

EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN AND YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how women and youth entrepreneurship contributed to inclusive development in Nigeria, with particular attention to access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support. A quantitative survey design was adopted, and structured questionnaires were administered to women and youth entrepreneurs operating small and medium-sized enterprises in selected entrepreneurial centres across Nigeria. Of the 420 questionnaires distributed, 386 were properly completed and found suitable for analysis, representing a response rate of 91.9%. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis with SPSS Version 28. The results showed significant positive relationships between access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, institutional support, and inclusive development. The regression model produced an R-value of 0.81 and an R^2 of 0.66, indicating that the four predictors jointly accounted for 66% of the variation in inclusive development. Access to finance had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), followed by entrepreneurial skills development ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), digital transformation ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), and institutional support ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that improving access to finance, strengthening entrepreneurial capabilities, expanding digital opportunities, and providing effective institutional support can enhance the contribution of women and youth entrepreneurship to inclusive development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurship; youth entrepreneurship; inclusive development; access to finance; entrepreneurial skills development; digital transformation; institutional support.

INTRODUCTION

Women and youth entrepreneurship have become increasingly important to inclusive economic development, particularly in developing economies where unemployment, inequality, and

restricted access to formal economic opportunities remain persistent challenges. Through business creation and self-employment, women and young people contribute to household income, employment generation, innovation, and local economic activity. Entrepreneurship also provides an avenue through which individuals can respond to limited formal employment opportunities and participate more actively in economic life. Nevertheless, the capacity of women and youth to translate entrepreneurial activity into sustainable outcomes is often constrained by inadequate access to finance, limited entrepreneurial skills, weak infrastructure, socio-cultural expectations, and institutional barriers.

Entrepreneurship is increasingly understood not simply as an economic activity but also as a means of empowerment, social participation, and economic transformation. For women entrepreneurs, outcomes are influenced by access to finance, markets, knowledge, networks, family responsibilities, and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment (Jaim, 2021; Panda, 2018). In Nigeria, informal community-based financing arrangements such as *Ajo* have provided an alternative means of mobilising resources for women entrepreneurs, particularly where access to formal financial services is restricted (Simba et al., 2023; Simba et al., 2024). The entrepreneurial ecosystem in which women operate can either expand or restrict these opportunities, depending on the availability of resources, networks, institutional support, and market opportunities (Isakova & Stroila, 2025; Stroila et al., 2026). Youth entrepreneurship is equally relevant to economic development. Young entrepreneurs create businesses, generate employment, introduce new products and services, and develop innovative responses to economic and social challenges. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that government support, informal networks, and access to external knowledge can strengthen learning and innovation among youth-owned businesses (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021). Thus, entrepreneurship provides both women and young people with opportunities to participate in economic activities while contributing to broader patterns of inclusive development.

Despite these contributions, a substantial gap remains between the entrepreneurial potential of women and youth and the outcomes they are able to achieve. Women entrepreneurs continue to encounter difficulties relating to finance, infrastructure, education, training, market access, and socio-cultural expectations (Panda, 2018). Nigerian evidence further indicates that financial resources, market access, managerial capabilities, household responsibilities, and wider socio-economic conditions influence the development of women-owned businesses (Simba, 2021). Informal financing arrangements may partially address some of these constraints, but they do not eliminate the structural limitations associated with formal financial exclusion (Simba et al., 2024). Young entrepreneurs face similar difficulties. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa indicates that youth entrepreneurship is constrained by barriers operating at individual, community, institutional, and wider environmental levels (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). In Nigeria, entrepreneurship programmes have also been associated with improved livelihood opportunities by providing young people with alternatives to formal employment (Osei-Assibey et al., 2023). These challenges suggest that entrepreneurial activity alone may not be sufficient to generate inclusive development. The resources, capabilities, technologies, and institutional conditions available to entrepreneurs are equally important.

This situation presents an important concern for policymakers and development stakeholders. Promoting women and youth entrepreneurship requires more than encouraging business start-up; it also requires an enabling environment in which entrepreneurs can access finance, acquire relevant skills, adopt appropriate technologies, develop networks, and obtain institutional support. Financial constraints, for example, can limit the ability of young entrepreneurs to establish and

sustain businesses (Senou, 2022). Similarly, evidence from Nigeria indicates that government support, informal networks, and access to knowledge can enhance learning and innovation among youth-owned enterprises (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021).

Against this background, this study examines how women and youth entrepreneurship contributes to inclusive development, with particular attention to the roles of access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support. The study seeks to establish whether these dimensions significantly influence inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The study tests the following null hypotheses:

Ho1: Access to finance has no significant effect on inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs.

Ho2: Entrepreneurial skills development has no significant effect on inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs.

Ho3: Digital transformation has no significant effect on inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs.

