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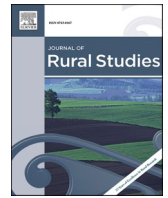
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Reconstructing women's entrepreneurial identity among rural small agrifood entrepreneurs: Agency, rural embeddedness, and stakeholder influence

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how women entrepreneurs in the Republic of Benin, West Africa, reshape their entrepreneurial identities through agency and interactions with supportive stakeholders. Drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews with women running small agrifood businesses and five interviews with representatives of women-support organizations, including NGOs, development projects and microfinance institutions, the study examines how women move from traditional, gendered roles toward being recognized and recognizing themselves as legitimate entrepreneurial actors. Rooted in scholarship on women's entrepreneurship, rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity, we emphasize that entrepreneurial identity reconstruction in rural and peri-urban settings is shaped by gendered norms, local reputation, household responsibilities, resource scarcity and stakeholder validation. Our findings show that women's motivation, personal control, self-efficacy and everyday entrepreneurial practice help them challenge socio-cultural constraints, while support organizations provide finance, coaching, recognition and legitimacy. Consequently, women gradually establish themselves as business owners and leaders, even though community recognition remains negotiated and gendered expectations persist. Building on these findings, we outline our study's contributions, policy implications and future research directions for scholarship on women's entrepreneurship, rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identity.

1. Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has become a key perspective for understanding how gender norms, cultural expectations and institutional environments influence entrepreneurial behavior, recognition and identity formation (De Bruin et al., 2006; Brush et al., 2009; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Foss et al., 2019). While a substantial body of research explores how women navigate gender-based constraints, seek legitimacy, and manage competing social roles, its implications for women working in rural and agrifood settings, where patriarchal systems, household responsibilities and place-based reputations are deeply rooted, remain underexamined (Anthopoulou, 2010; Seuneke and Bock, 2015; Newbery et al., 2017; Smith and McElwee, 2025). This gap is important because many women in rural and peri-urban agrifood economies are economically active, take risks, serve customers, and

sustain household livelihoods, yet their activities are often viewed as extensions of domestic responsibility rather than as entrepreneurship. Therefore, entrepreneurial identity matters not only for how women see themselves but also for how households, communities, customers, and support organizations recognize and support their ventures (Scott and Lane, 2000; Jones et al., 2008; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

In contexts such as the Republic of Benin and other sub-Saharan African countries, women engaged in agrifood businesses often operate within social environments where cultural norms define women primarily as caregivers, mothers, farmers, helpers, or informal traders. These identities do not always allow women to claim the social position of entrepreneur, even when they are clearly involved in entrepreneurial activities. Such identity tensions are particularly visible in rural and peri-urban spaces, where business activities are embedded in family obligations, local markets, community reputations, and limited formal

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support systems (Welter, 2011; Jack and Anderson, 2002; Korsgaard et al., 2015). Thus, women's entrepreneurial agency in patriarchal and resource-constrained contexts can be understood as a navigation tactic through which women respond to livelihood needs, resist marginalization, and gradually reinterpret their identities in relation to business activities.

Much of the existing research examines how women entrepreneurs navigate multiple identities, challenge gendered expectations, and present themselves as legitimate entrepreneurs (García and Welter, 2013; Chasserio et al., 2014; Boddington, 2024). Similarly, rural entrepreneurship studies emphasize the role of place, local networks, community-based legitimacy, resource constraints, and institutional conditions in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities (Arshed et al., 2023; Nordbø, 2022; Gittins and McElwee, 2023; Shitile et al., 2025). Research on farmers and agrifood entrepreneurs further shows that agricultural actors may hold split or hybrid identities, for example as farmers, producers, caregivers, and entrepreneurs (Mikko Vesala et al., 2007; Vesala and Vesala, 2010; McElwee, 2008; Janker et al., 2021). However, these perspectives rarely converge to explain how women in West African agrifood settings actively reconstruct entrepreneurial identities when they face deeply rooted gender norms and simultaneously receive new forms of support from NGOs, development projects, or microfinance institutions.

In fact, what remains less clear is how supportive organizations participate in reshaping gendered entrepreneurial identities and how women use motivation, agency, personal control and everyday entrepreneurial practice to challenge or redefine traditional roles. Recent studies show that empowerment initiatives, networks and stakeholder recognition can support women's developing entrepreneurial identities (Estrada-Cruz et al., 2020; Guerrero et al., 2021; Chen and Barcus, 2024). Yet little is known about the identity processes that unfold when women operating small agrifood businesses interact with organizations explicitly created to promote women's entrepreneurship and livelihood development. This is especially significant in rural and peri-urban Benin, where formal institutions may be limited but support organizations often act as intermediaries, providing resources, legitimacy and symbolic recognition.

Accordingly, this study examines how women entrepreneurs in the Republic of Benin reconstruct their entrepreneurial identities through interactions with supportive organizations and stakeholders, and how these interactions facilitate movement from traditional, caregiver- or farmer-oriented roles to identities recognized as legitimate entrepreneurial roles. We draw on 15 semi-structured interviews with women operating small agrifood businesses and five interviews with representatives of women-support organizations. Using an abductive, interpretive analysis, we move between the empirical material and the literature on women's entrepreneurship, rural entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity, stakeholder validation, and agency (Gioia et al., 2013; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The guiding research question is: *How do women engaged in rural and peri-urban agrifood businesses in Benin reconstruct entrepreneurial identities through the interplay of agency, gendered rural constraints, and stakeholder validation?*

Looking ahead, this study offers three key contributions. First, it contributes to rural entrepreneurship research by showing that rurality is not merely a contextual backdrop but an active condition that shapes women's entrepreneurial identity through spatial embeddedness, household-enterprise overlap, community reputation and local institutional structures. Second, it clarifies how supportive stakeholder organizations, including NGOs, development projects and microfinance institutions, shape women's entrepreneurial identity reconstruction by providing recognition, legitimacy, credit and alternative role models, thereby expanding research on stakeholder involvement in entrepreneurial identity development (Scott and Lane, 2000; Von Wallpach et al., 2017; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Third, it explains how women's entrepreneurial agency, expressed through motivation,

self-efficacy, personal control, resilience and everyday entrepreneurial practice, enables them to challenge socio-cultural barriers and establish themselves as legitimate entrepreneurs. In this way, the paper refines the earlier use of entrepreneurial orientation by treating proactiveness, risk-bearing and initiative as empirical cues of agency rather than as a separate explanatory framework.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews our theoretical background on rural women's entrepreneurship, farmer and agrifood entrepreneurial identities, gendered legitimacy, stakeholder validation, and women's agency. Section 3 outlines our qualitative, exploratory, and abductive research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the findings, contributions, policy implications, limitations, and future research directions. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, we examine research at the intersection of rural women's entrepreneurship, agrifood entrepreneurial identity, gendered legitimacy, stakeholder validation, and women's agency. This literature indicates that women's entrepreneurial paths are shaped by (i) spatial, social, institutional, and business contexts; (ii) hybrid identities as farmers, producers, caregivers, and entrepreneurs; (iii) legitimacy processes through which others validate or challenge entrepreneurial claims; and (iv) personal motivation and agency that enable women to act within constraints. Our goal is to establish the theoretical foundations that remain insufficiently connected and that our current study aims to address.

