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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. How Digitalisation Enables Decarbonisation: A Systematic Review Of Mechanisms, Pathways, And Boundary Conditions
Misheck Musaigwa, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza
6-27
2. Lapses in Water Services Management Within Gauteng Province- A Scoping Review Of Hammanskraal Water Woes
M. Diedericks, S. Sikwela, G.M. Solomons
28-57
3. Soldiered Democracy and Peace: The Smithan Syndrome Of Politics And Administration In Zimbabwe, 1965–2018
Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kelechi Johnmary Ani
58-76
4. Aligning Marketing Strategies with Climate Action and Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa
Gugulethu Mhlanga and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj
77-98
5. Agri-Tech And Livestock Management: Economic And Policy Drivers Of Digital Adoption In Nigeria And South Africa
Olukayode Idris Lasisi, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Muslim Akinbola Akintola Kedibone Phago
99-119
6. Indivisible Security And Sustainable Development In The Sadc Region: Assessing Stability And Cooperation Among The Drc, Rwanda, And Uganda
Masila Joshua Masipa
120-134
7. Reforming Public Service In Africa: Strategies, Challenges And The Future
Kazeem Oyedele Lamidi, Costa Hofisi
135-156
8. Organic Agribusiness In Rural South Africa: Marketing Strategies Amid Stiff Competition
Ishmael Obaeko Iwara
157-16
9. Minimising English Tense Substitution Errors: A Case Of Tshivenda-Speaking Students At A South African University
Farisani Thomas Nephawe
168-185
10. Institutional Dynamics And Hybrid Regime: Liberal And Authoritarian Democracy In The Central Africa
Muhlya Tshombe Lukamba, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Eunice Chesa
186-206
11. Ubuntu Philosophy And Regional Governance In Africa: A Human-Centred Framework For Regional Integration And Sustainable Development
Onuk Bulus Ojem, Phemelo Olifile Marumo
207-226

12. Nigerian Border Conflict With Neighbours And Implications For Regionalism
Kelechi Johnmary Ani

227-239
13. Epistemic Violence: Transboundary Conservation's Subjugation Of Basubiya
 Eco-Missiology And Riverine Agency
Phemelo Olifile Marumo, Sethunya Michael Gaarekwe

240-262
14. Strategies To Mitigate The Challenges Faced By Women In Agribusinesses In
 Rural Uphongolo, Kwazulu-Nata
Ndlangamandla, Wiseman Siboniso

263-283
15. In What Ways Do Intersecting Socio-Economic Factors Shape Revenue Growth
 Among Rural Women Entrepreneurs in KZN, South Africa?
Lindokuhle Senamile Ntuli, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

284-307
16. Climate Change and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and
 Pacific Islands
Mandisa Jili and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj

308-328
17. Transformative city branding in the face of climate change in the global south:
 A case of Harare
Kazaka Chiyambire

329-349
18. Mapping of urban climate initiatives in Brazil: promoting mitigation and
 adaptation in the transport sector
Ana Clara Vieira Pedrosa, Ana Clara de Roure, Mateus Bernardino Mata, Andréa Souza Santos

350-378
19. Ancestral Voices in Modern Crises: Traditional Leadership and Climate
 Adaptation in Zimbabwe
Douglas Nyathi

379-396

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN AGRIBUSINESSES IN RURAL UPHONGOLO, KWAZULU-NATAL

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges faced by women in agribusiness in rural uPhongolo, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Despite women contributing significantly to agricultural production and rural livelihoods, their participation remains constrained by persistent gender inequalities in access to land, finance, markets, and institutional support. A qualitative research design was employed using purposive sampling, where participants were selected based on predefined criteria including active involvement in agribusiness, years of experience, and engagement with local agricultural or institutional structures. The sample comprised twenty participants, including fifteen women engaged in smallholder agribusiness activities and five local government officials. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The results reveal four key challenges: institutional fragmentation, limited access to financial and physical resources, deficits in skills and technological capacity, and weak policy implementation. These challenges are reinforced by inadequate infrastructure, poor service delivery, and limited coordination among government stakeholders. The study proposes actionable strategies including strengthening intergovernmental coordination, improving monitoring and accountability mechanisms, expanding capacity-building and digital training initiatives, and implementing gender-responsive policy reforms.