Ho4: Institutional support has no significant effect on inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs.

The hypotheses were formulated to correspond directly with the predictors included in the reported regression model. The earlier formulation of institutional support as a moderator has not been retained because the statistical results supplied for the study represent a direct-effects regression rather than a moderation analysis.

The study has both practical and theoretical significance. From a practical perspective, the findings provide evidence that can assist policymakers, financial institutions, entrepreneurship development agencies, and other stakeholders in designing more effective support systems for women and youth entrepreneurs. Particular attention is given to financial inclusion, entrepreneurial skills, digital capabilities, and institutional support because these factors can influence the ability of entrepreneurs to establish, sustain, and expand their businesses. The study is also relevant to development agencies seeking to strengthen inclusive economic participation. Improving access to appropriate financial services, practical entrepreneurship education, digital infrastructure, mentorship, networks, and business-support programmes can create more favourable conditions for entrepreneurial development. Theoretically, the study contributes to entrepreneurship and development literature by bringing women and youth entrepreneurship into a common framework of inclusive development. Rather than treating entrepreneurial outcomes as products of individual effort alone, the study recognises the importance of the wider ecosystem, human capital, technological resources, and institutional environment in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Women Entrepreneurship

Women entrepreneurship refers to the process through which women identify opportunities, establish and manage business ventures, and mobilise resources to create economic and social value. It encompasses both formal and informal activities across sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, trade, services, and technology. In developing economies, women's

entrepreneurship extends beyond personal income generation because it can contribute to household welfare, employment creation, economic participation, and social inclusion (Panda, 2018; Simba, 2021). The development of women-owned businesses, however, is influenced by the environment in which entrepreneurs operate. Women may experience difficulties obtaining finance, accessing markets, acquiring business knowledge, and balancing enterprise activities with family responsibilities. These challenges can restrict the survival and expansion of women-owned businesses (Panda, 2018). Nigerian evidence similarly suggests that the financial and social environments surrounding women entrepreneurs influence their ability to mobilise and deploy resources effectively. Informal financing arrangements such as *Ajo* may provide an alternative source of funding where formal financial institutions are difficult to access (Simba et al., 2024). Consequently, women's entrepreneurship should be considered within a broader framework that recognises both entrepreneurial agency and structural conditions. The ability of women to create economic value depends not only on their willingness to undertake entrepreneurial activities but also on whether they have access to finance, skills, markets, technology, networks, and supportive institutions.

Youth Entrepreneurship

Youth entrepreneurship refers to business creation and entrepreneurial activity undertaken by young people. It has received increasing attention because of its potential to address unemployment, promote innovation, generate income, and improve young people's participation in economic life. In developing economies, entrepreneurship can provide an alternative to formal employment, particularly where labour markets are unable to absorb the growing youth population. Youth entrepreneurship is strongly connected to learning, knowledge, networks, innovation, and institutional support. Evidence from Lagos, Nigeria, indicates that government support, informal networks, and external knowledge infrastructure contribute to learning and innovation among youth-owned small businesses (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021). This suggests that young entrepreneurs benefit from environments that provide opportunities for knowledge acquisition, networking, mentoring, and business development. The wider sub-Saharan African literature also identifies inadequate entrepreneurial education and skills, limited access to finance and social capital, insufficient business-support facilities, and weak policy environments as important barriers to youth entrepreneurship (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). Effective youth entrepreneurship development therefore requires a combination of individual capabilities and supportive external conditions.

Inclusive Development

Inclusive development refers to a development process in which different groups within society have meaningful opportunities to participate in economic and social activities and to benefit from economic progress. It goes beyond aggregate economic growth by considering who participates in economic activity, who has access to resources and opportunities, and how the benefits of development are distributed. Entrepreneurship can support inclusive development by creating employment, generating income, stimulating innovation, and providing opportunities for groups that may otherwise face limited participation in formal economic systems. Women and youth entrepreneurship are particularly relevant in this regard because both groups can face barriers to employment, finance, markets, and institutional resources. Evidence from developing-country contexts indicates that women's entrepreneurship can strengthen social and economic participation. For example, research on women micro-entrepreneurs has linked entrepreneurship with social inclusion and identified individual capabilities such as self-efficacy and resilience as relevant factors (Quagraine et al., 2022). Similarly, entrepreneurship among women in rural

developing-country settings has been associated with income generation, employment, and participation in economic activity (Kabagerayo et al., 2022). The contribution of entrepreneurship to inclusive development is therefore conditional. Business creation does not automatically result in inclusive development; rather, positive outcomes are more likely where entrepreneurs have equitable access to financial, human, technological, and institutional resources.