2.1. Rural women's entrepreneurship, gendered contexts and contextual embeddedness

Research on women's entrepreneurship highlights how gendered norms, sociocultural expectations, and structural inequalities shape entrepreneurial participation and behavior (De Bruin et al., 2006; García and Welter, 2013; Yadav and Unni, 2016). Foundational work suggests that women experience entrepreneurship through socially embedded roles and institutional barriers that limit their access to resources, legitimacy, and opportunities (Brush et al., 2009; Ahl, 2006; Foss et al., 2019). These barriers are particularly pronounced in rural and agrifood settings, where domestic duties, kinship expectations, and community norms converge to reinforce persistent role prescriptions (Anthopoulou, 2010; Seunke and Bock, 2015; Gittins and McElwee, 2023; Nordbø, 2022). In such environments, deciding to pursue entrepreneurship requires navigating existing gendered constraints while creating new entrepreneurial identities rooted in economic agency and local recognition.

A contextual perspective helps systematize these constraints. Welter's contextual approach distinguishes spatial, social, institutional, business, and temporal dimensions that shape entrepreneurial action (Welter, 2011; Welter and Baker, 2021). Spatially, rural and peri-urban women's businesses are tied to local markets, homes, streets, and short food value chains. Socially, women's activities are judged by household duties, kinship relations, and community reputation. Institutionally, women often operate where formal support is limited, even though NGOs, development projects, and microfinance institutions may be visible. Business-wise, their enterprises are often micro-scale, informal, and livelihood-oriented, which makes them less visible under growth-centered definitions of entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2017; Ayamga et al., 2026). Thus, rurality does not merely provide the location of women's entrepreneurship; it shapes what women can do, how their work is interpreted, and whether they can credibly claim entrepreneurial identity.

A central theme in this literature is that women entrepreneurs must reconcile their entrepreneurial ambitions with gendered expectations and multiple social identities (Chasserio et al., 2014; Marlow and

McAdam, 2013; Jennings and Brush, 2013). In many Global South contexts, empowerment mechanisms such as training, networking, microfinance, and community support provide platforms for women to reinterpret gender roles and articulate more agentic entrepreneurial identities (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Chen and Barcus, 2024). However, empowerment alone does not determine outcomes. Entrepreneurial identity reconstruction results from ongoing interactions with audiences and stakeholders who recognize, validate, or challenge women's entrepreneurial legitimacy (Arshed et al., 2023; Estrada-Cruz et al., 2020). Collectively, these studies show that women's entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in gendered rural structures, but they do not fully explain how identity reconstruction unfolds when supportive organizations intervene in small agrifood businesses.

2.2. Farmer, producer and entrepreneur: hybrid identities in rural agrifood livelihoods

In rural and agrifood settings, the distinction between farmer and entrepreneur is important because the two categories are related yet distinct. Farmers are often associated with agricultural production, land-based work, household provisioning, and the continuity of rural livelihoods, whereas entrepreneurs are associated with opportunity recognition, market orientation, risk-taking, innovation, coordination, and strategic development (McElwee, 2008; Mikko Vesala et al., 2007). These roles can overlap. A farmer may act entrepreneurially without fully identifying as an entrepreneur, and an agrifood trader or processor may operate entrepreneurially without owning a formal farm. Therefore, the difference between farmer and entrepreneur is not only a question of occupation; it is also a question of identity, legitimacy, and social recognition.

Mikko Vesala et al. (2007) describe this situation as the split entrepreneurial identity of the farmer, indicating that agricultural actors may simultaneously identify with both production-oriented and entrepreneurial roles. Vesala and Vesala (2010) similarly show that producer and entrepreneurial identities coexist and vary with farm strategy, diversification, and market engagement. McElwee's taxonomy of entrepreneurial farmers further clarifies that entrepreneurial farmers differ in strategic capability, opportunity orientation, and market engagement (McElwee, 2008; McElwee and Smith, 2012). These insights are relevant to this study because women in Benin may identify as farmers, sellers, food processors, or mothers, even when they engage in entrepreneurial work. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how women move from familiar livelihood identities toward entrepreneurial self-understanding and public recognition.

2.3. Gendered legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity work

Entrepreneurial identity research views entrepreneurship as a dynamic, relational process in which individuals develop and enact identities aligned with entrepreneurial roles and ambitions (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Identity develops through meaning-making, role negotiation, narrative construction, embodiment, and interaction with others (Jones et al., 2008; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014; Shepherd and Patzelt, 2018). In rural agrifood settings, entrepreneurial identity often overlaps with occupational and household identities, such as farmer, caregiver, trader, producer, or household provider (Janker et al., 2021; Vesala and Vesala, 2010). This overlap produces hybrid identity configurations that shape how women interpret their work and how others evaluate their entrepreneurial claims.

Legitimacy is central to this process. Women may engage in entrepreneurial activities yet still lack legitimacy to call themselves entrepreneurs if their communities define entrepreneurship as male, large-scale, capital-intensive, or socially risky. Identity work therefore involves more than internal confidence; it also requires recognition from audiences that matter, including family members, customers, community members, and support organizations (Scott and Lane, 2000;

Estrada-Cruz et al., 2020). In rural communities, these audiences are close and overlapping, which intensifies reputation dynamics. A woman's business activity may therefore be judged not only economically but also morally, as an indication of whether she is fulfilling or exceeding expected gender roles.

From a broader perspective, stakeholders play a key role in shaping entrepreneurial identity. Their signals, expectations, and support influence how legitimacy is assessed and which roles become available to women entrepreneurs (Scott and Lane, 2000; York et al., 2016; Von Wallpach et al., 2017). Support organizations, such as NGOs, development agencies, and microfinance institutions, often serve as intermediaries that transfer legitimacy, provide identity resources, and help reframe gendered roles as entrepreneurial (Guerrero et al., 2021; Zankl and Grimes, 2020). Yet stakeholder validation can also be ambivalent. When support programs frame women primarily as vulnerable mothers or household helpers, they may reinforce the very norms they seek to challenge. Thus, we examine stakeholder support not only as material assistance but also as symbolic identity work.

2.4. Women's agency, personal traits and entrepreneurial orientation (EO)-like behaviors as identity cues

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) has traditionally been used to understand entrepreneurial behaviors such as innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Covin and Wales, 2012; Wales, 2016). However, in this study, EO is not treated as a separate firm-level explanatory framework. Rather, EO-like behaviors are used more carefully as sensitizing cues for understanding women's agency within identity reconstruction. This is because our empirical material speaks most directly to identity negotiation, motivation, self-recognition, and stakeholder validation rather than to firm-level strategic orientation. Nonetheless, personal traits and values such as optimism, personal control, self-efficacy, resilience, and initiative remain important because they help explain how women continue to engage in entrepreneurial practices despite stigma and constraints (Mikko Vesala et al., 2007; Janker et al., 2021).