Keywords: *Women in agribusiness; rural development; gender inequality; qualitative research; South Africa*

INTRODUCTION

Women play a critical role in agricultural systems worldwide, contributing significantly to food production, rural livelihoods, and household food security. Despite this contribution, their participation in agribusiness remains constrained by persistent structural and gender-based inequalities. While this challenge is

widely documented in South African literature, existing studies have largely focused on descriptive accounts of gender inequality without sufficiently linking empirical findings to context-specific mitigation strategies. This study addresses this gap by providing an integrated analysis that connects women lived experiences to actionable,

locally grounded interventions within a specific rural context.

The focus on uPhongolo Local Municipality is particularly significant due to its predominantly rural character, high levels of poverty, limited infrastructure, and reliance on smallholder agricultural systems. These contextual conditions intensify gendered constraints and provide a unique setting to examine how structural and institutional barriers operate in practice. By situating the study within this locality, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how national-level challenges manifest at the micro level. Furthermore, while previous studies acknowledge the importance of institutional coordination, limited attention has been given to the role of collective leadership in addressing these challenges. This study therefore contributes by explicitly integrating Collective Leadership Theory (CLT) to analyse how collaborative agency, participatory governance, and institutional engagement can inform practical solutions.

The study is guided by three objectives: (1) to identify the key challenges faced by women in agribusiness, (2) to analyse these challenges using Collective Leadership Theory, and (3) to develop empirically grounded strategies to mitigate these constraints. The study is further guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What structural and institutional barriers constrain women in agribusiness?
- (2) How do women navigate and respond to these challenges?
- (3) What strategies can enhance their participation and sustainability in agribusiness?

By addressing these questions, the study contributed to both theory and practice. It provided a context-specific understanding of gendered constraints in agribusiness and offered actionable insights for inclusive rural development in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lack of bank loan/funding

Women in agribusiness continue to face significant financial exclusion, which limits their ability to expand and sustain their enterprises. Existing studies consistently identify access to credit as a critical determinant of productivity; for instance, Nkosi, Agholor and Olorunfemi (2024) argue that improved access to finance enables investment in inputs and business growth. However, this perspective is contested by Biswas (2014), who maintains that formal financial systems remain structurally exclusionary due to rigid collateral requirements, bureaucratic processes, and a preference for low-risk clients. This structural exclusion is further reinforced by socio-cultural constraints that limit women's access to financial resources and institutional support (Fani, 2021), as well as persistent financial inequalities within African agribusiness sectors (Chisoro & Moothoo Padayachie, 2023).

These contrasting findings suggest that financial access alone is insufficient to address systemic barriers. Rather, the persistence of exclusion reflects deeper institutional misalignment between financial systems and the realities of rural women. Furthermore, much of the literature relies on macro-level analyses, with limited attention to women lived experiences, thereby weakening the contextual relevance of proposed financial interventions.

Lack of education/general training

Limited access to education, training, and technological resources remains a major constraint on women's participation in agribusiness. While existing literature often assumes that access to training leads to improved productivity, this relationship is not straightforward. Gumede (2021) demonstrates that literacy constraints significantly limit women's ability to benefit from training programmes, while Qange, Mdoda and Mditshwa (2024) highlight persistent skills gaps among rural women. Similarly, Omeire (2016) emphasises that education is a critical component of empowerment yet remains unevenly distributed in rural contexts.

Institutional inefficiencies further undermine the effectiveness of training initiatives. Koyenikan (2018) identifies challenges such as inadequate funding, weak coordination, and limited monitoring within extension services, while earlier work (Koyenikan, 2008) highlights gender bias in programme delivery, often excluding women farmers. The Commonwealth Secretariat (2021) also notes the underrepresentation of female extension workers, which contributes to the marginalisation of women in knowledge dissemination processes.

These findings indicate that the challenge extends beyond access to training and includes issues of quality, inclusivity, and contextual relevance. Without addressing these structural limitations, training programmes are unlikely to yield meaningful or sustained improvements in women's agribusiness performance.