Access to Finance

Access to finance represents the ability of entrepreneurs to obtain and effectively use financial resources for business establishment, operation, survival, and expansion. Finance enables entrepreneurs to purchase inputs, acquire equipment, employ workers, adopt technologies, develop products, and access new markets. Women and young entrepreneurs may experience greater difficulty obtaining formal finance because of limited collateral, inadequate credit histories, information asymmetry, and other structural constraints (Gunewardena et al., 2020; Panda, 2018). Such constraints can prevent potentially viable enterprises from progressing beyond small-scale operations.

In Nigeria, informal financial mechanisms have emerged as important alternatives. Simba et al. (2024) found that *Ajo* can provide women entrepreneurs with a mechanism for mobilising financial resources where formal financing is difficult to obtain. This illustrates the importance of considering both formal and informal financial systems when examining entrepreneurial development. Improving access to finance therefore requires more than increasing the availability of credit. Financial products must also be accessible, affordable, appropriate to the needs of small enterprises, and supported by financial literacy and business development services.

Entrepreneurial Skills Development

Entrepreneurial skills development involves acquiring the knowledge and capabilities required to identify opportunities, establish and manage enterprises, solve business problems, innovate, and respond to changing market conditions. Relevant capabilities include financial management, marketing, strategic planning, digital literacy, opportunity recognition, communication, leadership, and innovation. Entrepreneurship education can contribute to the development of these capabilities. Evidence from Nigeria suggests that entrepreneurship education can influence entrepreneurial motivation and intention (Amuda et al., 2019). Among youth-owned businesses, learning and access to external knowledge have also been associated with innovation (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021). The importance of skills is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where inadequate entrepreneurial education and capabilities have been identified as significant barriers to youth entrepreneurship (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). Entrepreneurship development programmes should therefore combine theoretical instruction with practical business experience, mentoring, networking, and exposure to real market conditions.

Institutional and Policy Support

Institutional and policy support encompasses government policies, regulatory frameworks, infrastructure, financial institutions, entrepreneurship development organisations, and other structures that shape the entrepreneurial environment. Businesses do not operate independently of their institutional context. Regulations, public policies, infrastructure, markets, finance, and support organisations can either facilitate or restrict entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurial ecosystem research emphasises the interdependence of these factors. Spigel and Harrison (2018) and Stam and van de Ven (2021) demonstrate that entrepreneurial outcomes are influenced by the relationships among entrepreneurs, institutions, markets, networks, resources, and infrastructure. For women and youth entrepreneurs, effective institutional support can help reduce structural barriers to finance, markets, technology, knowledge, and business networks. Evidence from

Nigeria indicates that government support can contribute to learning and innovation among youth-owned businesses (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021). Conversely, weak policies and inadequate institutional arrangements may limit entrepreneurial development (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025).

Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship

Digital transformation has become an important component of contemporary entrepreneurship. Digital technologies provide businesses with opportunities to access customers, gather market information, communicate with suppliers, process payments, advertise products, and reach markets beyond their immediate geographical locations. For women and youth entrepreneurs in developing economies, these technologies can reduce some information and market-access barriers. Kapinga and Montero (2019), for instance, demonstrated the potential of mobile marketing technology to improve market information among women entrepreneurs in Tanzania. More recent evidence indicates that digital technologies can support resource mobilisation, market expansion, sales growth, and product development among women entrepreneurs (Tanaji et al., 2025).

However, digital transformation is not equally accessible to all entrepreneurs. Its benefits depend on digital skills, infrastructure, affordability, finance, and supportive institutional conditions. Digital inclusion should therefore be treated as part of a broader entrepreneurial development strategy.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The study is anchored on Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Social Inclusion Theory.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory views entrepreneurship as an activity embedded within a broader system of actors, institutions, resources, networks, markets, and environmental conditions. Entrepreneurial outcomes are therefore not determined solely by individual characteristics but are also shaped by the environment within which entrepreneurs operate.

Spigel and Harrison (2018) emphasise the relationships among actors and institutions in shaping entrepreneurial ecosystems, while Stam and van de Ven (2021) explain how interconnected factors can enable or constrain entrepreneurial activity.

The theory is relevant to this study because women and youth entrepreneurs often face structural barriers to finance, markets, networks, knowledge, infrastructure, and institutional support. The significant role of government support, networks, and external knowledge in youth-owned businesses in Nigeria provides empirical support for this perspective (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021).

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory emphasises the contribution of education, knowledge, skills, and experience to productivity and economic outcomes. In entrepreneurship, human capital influences the ability to identify opportunities, manage resources, innovate, solve problems, and respond to changing market conditions.

The theory provides a basis for examining entrepreneurial skills development in this study. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that entrepreneurship education can influence entrepreneurial motivation and intention (Amuda et al., 2019), while learning and access to knowledge have been associated with innovation among youth-owned businesses (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021).