Agency, in this context, refers to women's capacity to act intentionally within constraints, to reinterpret social expectations, and to authorize themselves as business actors (Kabeer, 1999; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). When women continue to sell despite criticism, seek loans, diversify their activities, serve customers, or demonstrate competence to stakeholders, they generate practical evidence that their work is entrepreneurial. Such actions may resemble proactivity or risk-taking, but their main significance lies in how they help women reconstruct their identity. In other words, everyday entrepreneurial practice provides the behavioral ground on which women begin to see themselves and are gradually seen by others as entrepreneurs.

Collectively, these streams of literature suggest that entrepreneurial identity reconstruction among rural women is a gendered, relational, and context-embedded process. They guide our empirical analysis of how women in Benin reconstruct entrepreneurial identities in practice.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

To explore how women entrepreneurs in Benin reconstruct their entrepreneurial identities through interactions with supportive stakeholders, we adopted a qualitative, interpretive, and abductive research design. This approach is well suited to examining entrepreneurial identity, sensemaking, and lived experiences, which are socially constructed, iterative, and contextually embedded (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell and Poth, 2016; Creswell and Clark, 2017; Gioia et al., 2013). The abductive orientation was particularly useful because the analysis moved back and forth between the empirical material and theoretical concepts such as rural embeddedness, gendered legitimacy, stakeholder

validation, and identity work (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Our goal was not to test predefined assumptions about entrepreneurial identity or orientation but to understand how women use agency, support, and interaction to challenge or negotiate gendered norms and establish entrepreneurial legitimacy.

3.2. Research setting

The study was conducted in the Republic of Benin, focusing on peri-urban agribusiness clusters where a mix of patriarchal social structures, informal economic practices, and emerging support systems influences women's entrepreneurship. These areas are known for their historical and cultural heritage and for the strong presence of social traditions that shape gendered expectations. They also host active agrifood markets, street-based businesses, home-based production, and small-scale livelihood activities. This makes the setting especially useful for understanding how entrepreneurial identity emerges under strong socio-cultural constraints and within expanding networks of microfinance institutions, NGOs, and development projects focused on women's empowerment.

Women engaged in these agrifood and related livelihood businesses operate within environments characterized by resource scarcity, informal governance, household obligations, and community-based legitimacy. The study therefore focuses not only on formal farms but also on small-scale production, processing, and distribution activities, including vegetables, tomatoes, yams, sweet potatoes, coconut juice, charcoal, boiled corn, meals, and traditional maize-based foods. Only one participant primarily identified as a farmer, while others described themselves as sellers, processors, or women in food businesses. This diversity is important because it shows that entrepreneurial identity reconstruction in rural agrifood settings extends beyond farm ownership and includes the wider livelihood economy through which women sustain households and local markets.

3.3. Sampling and data collection procedure

To collect data for this study, we used purposive and snowball

sampling. We targeted women who were actively managing small agrifood or related livelihood businesses and could reflect on their work, family responsibilities, support experiences, and perceptions of identity. The women entrepreneurs were selected to ensure diversity in age, business type, experience, production scale, and family responsibilities. We initially planned to interview 20 women, but after 15 interviews (see Table 1) the research team observed strong repetition in narratives about gender norms, entrepreneurial self-description, credit access, stakeholder recognition, and identity negotiation. We therefore judged that theoretical saturation had been reached for the main analytic categories.

In addition to interviewing women, we interviewed five representatives from women-support organizations, including NGOs, development projects and microfinance institutions (Table 2). This dual sampling design enabled us to capture the perspectives of both identity-claimers, namely women entrepreneurs, and identity-granting stakeholders who provide credit, coaching, training and empowerment support (Scott and Lane, 2000; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Interviews also explored the issue of effective entrepreneurship versus co-preneurship. Most women described themselves as the day-to-day managers of their activities, even when male relatives, children or kin occasionally contributed labor, transport, advice, permission or access to resources. We therefore treat them as effective entrepreneurs in terms of everyday operational decision-making, while recognizing that their businesses remain embedded in household relations. Farm size was not systematically measured because the sample was not composed of commercial farm owners; instead, enterprise scale was captured through activity type, market location, loan size, capital constraints and narratives of business expansion.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, widely used in qualitative and identity research to elicit self-narratives, meaning-making, and experiential detail (Gioia et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2008). Interviews with women covered entrepreneurial motivation, household roles, self-identification, perceptions of the terms farmer and entrepreneur, interactions with support organizations, experiences of legitimacy and community judgment, and perceptions of empowerment. Interviews with stakeholder representatives examined support practices,

Table 1
Women participants and enterprise profile [Source: authors' own illustration].

No.	Main activity	Age	Interview place	Education (years)	Name used for anonymity	Enterprise/family involvement notes
1	Farming	37	Bohicon	0	Maman Farmer	Small family-embedded farming activity; identity anchored in farmer role
2	Fresh coconut juice selling	68	Cococodji	0	Maman Coconut	Sole daily manager; uses microcredit and local customers
3	Food commodities and fish selling (grocery shop)	30	Zogbohoulé	13	Maman Grocery Shop	Shop-based microenterprise; household livelihood orientation
4	Charcoal selling	50	Hountonho/Adja	0	Maman Coal	Own trading activity; family/community norms remain relevant
5	Yam selling	45	Zounzonsa (Bohicon)	0	Maman Yam	Market-oriented food trade; framed as supplementary income
6	Sweet potato selling	39	Bohicon	0	Maman Sweet Potato	Own trade; capital scarcity shapes identity claim
7	Meal preparation and selling	30	Kpatalokoli	0	Maman Food	Home/market food service; care and income roles overlap
8	Weaving cotton yarn and fabric	47	Abomey	6	Maman Cotton Yarn	Production activity supported through training
9	Boiled corn selling	40	Bohicon	0	Maman Boiled Corn	Uses progressive microloans; local customer base
10	Snack producing and selling	50	Covè	4	Maman Snack	Small-scale production and sales
11	Charcoal selling	35	Dan	0	Maman Charcoal	Own trading activity; community reputation important
12	Traditional corn-based fermented food (lio) production/sales	40	Bohicon	0	Maman Liwo	Food processing linked to household knowledge and market sales
13	Vegetable selling	40	Kinta Gbagbohoun	0	Maman Vegetables	Market trade; strong statement on gendered discouragement
14	Fresh tomato selling	40	Kpatalokoli	2	Maman Tomato	Food trade; micro-scale rural/peri-urban market activity
15	Corn-based fermented food (akassa) production/sales	39	Bohicon	0	Maman Akassa	Food processing and sales; household-enterprise overlap

Table 2
Stakeholder organizations and support roles [Source: authors' own illustration].