Lack of inclusion of farmers/agricultural workers under social security legislation

Social security is needed in the agricultural sector because agricultural workers are exposed to many risks at the workplace, especially women (Thobejane, 2022). If they are not protected, this may cause them to work in fear, knowing precisely that their jobs are insecure. Fani (2021:67) found that "concerning health insurance, many categories of rural farmers and workers are often excluded by law, while rural populations generally face much greater difficulties in accessing health services than urban populations." Legal exclusion of agricultural farmers and workers from social security may be caused by several factors, including high labour mobility and fluctuating income (Ndhlovu, 2025). Hart (2020:38) argued that "In some countries, workers in the agricultural sector, or some categories of workers in that sector, are excluded from coverage by the main social security or labour laws or are subject to separate laws that provide a lower level of protection". Ndhlovu (2025) found that language barriers and illiteracy are prevalent in rural populations, making them unable to read and understand legal regulations written in English. Fani (2021:46) argued that "Apart from the number of contributions, employees and employers may have difficulties in contributing if the financing arrangements, particularly the arrangements for collecting contributions, are not adapted to their situation".

Market access

Access to formal agricultural markets remains a persistent challenge for women in agribusiness. Structural constraints such as weak infrastructure, limited access to credit, and low levels of education restrict women's ability to participate effectively in competitive markets (Kabeer, 2020; Chen, 2019). Although policy frameworks exist to support emerging farmers, their implementation is often weak and fragmented (Department of Science and Innovation, 2021; Department of Water and Sanitation, 2020). As a result, many women are confined to informal markets characterised by low returns and limited growth opportunities (Ndhlovu, 2025). This exclusion is further compounded by the absence of agro-processing infrastructure and limited integration into formal value chains, reinforcing economic marginalisation and reducing overall productivity. These challenges highlight the need for coordinated institutional support to improve market access and participation.

Social Security and Structural Exclusion

Women in agribusiness are also affected by exclusion from social protection systems, which increases their vulnerability to economic and workplace risks. Hart (2020) and Thobejane (2022) highlight that agricultural workers are often excluded from formal social security frameworks, while Fani (2021) notes limited access to healthcare and insurance services in rural areas. Structural factors such as informal employment, fluctuating income, and legal barriers further reinforce this exclusion (Ndhlovu, 2025). In addition,

broader socio-economic conditions, including labour market inequalities and institutional weaknesses, contribute to the marginalisation of women in agribusiness. The lack of adequate social protection not only affects income security but also limits women's ability to invest in and sustain their enterprises.

Gender Stereotypes and Socio-Cultural Constraints

Socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes continue to shape women's participation in agribusiness. Women are often burdened with unpaid care responsibilities, which limit their ability to engage fully in economic activities (Du Toit & Neves, 2017; Alfes, 2016). These constraints are reinforced by labour market inequalities that confine women to low-skilled and insecure forms of employment (Dlamini, 2021; Ndhlovu, 2025). Furthermore, gendered expectations influence access to resources, decision-making, and institutional support, thereby limiting opportunities for growth and sustainability. These structural inequalities highlight the need for interventions that address both economic and socio-cultural barriers to women's participation in agribusiness.

Solutions to the challenges facing women in agribusinesses

Access to land

Access to land and secure tenure remains a key barrier to women's participation and growth in agribusiness. Globally, less than half of women have ownership or secure rights to land, with men twice as likely to own land in many countries and significant gaps in legal protection for women's

land rights persisting (Bienabe & Vermeulen, 2021). Progress remains limited, as increases in women's land ownership from 16% (2013) to 23% (2021) still fall short of global targets (Bienabe & Vermeulen, 2021). In Africa, efforts to promote gender-equitable land ownership remain inadequate despite policy commitments (Dlamini, 2021). In South Africa, slow land reform implementation, limited funding, and policy constraints further restrict women's access to land and productive resources (Smith, 2025). These land-related constraints also limit women's access to credit and investment, as land is often required as collateral in traditional financial systems. While targeted grants and gender-responsive funding can support women's agricultural participation, structural inequalities in inheritance practices and customary law continue to reinforce exclusion (Smith, 2025). Consequently, women remain disadvantaged in accessing productive resources necessary for agribusiness expansion, despite evidence that their empowerment improves food security and rural development outcomes. This highlights the need for stronger policy enforcement and inclusive land reform strategies to address persistent gender inequalities in agriculture (Gumede, 2021).

Enforcement of women inclusivity by government

Women in agribusiness continue to face structural exclusion despite their critical contribution to food security in South Africa. Gender inequality, limited access to finance, and restricted market opportunities remain persistent barriers, although women continue to mobilise for change (Kheswa, 2020).