Thus, Human Capital Theory supports the expectation that entrepreneurs with stronger knowledge and skills are better positioned to convert opportunities and resources into productive business outcomes.

Social Inclusion Theory

Social Inclusion Theory focuses on the ability of individuals and groups to participate meaningfully in economic, social, and institutional processes. Inclusive development requires barriers to participation to be reduced so that different groups can access opportunities, resources, and benefits.

This perspective is relevant because women and youth may experience structural barriers that limit their participation in economic activities. Entrepreneurship can provide an avenue through which these groups generate income, create employment, and strengthen their economic position.

Evidence from Ghana indicates that women's micro-entrepreneurship can contribute to social inclusion, with factors such as self-efficacy and resilience influencing entrepreneurial outcomes (Quagraine et al., 2022). Similarly, women's entrepreneurship in rural developing-country settings has been linked to income generation, employment, and broader participation in economic life (Kabagerayo et al., 2022).

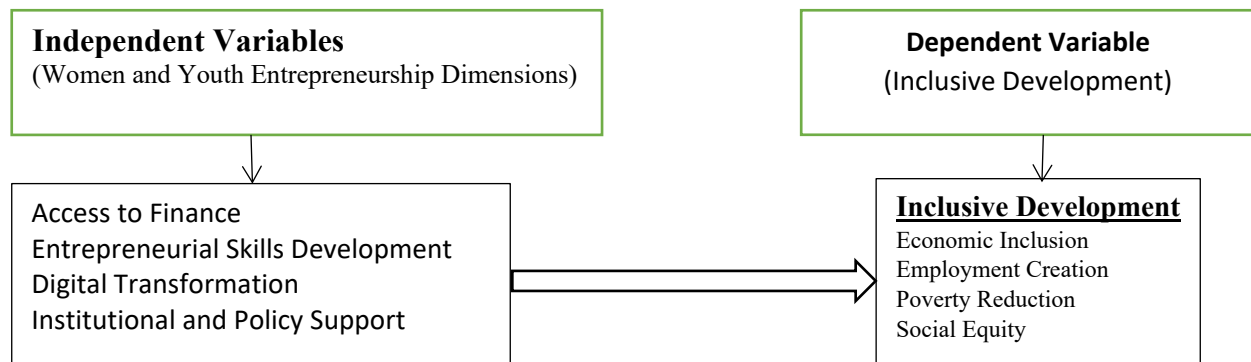
Theoretical Synthesis

The three theories provide complementary explanations for the relationships examined in this study. Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory highlights the importance of institutional and environmental conditions; Human Capital Theory explains the contribution of knowledge and entrepreneurial skills; and Social Inclusion Theory provides a basis for understanding how expanded entrepreneurial participation can contribute to broader economic and social inclusion.

Together, these perspectives provide an appropriate theoretical foundation for examining how women and youth entrepreneurship, supported by finance, skills, digital technologies, and institutional conditions, contributes to inclusive development in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework on Women and Youth Entrepreneurship for Inclusive Development



Source: Authors, 2026

The conceptual framework proposes that women and youth entrepreneurship contribute to inclusive development through four major dimensions: access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support. These dimensions represent important resources and conditions that determine the extent to which entrepreneurial activity can generate wider economic and social benefits. Access to finance enables entrepreneurs to establish, maintain, and expand businesses. Entrepreneurial skills provide the capabilities needed to manage these resources effectively and respond to market opportunities. Digital transformation expands access to information, customers, markets, and business technologies, while institutional support

provides the regulatory, infrastructural, and organisational environment within which entrepreneurship occurs. The framework therefore assumes that entrepreneurship is more likely to contribute to inclusive development when women and youth have access to the resources and conditions necessary to sustain viable enterprises. Inclusive development is reflected in outcomes such as employment creation, income improvement, poverty reduction, economic participation, and social inclusion.