No.	Stakeholder type	Age of representative	Name used for anonymity	Main support function	Identity-relevant role
1	Microfinance institution supporting microbusinesses	40	Microfinance Agent	Microloans, client assessment, progressive credit	Signals trustworthiness and business capacity through credit approval
2	NGO focused on women's empowerment	28	Assistant Director	Empowerment and gender advocacy	Names cultural resistance and validates women's ambitions
3	NGO promoting women's business and finance	27	NGO Women Business	Business promotion and financial inclusion	Frames women as legitimate entrepreneurs, not only helpers
4	Development project	37	Project Manager	Training, capacity-building, entrepreneurship promotion	Defines entrepreneurship as problem-solving and supports low-education women
5	Family empowerment NGO (BFA)	28	Promoter BFA	Family livelihood and coaching support	Provides coaching and self-value recognition

gender-specific interventions, assumptions about women entrepreneurs, credit and training mechanisms, and gender norms and expectations regarding women's entrepreneurial roles.

Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 min. Interviews with women-support organization representatives were conducted in French, while interviews with women were conducted in French or Fon, depending on participant preference. The first author and a trained research assistant collected the data. Both are familiar with the national and local context and speak French and Fon. All interviews were recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and translated into English through a double-checking and reconciliation process. Initial translations were compared with the original French/Fon expressions, and ambiguous meanings were discussed until consensus was reached. This procedure helped reduce distortion of meaning and preserve the pragmatic sense of expressions such as “farmer,” “business,” “extra income,” “value,” and “woman entrepreneur”. Complementary field notes captured contextual details, interaction cues, and observations of workspaces and community settings.

Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality. Names used in this paper are pseudonyms or descriptive labels.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive and abductive multi-stage

coding approach, consistent with grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Charmaz, 2014) and the coding method of Gioia et al. (2013), which is well suited to identity studies because it preserves participants' voices while enabling abstraction into theoretical constructs. The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify first-order codes closely aligned with participants' language. This stage helped preserve the distinction between women's own identity claims and stakeholders' recognition claims.

In the second stage, we identified similarities and differences among the first-order codes and grouped them into second-order themes. At this stage, the analysis moved abductively between data and theory. For example, the repeated distinction between farmer and entrepreneur led us back to the literature on split farmer identities and entrepreneurial farmers (Mikko Vesala et al., 2007; McElwee, 2008), while the recurring role of microfinance and NGO recognition led us back to stakeholder identity and legitimacy theory.

Finally, in the third stage, second-order themes were integrated into aggregate dimensions. We then compared women's accounts with stakeholder interviews to identify points of convergence and tension. Stakeholders generally validated women as entrepreneurs, but they also described support that sometimes remained tied to family care and vulnerability. This comparison allowed us to move beyond a linear empowerment narrative and identify multiple identity trajectories. The resulting data structure is presented in Fig. 1.

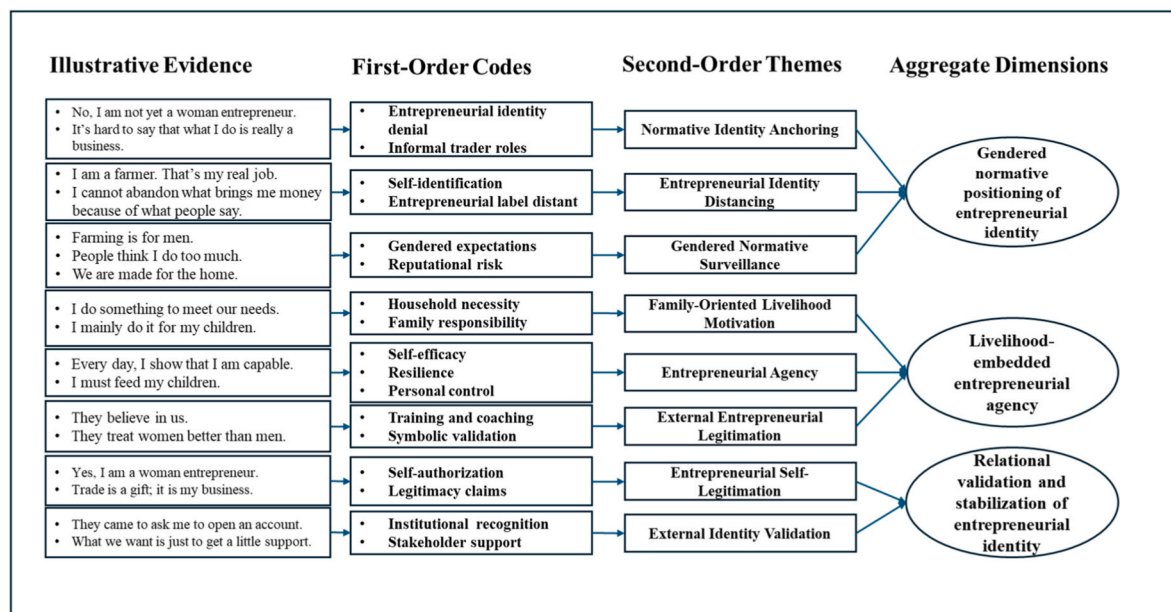


Fig. 1. Final data structure of how women entrepreneurs reconstruct their identities [Source: authors' own illustrations].

4. Findings: Reconstructing entrepreneurial identity among rural women in Benin

The findings show that entrepreneurial identity reconstruction among rural women in Benin unfolds through three interrelated theoretical dimensions. First, women's identities are shaped by a gendered normative positioning of entrepreneurial identity, in which socially accepted roles such as farmer, caregiver, or informal trader influence whether women see themselves and are seen by others as entrepreneurs. Second, women begin to reconstruct entrepreneurial identity through livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency, in which household necessity, family responsibility, self-efficacy, resilience, personal control, and external entrepreneurial legitimation enable them to act entrepreneurially in everyday practice. Third, this reconstructed identity becomes more visible through relational validation and stabilization of entrepreneurial identity, in which women make legitimacy claims, authorize themselves as entrepreneurs, and receive recognition from institutions and stakeholders. These processes collectively show that women's entrepreneurial identity is not simply adopted; it is negotiated, enacted, validated, and partially stabilized within gendered, relational, and context-embedded rural settings.

4.1. Gendered normative positioning of entrepreneurial identity

The gendered normative positioning of entrepreneurial identity captures how women's entrepreneurial identities are initially anchored in culturally familiar and socially acceptable roles. The analysis shows that many women do not immediately identify with the formal entrepreneurial label, even when engaged in income-generating activities. Instead, they situate themselves within identities such as farmer, caregiver, or informal trader.

Women's accounts indicate that their economic activities are often viewed as extensions of household survival rather than as entrepreneurship. For instance, Maman Farmer, who combines farming and trade, rejects the entrepreneurial label and anchors her identity in farming: *"I cannot say I am an entrepreneur ... I am a farmer. That is my real job"*. Similarly, Maman Yam emphasizes that her activity is secondary to household provisioning: *"I do it just to generate extra income"*. Maman Food also expresses ambivalence about her work: *"I do not really enjoy this work, but I am already committed to it"*. These narratives show that women's income-generating practices do not automatically translate into entrepreneurial self-identification. Their identities remain tied to normative roles that are more socially recognizable in the rural context.