Strengthening collective action through agricultural cooperatives is identified as a key strategy to improve bargaining power, resource sharing, and market access (Ndhlovu, 2025). In this regard, government-private sector partnerships, mentorship programmes, and targeted funding initiatives are essential for improving women's participation and sustainability in agribusiness (Dlamini, 2021).

The literature further shows that these challenges are deeply rooted in structural constraints, particularly limited access to land, weak land reform implementation, and discriminatory customary practices. Inadequate land rights restrict women's access to finance, mechanisation, and markets, thereby limiting productivity and business growth. Financial exclusion is reinforced by traditional banking systems that undervalue women's agricultural enterprises, making grants and gender-responsive funding critical policy tools. Overall, studies consistently emphasise that improving women's access to land, finance, and institutional support is essential for strengthening agribusiness development, food security, and rural livelihoods (Kheswa, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2025; Dlamini, 2021).

Synthesis of Literature Gaps

The reviewed literature highlights several critical gaps. First, there is limited integration of women lived experiences with policy-oriented solutions, as many studies remain descriptive. Second, there is insufficient critical engagement with the effectiveness of institutional systems, particularly in relation to finance, training, and market support. Third, there is weak application of

theoretical frameworks to explain the underlying dynamics of gendered agribusiness challenges. This study addresses these gaps by integrating empirical findings with Collective Leadership Theory, thereby providing a more comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of how collaborative governance and shared agency can contribute to mitigating the challenges faced by women in agribusiness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Collective Leadership Theory (CLT), which conceptualises leadership as a distributed and relational process emerging through collaboration, shared responsibility, and multi-actor engagement (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2021). Rather than treating CLT as a descriptive lens, this study operationalises the framework through three analytical dimensions: collaborative agency, participatory governance, and institutional engagement. Collaborative agency is examined through the extent to which women farmers engage in collective action, knowledge sharing, and cooperative strategies to address resource constraints. Participatory governance is assessed by analysing women's inclusion in decision-making processes and their ability to influence agribusiness-related policies and programmes. Institutional engagement focuses on the nature and quality of interactions between women farmers and key stakeholders, including government departments and local authorities. These dimensions provided a structured coding framework for the thematic analysis, enabling both inductive identification of emergent themes and deductive interpretation guided by CLT constructs. In this study,

agribusiness is defined as smallholder and emerging farming enterprises engaged in production and limited market-oriented activities, thereby distinguishing the context from large-scale commercial agriculture.

The application of CLT provides an analytical basis for examining how fragmented institutional systems and weak coordination contribute to the challenges faced by women in agribusiness. Empirical evidence from the study demonstrates that limited interdepartmental collaboration, inconsistent support programmes, and weak monitoring systems reflect deficiencies in collective leadership practices, consistent with findings that ineffective relational coordination undermines public service delivery (Ospina et al., 2020; Crosby & Bryson, 2018). At the same time, the study identifies emergent forms of collective leadership within informal networks, where women farmers rely on shared knowledge, peer support, and adaptive strategies to navigate structural constraints, supporting arguments that leadership in marginalised contexts often manifests through everyday collaborative practices (Raelin, 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). By integrating these insights, the study extends CLT beyond its traditional organisational focus to a rural agribusiness context, demonstrating that the effectiveness of collective leadership is contingent upon active institutional support, coordinated governance, and inclusive participation across multiple levels.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of women in agribusiness.

This approach is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena and generating in-depth insights. According to Brink (2018), qualitative research entails a researcher engaging with participants to learn about their daily lives and then using that knowledge in a way that improves their position. The main goal of qualitative research is to discover people's meanings and perceptions of everyday life, and then to analyse this knowledge in words so that it is obvious and valuable to anyone interested in learning about specific life experiences.