GAP IN LITERATURE

Although women and youth entrepreneurship have received considerable scholarly attention, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature treats women entrepreneurship and youth entrepreneurship as separate areas of investigation. This has generated valuable knowledge about the constraints affecting each group but has provided less evidence on their combined contribution to inclusive development. Second, previous studies have often focused on individual constraints, such as access to finance or entrepreneurial skills, rather than considering how financial, human-capital, technological, and institutional factors operate together. Studies have established the importance of finance for women entrepreneurs (Panda, 2018; Simba et al., 2024), learning and skills for youth-owned enterprises (Adeosun & Shittu, 2021), and entrepreneurial ecosystems for venture development (Spigel & Harrison, 2018; Stam & van de Ven, 2021). However, an integrated empirical framework remains necessary. Third, although evidence exists from Nigeria and other developing economies, relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to directly linking women and youth entrepreneurship with measurable dimensions of inclusive development. Existing studies have demonstrated relationships between entrepreneurship, employment, learning, innovation, and social inclusion, but the combined effect of the identified entrepreneurial dimensions requires further empirical examination. Finally, the increasing importance of digital entrepreneurship creates another area requiring investigation. Digital technologies can improve access to information and markets, but their benefits depend on skills, infrastructure, finance, and institutional support. Examining digital transformation alongside these other dimensions can therefore provide a more complete explanation of entrepreneurial contributions to inclusive development. This study addresses these gaps by examining women and youth entrepreneurship within a unified framework that incorporates access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support. The approach provides an integrated basis for assessing how entrepreneurial activity can contribute to employment, income generation, economic participation, poverty reduction, and social inclusion in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative survey research design to examine the relationship between women and youth entrepreneurship and inclusive development in Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it allowed numerical data to be collected from a relatively large number of entrepreneurs and provided a basis for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. The survey focused on women and youth entrepreneurs operating SMEs across selected sectors, including agriculture, retail, services, and digital enterprises. The design also enabled the study to

assess the relative contribution of access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support to inclusive development.

The population consisted of approximately 12,800 women and youth entrepreneurs operating registered SMEs across Nigeria. Respondents were drawn from entrepreneurial centres including Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Ibadan, and Kano. Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the initial sample size was determined to be 350 respondents. An additional 20% was included to account for possible non-response and incomplete questionnaires, resulting in a final target sample of 420 respondents. A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted. Purposive sampling was first used to select locations characterised by substantial entrepreneurial activity. Respondents were subsequently stratified into women entrepreneurs and youth entrepreneurs. Simple random sampling was then used within the identified strata to select participants.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from established entrepreneurship and inclusive-development measures. The instrument contained two major sections. Section A collected demographic information, including age, gender, educational background, business type, and entrepreneurial experience. Section B contained items measuring the study variables. Women and youth entrepreneurship was operationalised through four dimensions: access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support. Inclusive development was measured using indicators relating to employment creation, income improvement, poverty reduction, economic participation, and social inclusion. All substantive items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Before the main survey, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in entrepreneurship and development studies and subjected to pilot testing. The exercise helped to improve the clarity, relevance, and suitability of the measurement items. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the use of responses strictly for academic purposes, were observed.

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 28. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise the demographic characteristics and responses of participants. Inferential analysis involved Pearson correlation and multiple regression. The regression model examined the effects of access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support on inclusive development. The hypotheses were tested at the 5% significance level. Statistical decisions were based on the probability values, beta coefficients, and corresponding t-statistics.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Content Validity

Content validity was established through expert assessment. Three academics specialising in entrepreneurship and two practitioners involved in SME development reviewed the questionnaire. Their observations were used to improve the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the measurement items. The resulting Content Validity Index (CVI) was 0.87, indicating a satisfactory level of content validity.

Construct Validity

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.91, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (276) = 2245.62$, $p < 0.001$, confirming that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis.

Four constructs emerged as expected:

Construct	Factor Loadings	AVE
Access to Finance	0.71–0.87	0.64
Entrepreneurial Skills Development	0.69–0.85	0.61
Digital Transformation	0.73–0.89	0.66
Institutional Support	0.70–0.86	0.63

All factor loadings exceeded 0.60, providing evidence of satisfactory construct validity.

Convergent Validity

Construct	AVE	CR
Access to Finance	0.64	0.88
Entrepreneurial Skills Development	0.61	0.86
Digital Transformation	0.66	0.90
Institutional Support	0.63	0.87

All AVE values exceeded 0.50, while all Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.70. These results indicate satisfactory convergent validity and internal consistency.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations. In addition, the correlation coefficients were below 0.80, indicating that the constructs were sufficiently distinct from one another and that serious multicollinearity was unlikely.

RELIABILITY

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Access to Finance	0.83	Good
Entrepreneurial Skills Development	0.81	Good
Digital Transformation	0.86	Excellent
Institutional Support	0.88	Excellent

All coefficients exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory to excellent internal consistency across the study constructs.

NORMALITY AND MULTICOLLINEARITY TESTS

Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis
Access to Finance	-0.54	0.38
Skills Development	-0.61	0.44
Digital Transformation	-0.67	0.49
Institutional Support	-0.52	0.36

The skewness and kurtosis values were within the commonly accepted range of ± 1 , suggesting that the variables approximated normal distributions.

Shapiro-Wilk Test

The Shapiro-Wilk test was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Given the sample size, this result was interpreted alongside the skewness and kurtosis statistics rather than being treated as evidence of substantial non-normality. The relatively small skewness and kurtosis values indicated that the distributions were sufficiently close to normal for the planned parametric analyses.