This distancing from entrepreneurship is also shaped by the meaning women attach to the label itself. Some women associate entrepreneurship with large-scale business, formal capital, or visible commercial expansion. As Maman Sweet Potato explains, *"I do not have the financial capital for entrepreneurship"*. Although she is already engaged in business, she does not fully identify with entrepreneurship because her activity is perceived as too small or insufficiently capitalized. This illustrates that entrepreneurial identity denial stems not only from gender norms but also from dominant understandings of what counts as a "real" business.

At the same time, women's identities are positioned and constrained through gendered expectations and reputational risk. Women who engage in farming, trading, or business activities beyond accepted domestic roles are subject to social scrutiny. Maman Farmer explains: *"When I come to the city for my business, people are surprised to hear me say I am a farmer, and they say 'Farming is for men'. But in the village, many women are farmers"*. Other women describe similar forms of social disapproval: *"People are unhappy with this activity I do"* (Maman Coconut); *"People think it is risky, my activity"* (Maman Sweet Potato); and *"If I work hard to feed my children, people think I do too much"* (Maman Food). These statements show how women's entrepreneurial practices are monitored through community expectations about appropriate feminine behavior.

The reputational dimension is particularly evident in narratives that

link women's work to social judgment. Maman Vegetables explains: *"people see us (women), as we cannot really succeed, that we are made for the home, which is discouraging"*. These accounts suggest that entrepreneurship is not only an economic practice but also a gendered identity claim that can expose women to criticism, suspicion, or discouragement. Thus, before women can reconstruct themselves as entrepreneurs, they must first navigate a social environment in which their roles are normatively defined, their activities are evaluated, and their identities are constrained by expectations of domesticity, respectability, and small-scale livelihood work. This is especially relevant to women who work in the informal sector of the agrifood system (Ayamga et al., 2026).

Stakeholders also recognize these constraints. While they challenge women's narrow understanding of entrepreneurship by framing it as problem-solving rather than business size - *"entrepreneurship is about providing a solution to a problem"* (Project Manager) - they also acknowledge the persistence of restrictive norms. As the Assistant Director observes, *"nothing has changed in the norms and culture ... men are still ready to prevent women from going far"*. This reinforces the finding that women's entrepreneurial identity reconstruction begins from a gendered normative position, in which social expectations, household roles, reputational pressures, and limited recognition shape how women understand and perform entrepreneurship.

4.2. Livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency

The livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency explains how women move from normative positioning to entrepreneurial enactment. The findings show that women do not reconstruct entrepreneurial identity through abstract business ideals alone. They do so through everyday efforts to meet household needs, care for children, exercise control, persist through difficulty, and respond to opportunities for training, coaching, and symbolic validation.

4.2.1. Family-oriented livelihood motivation

Women's entrepreneurial activities are strongly motivated by household necessity and family responsibility. Economic pressure, children's needs, and the limits of male provision push women into income-generating activities. Many respondents expressed this simply as: *"men only cannot"*. This statement captures the practical reality that household survival cannot depend solely on men's income. For single women, the necessity is even more direct. Maman Sweet Potato explains: *"I needed to provide for myself"*.

In this context, entrepreneurship is framed less as opportunity seeking and more as a livelihood responsibility. Women act because they must feed their children, pay school expenses, and support household survival. As one respondent puts it, *"I do something to meet our needs"*, while another explains, *"I mainly do it for my children"*. These accounts show that family responsibility is central to women's entrepreneurial motivation. Their activities are not detached from domestic life; they are embedded in the moral and economic obligations of care.

However, this livelihood motivation also evolves into aspiration. What begins as survival gradually becomes a foundation for future-oriented ambition. Women describe hopes of expanding their activities and improving their children's lives. Maman Grocery Shop states: *"My big vision is to have a big fish shop"*. Maman Food similarly expresses the desire *"that my children can go to school and become professionals"*. These aspirations show that household necessity does not merely trap women in survival entrepreneurship. It can also activate a process through which women begin to imagine themselves as capable economic actors with future-oriented goals.

4.2.2. Entrepreneurial agency

Women's identity reconstruction is further activated through entrepreneurial agency. The findings show that women exercise self-efficacy, resilience, and personal control as they continue their activities despite social criticism and structural limitations. Agency appears in their

willingness to persist, demonstrate competence, and make decisions about their economic lives.

Several women describe entrepreneurship as a form of self-building and resistance. Maman Coconut states: *"I want to fight and build myself"*. Maman Sweet Potato offers a more direct rejection of reputational pressure: *"I don't care what others think"*. Similarly, another respondent explains: *"I cannot abandon what brings me money because of what people say"*. These narratives show that women's agency is not always expressed through open confrontation. Sometimes it appears as quiet persistence, practical endurance, and a refusal to give up activities that sustain their households.

Women also reconstruct their identity by demonstrating competence through repeated practice. Maman Snack's statement, *"Every day, I show that I am capable"*, captures the performative dimension of agency. Through daily work, women do not merely claim ability; they enact it. Their entrepreneurial identity is gradually built through visible competence, persistence, and control over livelihood activities, as rural entrepreneurship literature identifies these factors as relevant to entrepreneurial identity and capability (Mikko Vesala et al., 2007; Janker et al., 2021).

For some women, entrepreneurship also becomes associated with autonomy and freedom. Maman Coal explains: *"I can never again be a slave working for someone else"*. This statement shows that entrepreneurial agency is not only economic but also tied to identity. It involves a shift from dependence to self-direction, from survival to self-authorization, and from being positioned by others to actively shaping one's role.

4.2.3. External entrepreneurial legitimization

The analysis also shows that entrepreneurial agency is supported by external legitimization of entrepreneurship, particularly through training, coaching, and symbolic validation. Stakeholders help women recognize their value, strengthen their skills, and view their activities as legitimate entrepreneurial work. This does not replace women's agency; it reinforces their capacity to act.

Stakeholders emphasize that women often have entrepreneurial potential but need support to recognize and develop it. As Promoter BFA explains, *"Few women know their value; they need support"*. Similarly, the Microfinance Agent observes, *"Those who do not know their value need coaching."* These statements show that training and coaching are not only technical interventions. They also serve as identity-building mechanisms by helping women reinterpret their activities, abilities, and value.

Women also acknowledge the empowering effect of institutional attention. Maman Farmer states: *"Just the fact of seeing institutions show interest in women gives me value"*. Maman Cotton Yarn similarly recognizes the effort invested in their development: *"They spent resources to create this training to support us"*. These statements show that external support carries symbolic meaning. They tell women that their activities matter, that their capabilities are recognized, and that their economic roles can be understood as entrepreneurial.

Stakeholder organizations also describe their interventions as explicitly gender-focused. One NGO representative notes: *"Our organization promotes women and emphasizes women entrepreneurship"* (NGO Women Business). The Project Manager explains that *"Programs help women become autonomous, especially those with low education"*. These accounts show that external entrepreneurial legitimization expands women's practical capacity while challenging the assumption that rural women's activities are merely informal survival work. Through coaching, training, and symbolic validation, women's everyday livelihood practices become more clearly linked to entrepreneurial agency.