Study Area and Sampling

The study was conducted in uPhongolo Local Municipality in February 2025. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria. The sample comprised twenty participants which included fifteen women farmers and five municipal officials. Ritchie (2014) stated that purposeful sampling ensures that participants are picked following the condition. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in agribusiness activities, a minimum of two years of experience, engagement with agricultural or government support programmes, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. To ensure a diverse and representative sample, variations were considered in terms of age (18–50 years), type of agribusiness (crop farming, livestock farming, or mixed farming), scale of operations, and years of experience. This approach ensured a heterogeneous sample capable of capturing diverse experiences across the agribusiness sector. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews,

particularly after the twelfth participant. Additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic consistency, thereby ensuring adequate coverage of diverse experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. An interview guide was developed covering themes such as access to resources, institutional support, and operational challenges. The twenty study participants agreed to participate and gave their written consent. Interview audio records were transcribed and coded using thematic content analysis. Interviews were conducted primarily in isiZulu, the dominant local language. Transcripts were translated into English by a bilingual researcher, and back-translation techniques were used to ensure accuracy and preserve meaning.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework using both inductive and deductive approaches. Deductive coding was guided by the three dimensions of Collective Leadership Theory, while inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the data. Coding was conducted manually by the primary researcher, followed by iterative review and refinement of codes and themes. To enhance reliability, a second independent reviewer examined a subset of transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. This process strengthened intercoder consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured in line with the qualitative framework of Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 2018), which remains widely used in contemporary qualitative research to evaluate rigor through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, where participants verified the accuracy of interpreted results, a strategy supported in recent qualitative research as essential for ensuring authenticity of participant meanings. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail that documented all methodological and analytical decisions, thereby enhancing transparency and allowing systematic review of the research process. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling, which enabled the researcher to critically reflect on personal assumptions and minimise bias during interpretation of data. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study context, participants, and results, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar rural agribusiness settings. Collectively, these strategies ensured methodological rigor and alignment with established qualitative trustworthiness standards (Lincoln & Guba, 2018). To ensure effective member checking, participants were provided with summaries of findings to verify accuracy. The detailed records of coding decisions, theme development, and methodological choices were maintained to ensure audit trail. To ensure reflexive journaling, the researcher documented reflections on

positionality and potential bias throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was free and voluntary. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher used “WIAB” for women in agribusinesses and “ULM” for uPhongolo Local Municipality officials. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation.

RESULTS

To provide a detailed presentation of results on the investigated research problem, related themes were created. The themes stem from the objectives of the study which were stated in the introduction section:

- a) Limited government support and financial constraints
- b) Weak monitoring, inspection, and accountability mechanisms
- c) Lack of coordinated empowerment programmes and awareness
- d) Capacity building and training needs
- e) Resource and infrastructure challenges
- f) Unsafe working conditions and security risks
- g) Environmental, health, and social vulnerabilities

This section presented the summary of the results from the various categories of study participants, with the first set of results from women in agribusinesses, followed by government officials' results. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher used “WIAB” for women in agribusinesses and “ULM” for

uPhongolo Local Municipality officials. The presentation of results starts by demonstrating socio-demographic profile of women in agribusiness (Female farmers).

Socio-demographic profile of women in agribusiness

The results indicate that all interviewed participants were African women aged between 18 and 50 years, with most having completed Grade 12, followed by Diploma qualifications. This reflects a relatively low to moderate level of formal education among participants engaged in agribusiness activities.

Limited government support and financial constraints

A dominant theme emerging from the results is the lack of adequate government support. Almost all participants (12 out of 15) reported experiencing difficult working conditions due to insufficient financial and non-financial assistance from government. Key issues included “poor government financial and non-financial support,” “inadequate funds to support the operations of agribusinesses,” and “expensive equipment from suppliers”. These constraints were reported to directly affect business sustainability, including the inability to pay salaries or cover operational costs such as electricity. The results indicate that information about grants, training, and support programmes does not consistently reach women farmers. When available, training is often once-off with limited follow-up support or mentoring, reducing long-term effectiveness.

Resource and infrastructure challenges

Participants highlighted significant challenges related to limited resources and infrastructure. These included “poor water supply,” “lack of medication and food for livestock,” and inadequate farming inputs. One participant emphasised:

“There is a challenge of livestock medication. Agribusiness requires medication and food. Lack of these has a negative effect on productivity of the business. The livestock dies if there is insufficient medication especially during the winter season” (WIAB, 2025).

These results demonstrate the centrality of resource availability to agribusiness productivity.

Unsafe working conditions and security risks

The results show that women in agribusiness operate in unsafe environments, largely due to unfenced premises and lack of security. Participants reported risks such as theft, physical abuse, and gender-based violence. One respondent stated:

“Most agribusinesses experience high theft cases due to no fencing. Crime in rural areas affect the operations of agribusinesses, women farmers work in unsafe working environment” (WIAB, 2025).