Multicollinearity

Predictor	VIF
Access to Finance	1.72
Skills Development	1.85
Digital Transformation	1.91
Institutional Support	1.68

All VIF values were substantially below 5.00, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in the regression model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

A total of 420 questionnaires were administered. Of these, 386 were successfully retrieved, properly completed, and considered suitable for analysis, representing a response rate of **91.9%**. The high response rate provided an adequate basis for the analysis.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	192	49.7
	Female	194	50.3
Age	18–25	88	22.8
	26–35	146	37.8
	36–45	98	25.4
	46+	54	14.0
Entrepreneurship Type	Women Entrepreneurs	208	53.9
	Youth Entrepreneurs	178	46.1
Business Sector	Agriculture	102	26.4

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experience	Services	154	39.9
	Retail/Trade	96	24.9
	Digital/Tech SMEs	34	8.8
	1–3 years	96	24.9
	4–7 years	162	42.0
	8–10 years	78	20.2
	10+ years	50	12.9

The demographic distribution provides relatively balanced representation of male and female respondents, with females accounting for 50.3% and males 49.7%. Women entrepreneurs constituted 53.9% of the sample, while youth entrepreneurs accounted for 46.1%, providing substantial representation of both groups. The largest age category was 26–35 years (37.8%), followed by 36–45 years (25.4%). This indicates that most respondents were within economically active age groups. Services represented the largest business sector (39.9%), followed by agriculture (26.4%) and retail/trade (24.9%). Digital and technology-based SMEs accounted for 8.8% of the sample. Regarding entrepreneurial experience, 42.0% of respondents had between four and seven years of experience. This suggests that a considerable proportion of participants had accumulated sufficient business experience to assess the financial, skills, technological, and institutional conditions surrounding their enterprises.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Access to Finance	386	4.21	0.66
Entrepreneurial Skills Development	386	4.18	0.63
Digital Transformation	386	4.12	0.71
Institutional Support	386	4.09	0.68
Inclusive Development	386	4.27	0.60

The results show generally high mean scores across all variables. Inclusive Development recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.60$), suggesting that respondents generally perceived entrepreneurship as contributing positively to employment, income generation, economic participation, and social inclusion. Access to Finance recorded a mean of 4.21 ($SD = 0.66$), demonstrating the importance respondents attached to financial resources. Entrepreneurial Skills Development also recorded a high mean ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.63$), indicating that respondents considered skills and capabilities important to business success. Digital Transformation recorded a mean of 4.12 ($SD = 0.71$), suggesting that respondents recognised the growing relevance of digital technologies to entrepreneurial activity. Institutional Support recorded the lowest mean among the explanatory variables ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.68$), although the score remained high. Overall, the descriptive results indicate favourable perceptions of the conditions examined in the study.

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Variable	Inclusive Development (r)	Sig.
Access to Finance	0.74	0.000

Variable	Inclusive Development (r)	Sig.
Skills Development	0.69	0.000
Digital Transformation	0.66	0.000
Institutional Support	0.63	0.000

The correlation analysis shows positive and statistically significant relationships between all four predictors and inclusive development. Access to Finance had the strongest association with Inclusive Development ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that respondents reporting stronger access to finance also tended to report higher levels of inclusive development. Entrepreneurial Skills Development was also strongly associated with Inclusive Development ($r = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$). The result indicates that stronger entrepreneurial capabilities were associated with more favourable development outcomes. Digital Transformation recorded a significant positive relationship with Inclusive Development ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that greater use of digital technologies was associated with stronger perceptions of inclusive development. Institutional Support had a positive and significant relationship with Inclusive Development ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). Although this was the weakest of the four correlations, the result still indicates a meaningful association between the institutional environment and inclusive development. These correlations provide preliminary evidence of relationships among the study variables. However, because correlation does not establish causation, the regression analysis was used to determine the unique contribution of each predictor while controlling for the others.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Dependent Variable: Inclusive Development

Predictors: Access to Finance, Entrepreneurial Skills Development, Digital Transformation, Institutional Support

Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
1	0.81	0.66	0.65	0.34

The regression model produced an R value of 0.81, indicating a strong relationship between the combined predictors and inclusive development. The R² value of 0.66 indicates that access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support jointly explained approximately 66% of the variation in inclusive development. The adjusted R² of 0.65 indicates that the model retained substantial explanatory power after adjustment for the number of predictors.

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Access to Finance	0.38	0.05	0.40	7.60	0.000
Skills Development	0.32	0.06	0.34	5.33	0.000
Digital Transformation	0.28	0.07	0.30	4.00	0.000
Institutional Support	0.25	0.06	0.27	3.92	0.000

The regression results indicate that all four predictors had statistically significant positive effects on Inclusive Development.