4.3. Relational validation and stabilization of entrepreneurial identity

The relational validation and stabilization of entrepreneurial identity explain how women's reconstructed entrepreneurial identities become

articulated, recognized, and partially stabilized through self-legitimation and external validation. It shows that identity reconstruction is not complete when women begin to act entrepreneurially. It becomes more stable when women claim legitimacy for themselves and when institutions and stakeholders recognize and support those claims.

4.3.1. Entrepreneurial self-legitimation

Women's entrepreneurial identity becomes more visible when they begin to authorize themselves and assert legitimacy for their work. In contrast to earlier accounts in which women distance themselves from the entrepreneurial label, several women later articulate a stronger entrepreneurial self-understanding. They explicitly identify themselves as women entrepreneurs: *"Yes, I am a woman entrepreneur"* (Maman Coconut, Maman Grocery Shop, Maman Coal, Maman Food, Maman Cotton Yarn). Maman Vegetables also affirms this identity by linking it to the economic value of her activity: *"Yes, I am a woman entrepreneur, well, that's what I do. It's what brings me money, so it is my business"*.

These statements reflect a shift from identity denial and distancing to self-authorization. Women not only wait for others to define them as entrepreneurs; they begin to claim the label themselves. This claim is grounded in practical experience: the activity brings in income, supports the household, and demonstrates competence. In this sense, entrepreneurial identity is reconstructed through the women's own interpretation of what their work means.

Maman Tomato's statement, *"Trade is a gift; it is my business"*, further illustrates this self-legitimation. It reframes trade not as a marginal activity but as a valued competence and a legitimate source of identity. Women's claims therefore challenge narrow definitions of entrepreneurship based on business size, capital, or formal registration. Instead, they construct entrepreneurial legitimacy around skill, income generation, persistence, and contributions to family and community life.

4.3.2. External identity validation

Women's reconstructed identities are also stabilized through recognition and support from external actors. Institutional recognition and stakeholder support provide relational confirmation that women's activities are legitimate, valuable, and worthy of investment. For example, women describe microfinance institutions as important sources of recognition and practical support. Maman Coconut states: *"They accept me without hesitation for a microloan"*. Maman Boiled Corn explains: *"I started with a 50,000 FCFA loan, but now I am at 200,000 FCFA"*.

These accounts show that credit is not only a financial resource. It also serves as a form of identity validation, signaling trust in women's capacity to manage economic activity. When institutions provide loans, training, or support, they recognize women as capable actors. This recognition strengthens women's confidence and helps stabilize their entrepreneurial self-understanding.

Stakeholders also affirm women's competence and reliability. The Microfinance Agent explains: *"Women are always at the top in financing ..."* and adds that *"If an activity does not work, they (women) move to another"*. These statements validate women as adaptive, reliable, and capable entrepreneurs. They also challenge gendered assumptions that women cannot succeed or should remain confined to the home.

Women themselves recognize the identity-relevant value of such support. Several women report a stronger sense of self-worth through stakeholder engagement: *"I feel valued by stakeholders' support"* (Maman Coconut, Maman Coal, Maman Boiled Corn). This suggests that external validation reinforces internal identity reconstruction. Women's entrepreneurial identities are not only self-claimed but also relationally affirmed by institutions, support organizations, and stakeholders who recognize their work.

Nevertheless, this stabilization remains partial and contested. The broader gender order persists. As the Assistant Director notes, *"Nothing has changed ... men are still ready to prevent women from going far"*. This means that identity reconstruction occurs amid persistent structural resistance. Women may become more confident and recognized, but

their entrepreneurial identities continue to be negotiated in relation to gendered expectations, family obligations, community judgment, and institutional support.

5. Discussion

Based on our study findings, we propose a gendered, relational, and context-embedded model of entrepreneurial identity reconstruction among rural women in Benin (Fig. 2). The model shows that identity reconstruction does not follow a simple linear transition from a 'traditional woman' to an 'entrepreneur'. Instead, it unfolds through three interrelated processes. First, women are positioned within gendered normative identities rooted in caregiver, farmer, household-support, and informal-trader roles. Second, women activate entrepreneurial agency through household necessity, family responsibility, self-efficacy, resilience, personal control, and everyday livelihood practices. Third, the reconstructed identity becomes relationally validated and partially stabilized through self-legitimation, institutional recognition, stakeholder support, training, coaching, and symbolic validation.

By this model, we extend entrepreneurship research by showing that entrepreneurial identity reconstruction among rural women is not only an individual psychological process but also a gendered, relational process shaped by social norms, household responsibilities, rural embeddedness, and recognition from external actors. This aligns with context-sensitive entrepreneurship scholarship, which argues that entrepreneurship must be understood in relation to the social, spatial, institutional, and cultural settings in which it is enacted (Welter, 2011; Jack and Anderson, 2002; McKeever et al., 2015). It also resonates with feminist entrepreneurship research, which critiques dominant assumptions that portray entrepreneurship as an individualistic, growth-oriented, and gender-neutral activity (Ahl, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Jennings and Brush, 2013). In the Benin context, women's entrepreneurial identity is reconstructed not by escaping gendered norms entirely, but by negotiating them through livelihood action, self-authorization, and relational validation.

In what follows, we discuss our study's contribution by situating the present findings within the existing literature.

5.1. Gendered normative positioning of entrepreneurial identity

Our study's first contribution is demonstrating how women's entrepreneurial identities are initially shaped by gendered normative positioning. The findings indicate that women's income-generating activities are often anchored in socially recognized roles, such as caregiver, farmer, household supporter, or informal trader. This helps explain why several women hesitate to identify as entrepreneurs, even when they are actively engaged in trading, production, farming, or service activities. Their reluctance is not simply a lack of confidence but reflects the social meaning attached to entrepreneurship and the gendered boundaries around what women are expected to do in our study context.

This finding aligns with feminist entrepreneurship literature, which shows that women's entrepreneurial identities are often shaped by gendered expectations and the social legitimacy attached to particular forms of work (Ahl, 2006; Bruni et al., 2004; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). In our study, women's entrepreneurial identity is constrained by the idea that women's work should remain close to the household, be small in scale, be morally acceptable, and be compatible with care responsibilities. Thus, the entrepreneurial label becomes distant for some women because it is associated with larger-scale business, financial capital, public visibility, and forms of autonomy that may conflict with local gender expectations.

Our study then shows that entrepreneurial identity denial and entrepreneurial identity distancing are not just individual self-perceptions, but they are socially produced through gendered norms that define what counts as legitimate women's work. This aligns with identity theory, which emphasizes that identities are negotiated through social recognition, role expectations, and audience validation (Watson, 2008; Ybema et al., 2009; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Our findings indicate that women's self-understanding is shaped by how others evaluate their activities, suggesting that women's entrepreneurial action is assessed through a moral and reputational lens.