The absence of security personnel further contributed to feelings of insecurity, particularly when working early or late hours.

Weak monitoring, inspection, and accountability mechanisms

Irregular and ineffective government inspections emerged as a major concern. Participants noted “poor government monitoring and evaluation,” as well as “irregular

government inspections,” which limited the ability to address labour conditions and operational challenges. The study found that inadequate inspection practices and lack of accountability among inspectors hindered the identification and resolution of labour-related issues.

Lack of coordinated empowerment programmes and awareness

The results reveal that challenges faced by women in agribusiness are often underreported and insufficiently known by government departments. Participants indicated a lack of “well-coordinated operational women empowerment programmes” and limited awareness of available support initiatives. Despite some media attention, support remains minimal and fragmented.

Limited collaboration and weak government relations

Only a small proportion of participants (2 out of 15) reported having a positive relationship with local government, mainly through access to training and assistance with funding applications. However, the majority experienced weak engagement and limited collective action from government departments. Participants emphasised the need for stronger collaboration across government spheres and improved communication with agribusiness stakeholders.

Capacity building and training needs

Participants identified a strong need for structured and continuous training programmes. Below is verbatim from some of the participants (Female farmer):

“There is a need for government to introduce well-coordinated skills and

development trainings for women in agribusinesses. These trainings must provide basic, intermediate and advanced information on labour related issues faced by women in agribusinesses” (WIAB, 2025).

Existing training initiatives were reported to be limited, often once-off, and lacking follow-up support.

Proposed strategies by women in agribusinesses

Participants recommended regular and well-monitored farm inspections. They also suggested establishing a dedicated government task team for agribusiness oversight. Strengthened reporting and accountability mechanisms for labour inspectors were highlighted as necessary. In addition, participants called for improved interdepartmental collaboration to enhance coordination among government structures. Finally, they recommended expanding structured and continuous training programmes for women in agribusiness.

Government officials’ perspectives on challenges

Results from government officials corroborate the experiences of women farmers, highlighting issues such as “poor government support, gender biasness, irregular farm inspection, lack of educational training as well as limited water supply.” Officials also noted challenges related to theft and infrastructure, stating:

“The agribusinesses in animal farming face a challenge of theft, their livestock often get stolen by criminals due to poor or lack of fencing in business premises” (ULM, 2025).

Additionally, water shortages and lack of security were identified as factors negatively affecting productivity and customer retention. Another official stated the following:

I am aware that women farmers often report that their agribusinesses operate in unfenced premises with limited security. There are also water shortages which affect the livestock and crops. The water challenges may lead to loss of customers as the business operations are affected (ULM, 2025).

Environmental, health, and social vulnerabilities

Government officials emphasized that women in agribusiness are exposed to multiple risks, including environmental hazards, health threats, and social inequalities. Participants stated that:

“Rural women in agribusinesses are a particularly vulnerable population group due to their limited knowledge of health risks and workers' rights at work, inadequate training to protect against environmental hazards, lack of access to medical care, documentation status, and language and/or cultural barriers. The female farmers and workers in agribusinesses are also vulnerable to emerging health threats such as climate change (ULM, 2025).

Women in agribusinesses are exposed to numerous environmental hazards, including chemical factors such as pesticides and heat exposure and social factors discrimination, and lack of social protection schemes (ULM, 2025).

Exposure to pesticides, heat, discrimination, and lack of social protection further compound these vulnerabilities.

Existing support programmes and their limitations

While some government programmes exist, such as training, funding application support, and local

development initiatives, their reach and effectiveness are limited. Government officials acknowledged that although support programmes exist, their impact remains limited. Assistance is often restricted to cooperatives and selected beneficiaries, with uneven distribution of resources. Programmes include training, funding application support, and ward-based agricultural assistance; however, budget constraints and accessibility issues limit reach.

Officials reported that local economic development programmes operate under limited budgets, affecting the scale and inclusivity of support. As a result, not all agribusinesses benefit equally from government interventions. One official explained:

“Each ward within uPhongolo Local Municipality has its budget... Programmes like these are in existence, however, they are limited by budget issues, and they are not accessible to everyone” (ULM, 2025).

The results indicate that not all agribusinesses benefit from these programmes, and support is often unevenly distributed.