Access to Finance was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$). Entrepreneurial Skills Development was the second strongest ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Digital Transformation ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) and Institutional Support ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$).

Since all four predictors were statistically significant at the 5% level, Ho1, Ho2, Ho3, and Ho4 were rejected. The results indicate that each factor made a significant unique contribution to inclusive development after controlling for the other predictors.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate that inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs is associated with a combination of financial, human-capital, technological, and institutional factors. The regression model produced an R of .81 and an R² of .66, indicating that the four predictors jointly explained 66% of the variance in inclusive development. This substantial explanatory power suggests that entrepreneurial outcomes are shaped by more than individual willingness or ability to start a business. The result supports the broader view that entrepreneurship is embedded within an enabling environment. Women and youth may possess entrepreneurial aspirations and capabilities, but their ability to translate these into sustainable outcomes depends substantially on the resources and opportunities available to them. Access to Finance emerged as the strongest predictor of Inclusive Development ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$). The result indicates that financial access made the largest unique contribution to inclusive development among the variables examined. Financial resources are essential for starting and expanding businesses, purchasing inputs and equipment, adopting technology, employing workers, and responding to market opportunities. Where entrepreneurs cannot access appropriate financing, even viable business ideas may remain small or fail to reach their growth potential. The finding is supported by Nigerian evidence. Metu and Nwogwugwu (2024) identified inadequate collateral, difficulties obtaining guarantors, fear of default, and information asymmetry among the barriers affecting women's access to finance. These constraints can restrict the capacity of women entrepreneurs to secure resources for business development. Similarly, Ogundana et al. (2021) demonstrated that financial resources form part of the wider conditions influencing women's business development in developing economies. The present finding therefore suggests that financial inclusion should remain a central component of policies aimed at strengthening women and youth entrepreneurship. Access to credit should be accompanied by appropriate repayment structures, financial literacy, alternative collateral arrangements, and products suited to the circumstances of small and emerging businesses. Entrepreneurial Skills Development was the second strongest predictor of Inclusive Development ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that financial resources alone do not guarantee positive entrepreneurial outcomes. Entrepreneurs must also possess the knowledge and capabilities required to use available resources effectively. Skills in financial management, marketing, opportunity recognition, innovation, strategic planning, digital operations, and decision-making can strengthen entrepreneurs' ability to respond to market conditions and sustain their enterprises. The result corresponds with Adeosun and Shittu (2021), who found that learning and access to external knowledge were important to innovation among youth-owned businesses in Lagos. It is also consistent with the wider evidence that inadequate entrepreneurial skills and education remain important constraints on youth entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). The implication is that entrepreneurship programmes should not end once a business has been established. Continuous training, mentorship, peer learning, and access to business-development networks are necessary to help entrepreneurs respond to changing market conditions. Digital Transformation had a positive and significant effect on Inclusive Development ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). Although its effect was lower than those of finance and skills development, the finding demonstrates the growing importance of digital capabilities in entrepreneurial activity. Digital technologies can improve access to customers, information, suppliers, financial services, and wider

markets. They can also support digital marketing, electronic payments, online sales, business communication, and operational efficiency. The result is consistent with evidence from Tanzania showing that mobile marketing technology can improve women's access to market information (Kapinga & Montero, 2019). More recent evidence also indicates that digital technologies can help women entrepreneurs mobilise resources, expand markets, increase sales, and develop new products (Tanaji et al., 2025). The finding nevertheless suggests that digital transformation should not be viewed in isolation. Technology is most likely to generate meaningful benefits where entrepreneurs possess the skills to use it, can afford digital tools and services, and operate within an environment with adequate infrastructure. Institutional Support was the weakest of the four predictors but remained statistically significant ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that government policies, regulations, institutional programmes, infrastructure, and support organisations make an important contribution to inclusive development. The relatively lower coefficient should not be interpreted as evidence that institutional support is unimportant. Instead, it suggests that, within this particular model, respondents perceived finance, skills, and digital transformation as having stronger direct contributions. The finding is consistent with Adeosun and Shittu (2021), who identified government support as relevant to learning and innovation among youth-owned businesses in Lagos. Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025) similarly identified weak policies and institutional barriers among the constraints affecting youth entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa.

For Nigeria, the implication is that entrepreneurship policies should focus not only on programme creation but also on implementation, accessibility, coordination, and continuity. Institutional support is likely to be most effective when it complements financial services, skills development, digital infrastructure, and market opportunities.