We also contribute to debates about rural entrepreneurship by showing that rural embeddedness is not only spatial or economic but also identity-related. Women's businesses are embedded in markets, homes, farms, streets, and local production systems, and their identities are also embedded in community expectations, household obligations,

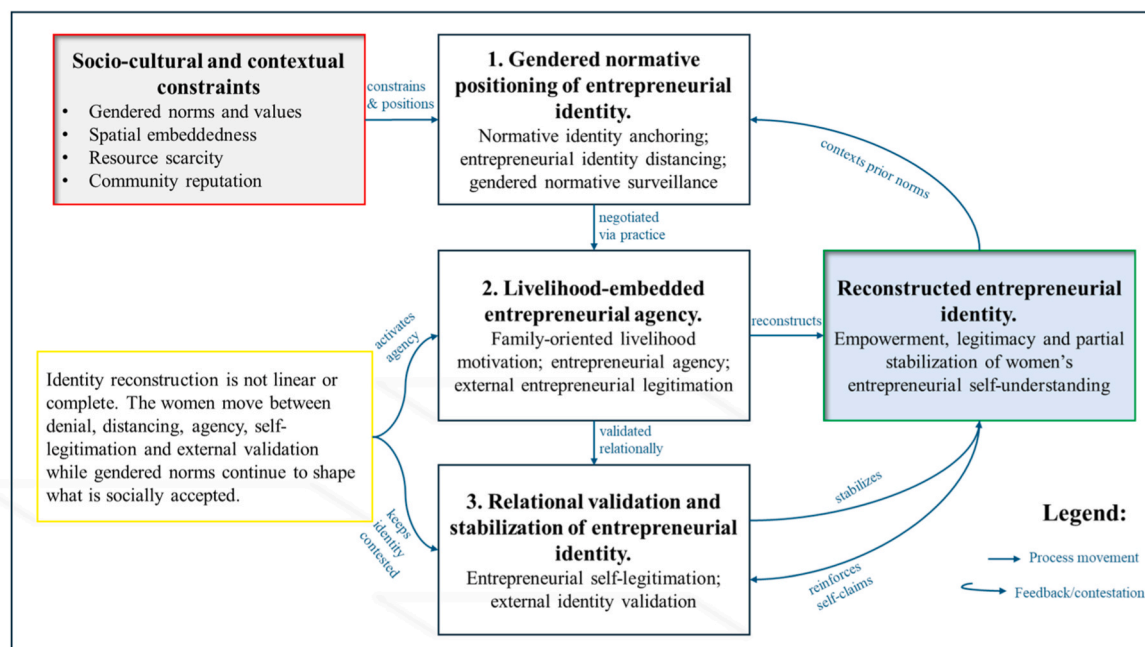


Fig. 2. A gendered, relational, and context-embedded model of entrepreneurial identity reconstruction among rural women in Benin [Source: authors' own illustration].

and reputational surveillance. This confirms the argument that entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in place and social relations (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Welter, 2011; Korsgaard et al., 2015; Ekpodil). In rural Benin, place matters not only because it shapes access to markets or resources but also because it shapes whom women are allowed to become.

5.2. Livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency

The second contribution of our study concerns the role of livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency. The findings show that women's entrepreneurial identity reconstruction is activated by household necessity, family responsibility, resilience, self-efficacy, and personal control. Women do not necessarily enter entrepreneurship with a self-image as 'formal entrepreneurs'. Instead, many begin out of the need to feed children, support the household, pay school fees, provide for themselves, or compensate for insufficient household income. Over time, these livelihood practices serve as evidence of competence and gradually support the reconstruction of an entrepreneurial self-understanding.

Building on this finding, we extend research on women's entrepreneurship by showing that necessity and agency should not be treated as opposites. In many rural and informal contexts (see, e.g., Ayamga et al., 2026), women's entrepreneurship is often framed as necessity-driven, whereas opportunity entrepreneurship is treated as more strategic or legitimate. However, our findings suggest that household necessity can become a source of agency. Women's statements about fighting to build themselves, refusing to abandon income-generating activities, and showing every day that they are capable indicate that necessity can activate resilience, self-authorization, and entrepreneurial competence.

This challenges simplistic distinctions between necessity and opportunity entrepreneurship by showing that, for rural women, livelihood necessity can serve as the practical ground for enacting entrepreneurial agency. This aligns with research calling for more nuanced understandings of women's entrepreneurship in resource-constrained and informal economies (Kabeer, 1999; Williams and Gurtoo, 2011; Xheneti et al., 2019). It also resonates with empowerment literature, which views agency as the ability to make meaningful choices within constraints instead of only after constraints have disappeared (Kabeer, 1999, 2020).

Furthermore, although women display behaviors associated with proactivity, persistence, initiative, and risk-taking, these behaviors are not treated here as a separate or dominant explanatory mechanism. Instead, they are understood as identity cues that help women demonstrate competence and claim legitimacy. This interpretation aligns with entrepreneurial orientation research, which identifies initiative, risk-taking, and proactivity as entrepreneurial behaviors (Covin and Wales, 2012; Wales, 2016), but it places these behaviors within a broader identity reconstruction process.

The implication is that entrepreneurial action among rural women should be understood as both business behavior and identity work. When women seek credit, manage customers, sustain trade, diversify activities, or persist despite criticism, they are not only running enterprises but also producing evidence of their capability, legitimacy, and deservingness of recognition as entrepreneurs. This aligns with the entrepreneurial identity literature, which shows that entrepreneurs construct identity through practice, narration, legitimacy claims, and interaction with audiences (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Navis and Glynn, 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

5.3. Relational validation and stabilization of entrepreneurial identity

The third contribution of our study concerns relational validation and stabilization. The findings show that women's reconstructed entrepreneurial identities are strengthened through both self-legitimation and external validation. Women are increasingly authorizing

themselves as entrepreneurs, which is important because it signals a shift from identity distancing to identity ownership. However, the findings also show that self-claims become more stable when they are supported by external recognition from stakeholders, institutions, microfinance actors, NGOs, and women-support organizations.

This insight aligns with legitimacy theory, which holds that actors gain acceptance when their activities are perceived as desirable, appropriate, or valid within a social system (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In this study, legitimacy is viewed not only as market- or formal-based but also as gendered, moral, relational, and community-based. Women need to be seen not only as economically active but also as respectable, capable, and socially legitimate. This is why stakeholder support plays an identity-relevant role.

Support organizations are often discussed as providers of credit, training, coaching, or enterprise services. Our findings show that they also perform symbolic identity work. By approving loans, organizing training, inviting women to programs, recognizing their activities, and publicly supporting women's entrepreneurship, stakeholders help validate women's entrepreneurial identities. This extends research on entrepreneurial identity and stakeholder audiences by showing that external actors are not merely observers of identity claims; they can become co-producers of entrepreneurial legitimacy (Scott and Lane, 2000; Navis and Glynn, 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

The study therefore contributes the idea that stakeholder validation serves as both material and symbolic identity work. Materially, stakeholders provide loans, training, coaching, and access to support programs. Symbolically, they communicate that women's activities matter, that women are capable, and that informal or micro-scale agrifood activities can be recognized as entrepreneurship. This dual role is particularly important in rural and Global South contexts, where formal institutions may be limited and informal businesses often rely on relational trust, community recognition, and development intermediaries for legitimacy.

