandi, 2023). Community support and positive perceptions of women's participation in such programs have been shown to facilitate economic empowerment and foster inclusive development (Karim et al., 2018). In the Amolatar Sub-Region, the study's results signify the transformative potential of the UWEP in not only improving participants' livelihoods but also fostering positive lifestyle changes and aspirations for future business expansion and community development. Consequently, policymakers and practitioners must continue to prioritize community engagement and support mechanisms, ensuring that gender-specific entrepreneurship programs are embedded within broader socio-economic development agendas. By harnessing the momentum of community support and participants' optimism, these programs can catalyze sustainable economic growth, create employment opportunities, and promote gender equality in rural areas.

5.1 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several notable strengths. Firstly, it employed a comprehensive methodological approach, utilizing a robust combination of key informant and in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. This enhances the depth and reliability of the findings by capturing multiple perspectives on the impact of such programs. Secondly, the study's context-specific insights provide valuable understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Uganda. This specificity is crucial for comprehending the localized impact of programs like UWEP and how cultural and socio-economic factors interplay in this setting. However, the study also has some limitations. While the study provides rich, context-specific insights, these may not be applicable to other regions or settings. The unique socio-cultural and economic context of Amolatar might not be representative of other rural areas in Uganda or other countries. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability bias, recall bias, and subjective interpretation of experiences, potentially affecting the accuracy and objectivity of the reported findings. Furthermore, the study captures the experiences of participants at a specific point in time. Given the dynamic nature of economic and social conditions, the findings might not fully account for changes over time, limiting the understanding of the long-term impacts of the entrepreneurship programs.

6. CONCLUSION

Gender-specific entrepreneurship programs like UWEP significantly contribute to the economic empowerment of rural women in Amolatar, Uganda. The programs help women acquire crucial business skills, overcome

challenges, and gain support from their families and communities. These initiatives are essential for fostering sustainable economic development and gender equality in rural areas.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest

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