Taken together, the results indicate that inclusive development among women and youth entrepreneurs is multidimensional. No single factor adequately explains entrepreneurial outcomes. Instead, financial resources, entrepreneurial capabilities, technological opportunities, and institutional conditions operate together. The ranking of the regression coefficients provides an important insight. Access to Finance recorded the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.40$), followed by Entrepreneurial Skills Development ($\beta = 0.34$), Digital Transformation ($\beta = 0.30$), and Institutional Support ($\beta = 0.27$). This ordering suggests that financial and human-capital resources were particularly important to the respondents in the context examined. The findings also reinforce the theoretical foundation of the study. The significance of institutional support reflects the relevance of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory, while the effect of skills development supports the Human Capital perspective. The positive relationship between entrepreneurship-related factors and inclusive development is consistent with the central proposition of Social Inclusion Theory that greater economic participation can improve the opportunities available to individuals and groups. The findings therefore support an integrated understanding of entrepreneurship in which individual capabilities and environmental conditions are considered together. Women and youth entrepreneurship is more likely to generate inclusive development when entrepreneurs can access finance, acquire relevant skills, use digital technologies, and operate within supportive institutional environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the contribution of women and youth entrepreneurship to inclusive development in Nigeria, with particular attention to access to finance, entrepreneurial skills

development, digital transformation, and institutional support. The findings demonstrate that all four dimensions had positive and statistically significant effects on inclusive development. Access to Finance recorded the strongest effect, followed by Entrepreneurial Skills Development, Digital Transformation, and Institutional Support. Collectively, the predictors explained 66% of the variation in inclusive development. The results indicate that entrepreneurship can serve as an important mechanism for promoting economic participation and inclusive development, but its contribution depends substantially on the conditions within which entrepreneurial activities occur. Women and youth entrepreneurs require more than opportunities to establish businesses; they need access to appropriate finance, relevant skills, digital resources, supportive institutions, and markets. The study consequently concludes that a coordinated approach to entrepreneurial development is more likely to produce sustainable outcomes than isolated interventions. Policies that combine financial inclusion, skills development, digital inclusion, and effective institutional support can strengthen the capacity of women and youth entrepreneurs to create employment, improve income, expand economic participation, and contribute to inclusive development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Government agencies and financial institutions should expand affordable and accessible financing opportunities for women and youth entrepreneurs. Financing schemes should include flexible repayment arrangements, reduced collateral requirements, alternative credit-assessment mechanisms, and financial literacy support.
- ii. Entrepreneurship development agencies, universities, training institutions, and private-sector organisations should provide continuous practical training in financial management, marketing, innovation, strategic planning, digital business operations, and opportunity recognition.
- iii. Policymakers should improve access to affordable internet services, digital infrastructure, digital-payment systems, e-commerce platforms, and relevant technology training. Particular attention should be given to entrepreneurs who lack the resources to adopt digital technologies independently.
- iv. Government should simplify business registration and regulatory procedures, reduce unnecessary administrative barriers, and improve the accessibility and coordination of SME support programmes.
- v. Entrepreneurship support organisations should establish structured mentorship, incubation, and networking programmes that connect women and youth entrepreneurs with experienced business owners, investors, professional advisers, and potential markets.
- vi. Financial support, entrepreneurship training, digital inclusion, and institutional assistance should not be implemented as isolated programmes. Coordinated interventions are more likely to address the interconnected constraints affecting women and youth entrepreneurs.

Contributions to Knowledge

The study contributes to entrepreneurship and development literature in several ways.

First, it provides empirical evidence on the relationship between women and youth entrepreneurship and inclusive development within the Nigerian context.

Second, the study integrates access to finance, entrepreneurial skills development, digital transformation, and institutional support into a single framework for explaining inclusive development.

Third, the findings highlight the growing relevance of digital transformation to entrepreneurship and demonstrate that technological capabilities constitute an important dimension of contemporary entrepreneurial development.

Fourth, the study contributes to the application of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Social Inclusion Theory by demonstrating the complementary relevance of environmental conditions, entrepreneurial capabilities, and economic participation to inclusive development.

Finally, the study provides evidence that may assist policymakers and entrepreneurship-development organisations in designing interventions that address multiple dimensions of entrepreneurial disadvantage rather than concentrating on business start-up alone.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research could extend this study in several directions.

First, longitudinal studies could examine whether the relationships identified in this study remain stable over time and whether entrepreneurial support produces sustained improvements in inclusive development.

Second, comparative studies could examine differences across sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, retail, services, and technology to determine whether the determinants of inclusive development vary according to business context.

Third, qualitative studies could explore the experiences of women and youth entrepreneurs in greater depth, particularly their experiences with financial institutions, government programmes, digital technologies, and business networks.

Fourth, future studies could examine the effects of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, fintech, blockchain, and digital platforms, on entrepreneurial performance and inclusion.

Finally, comparative studies across Nigeria's geopolitical zones could investigate the extent to which differences in infrastructure, institutional capacity, markets, and socioeconomic conditions influence the relationship between entrepreneurship and inclusive development.

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