However, the findings also caution against presenting stakeholder support as a panacea. Although stakeholder recognition strengthens women's confidence and legitimacy, it does not eliminate gendered norms. Men may still restrict women's mobility or business expansion; communities may still judge women who "do too much"; and women may still feel pressure to frame entrepreneurship primarily as household support. Thus, stakeholder validation creates partial spaces of recognition within persistent gendered constraints. This makes the reconstructed entrepreneurial identity (Fig. 2) both empowering and contested. It is stabilized through recognition, yet it remains vulnerable to social judgment, household relations, and ongoing gendered expectations.

5.4. Policy and practical implications

Our study findings have direct implications for rural development, women's entrepreneurship, agrifood enterprise support, microfinance, and gender-sensitive development programming. First, support for women's entrepreneurship should combine financial inclusion with identity-sensitive coaching. Microcredit and business finance are important, but the findings show that finance alone is insufficient. Support is more transformative when paired with mentoring, confidence-building, business coaching, and explicit recognition of women as legitimate entrepreneurs (Barbosa and Real de Oliveira, 2026). Programs should therefore help women develop both enterprise capacity and entrepreneurial self-recognition.

Second, support programs should engage households and communities, not only individual women. Because women's entrepreneurial legitimacy is shaped by community reputation, household expectations, and gender norms, interventions should include spouses, family members, local leaders, market associations, and community gatekeepers. Community dialogue and sensitization can reduce reputational risks and make women's entrepreneurial activities more socially acceptable (Nair,

2020; Kuran and Khabbaz, 2024).

Third, entrepreneurship support should avoid framing women solely as vulnerable, survival-focused, or household-welfare-oriented. While family responsibility is central to women's motivation, programs should also recognize women as strategic market actors, innovators, decision-makers, and economic contributors (Ekpodilè-Domingo, 2024). If women are supported only as vulnerable mothers or household caregivers, interventions may unintentionally reinforce the same gendered roles that limit entrepreneurial identity reconstruction.

Fourth, business-support criteria should be adapted to informal, micro-scale, and agrifood-based enterprises. If entrepreneurship is recognized only through formal registration, large capital, growth metrics, or conventional business plans, many rural women entrepreneurs will remain invisible. Support systems should recognize small-scale trading, processing, farming-linked enterprises, and household-based production as legitimate entrepreneurial activity (see e.g., Webb et al., 2009).

Fifth, monitoring and evaluation systems should include identity and legitimacy outcomes. Program success should not be measured solely by income, loan repayment, enterprise growth, or the number of women trained (e.g., Kuzilwa, 2005). It should also include indicators such as confidence, self-recognition, decision-making power, community recognition, stakeholder trust, ability to negotiate household support, and public legitimacy as entrepreneurs.

Finally, policy actors should build enabling recognition systems for rural women entrepreneurs. In Benin and similar Global South contexts, this entails combining credit, coaching, visibility, community dialogue, gender-sensitive training, and institutional recognition. Such systems can help women transition from informal, undervalued livelihood roles to more publicly legitimate entrepreneurial identities. This aligns with empowerment-oriented development research, which emphasizes that women's agency is strengthened not only by resources but also by recognition, voice, and the ability to make socially meaningful choices (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2020; Guérin et al., 2013; Guérin et al., 2015).

5.5. Limitations and future research directions

Our study has several limitations that point to avenues for future research. First, the sample is concentrated in Benin's rural and peri-urban agrifood economy. Our aim was to provide analytical conclusions, not statistical generalizations. Future research could examine whether similar identity reconstruction processes occur in other rural sectors, regions, or countries.

Second, the study focused on identity narratives and did not systematically measure enterprise size, land access, income, profitability, or household decision-making power. Future studies could integrate qualitative identity analysis with quantitative indicators of enterprise performance, asset ownership, income control, and intra-household bargaining.

Third, the study captures identity reconstruction at a single point in time. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how women's identities stabilize, reverse, fragment, or strengthen as businesses grow, household circumstances change, community attitudes shift, or stakeholder support is withdrawn.

Fourth, future research could more explicitly compare stakeholder types. Microfinance institutions, NGOs, women-support organizations, development projects, market associations, local authorities, and religious or traditional leaders may validate women's entrepreneurial identities in different ways. Future studies should therefore examine not only whether stakeholders support women but also what kind of identity each stakeholder makes possible.

Finally, household members, men, customers, and community audiences should be studied more directly as identity audiences. Because entrepreneurial legitimacy is relationally negotiated, future research could examine how husbands, children, market actors, community leaders, and peers either constrain, contest, or validate women's

entrepreneurial identities. Digital tools and platforms may also create new spaces for visibility and identity projection in rural entrepreneurship, but this requires dedicated research and should be treated as a future extension, which is not a core implication of our present study.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how rural women entrepreneurs in Benin reconstruct their entrepreneurial identities in a context where socio-cultural norms continue to position women primarily as caregivers, household supporters, farmers, and informal traders. Drawing on research in women's entrepreneurship, rural entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial identity, the study shows that reconstructing entrepreneurial identity is a gendered, relational, and context-embedded process. It is not driven solely by individual motivation or business participation; it also emerges from the interplay among normative positioning, livelihood-embedded agency, self-legitimation, and external identity validation.

Three main conclusions emerge. First, entrepreneurial identity reconstruction begins with gendered normative positioning. Women's initial engagement in entrepreneurship is often shaped by household needs, family responsibilities, rural livelihoods, and community reputation rather than by an already established entrepreneurial self-identity. Many women distance themselves from the entrepreneurial label because their activities are seen as informal, small-scale, or tied to household survival. This shows that entrepreneurial identity is not automatically produced by business activity; it depends on whether women can interpret and present their activities as legitimate entrepreneurship within a gendered social context.

Second, identity reconstruction is activated through livelihood-embedded entrepreneurial agency. Women gradually come to see themselves as entrepreneurs through everyday practices such as trading, farming, seeking credit, managing customers, supporting children, controlling income, and persisting despite criticism. Their agency is not separate from care responsibilities; it is often grounded in them. Our study therefore shows that household responsibility can be a basis for entrepreneurial agency, not merely a constraint on women's entrepreneurship.

Third, reconstructed entrepreneurial identity is relationally validated yet only partially stabilized. Stakeholders such as microfinance institutions, NGOs, women-support organizations, and development actors do more than provide finance or training. They also validate women's identities by recognizing their activities, offering coaching, providing symbolic support, and naming them entrepreneurs. At the same time, traditional norms remain powerful, so women's reconstructed identities continue to be negotiated and are far from fully settled.

To date, our study contributes to entrepreneurship research by showing that rural women's reconstruction of entrepreneurial identity is not a simple transition from informal work to entrepreneurship. It is an ongoing process of negotiating gendered norms, enacting livelihood agency, claiming legitimacy, and receiving relational validation. For policy and practice, the central implication is that women's entrepreneurship programs should move beyond finance and training alone. They should build recognition systems that strengthen women's confidence, community legitimacy, household support, and public acceptance as entrepreneurs. In doing so, support programs can help make women's entrepreneurial identities both economically viable and socially legitimate and personally empowering.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Blandine A. Ekpodilè-Domingo: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Matthew Ayamga: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology,

Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Maria Aina: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could appear to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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