Need for integrated and collaborative governance

The results highlight the importance of coordinated efforts among government departments. Government officials stressed the need for joint inspections and integrated approaches, noting that collaboration between municipalities and the Department of Labour could address both operational and labour-related challenges. The results suggest that current fragmented approaches delay responses and weaken policy implementation. Overall, the results demonstrate that women in agribusiness face multifaceted challenges related to limited support, inadequate resources, unsafe working

conditions, and weak institutional coordination, with both participants and government officials acknowledging gaps in current interventions. This reflects the need for integrated governance systems that improve efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness in addressing agribusiness challenges.

Overall summary of results

Overall, the study reveals that women in agribusiness in uPhongolo face interconnected structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges. While government programmes exist, their implementation is fragmented, inconsistently accessible, and insufficient to address the depth of challenges experienced. Both participants and officials agree on the need for strengthened intergovernmental coordination, improved inspection systems, expanded training programmes, and enhanced resource support to promote sustainable women-led agribusiness development.

DISCUSSION

The section below discusses the study results and offers empirically grounded strategies to mitigate the constraints facing women in agribusiness. The discussion of results is infused with relevant literature review. The results chapter above revealed that women in agribusinesses often face difficulties accessing productive resources, markets and services. The study found that these difficulties hinder women's productivity and reduce their overall contribution to the agricultural sector. The study notes that overcoming these obstacles is therefore essential to achieving long-term growth and

sustainability in the agricultural sector. To mitigate the obstacles in agribusinesses, the study recommends that the following strategies be implemented.

Introduction of Agriculture 4.0 technologies (Smart farming).

There is a need for women in agribusiness to be educated about technology advancement for better digital communication about labour-related issues in the agricultural sector. This study found that most women in agribusinesses struggle to thrive due to being illiterate and unskilled, and lack knowledge of using mobile phones, typing complaints, and sending emails. Smith (2025:45) stated that "A lack of education and illiteracy denies rural women access to essential information and technologies required to manage and expand their productive capacity". It is thus recommended that government must formulate a task team that will bring well-coordinated Information Technology (IT) trainings for agribusiness workers to be knowledgeable about digital communication for better reporting of their labour issues. According to the World Bank Group (2021:73) "Female farmers and entrepreneurs should also be equipped to safeguard their business finances and investments by adopting and utilising technology, such as digital banking". In response to the above-mentioned issues facing female farmers, the researcher notes that the introduction of smart farming trainings might help enhance women's access to financial resources, training, and business networks. For instance, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Report (2020:67) outlines "Several government initiatives aimed at fostering women's entrepreneurship,

such as microfinance programs, skill development workshops, and mentorship programs”.

Women in agribusiness have historically faced distinct challenges rooted in societal expectations and entrenched gender norms, which have often limited their access to resources, markets, and decision-making opportunities (Ndandula, 2021). Despite these barriers, women have been instrumental in enhancing agricultural productivity, contributing significantly to food security and economic development (Sheeba & Christopher, 2024). “As the agricultural sector increasingly integrates Industry 4.0 technologies, such as automation, precision agriculture, and digital platforms, understanding how women can harness these innovations becomes critical to achieving inclusive and sustainable progress” (Sindhu & Kumar, 2022:69). Ndhlovu (2025) stated that technology-driven farming might greatly benefit female farmers in South Africa especially in rural areas where women receive less support from government. Ndhlovu (2025:77) argued that “Through mobile apps, drones, and GPS technology, women are embracing the digital age to enhance crop yields, improve pest control, and monitor farm conditions in real-time”. The researcher noted that these technology-driven farming might help rural female farmers to farm more effectively and efficiently, as a result contribute to food security in the country.

Technology can significantly enhance the agri-business value chain, particularly for women entrepreneurs, by improving efficiency and reducing reliance on manual labour (Ndandula, 2021). Automation and data analytics can streamline various activities within

the value chain, including planting, irrigation, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. These advancements have the potential to level the playing field for women by providing tools that enhance productivity and decision-making capabilities. “The successful adoption of Agriculture 4.0 technologies also depends on factors such as farm size and crop suitability, which are crucial for maximising profitability” (Uma, 2020; 48). Additionally, improved access to markets through technology can help small-scale farmers navigate the challenges of securing contracts, ultimately enhancing their competitiveness in the market (Uma, 2020).

Based on the results of the study and relevant literature on the use of IT in agribusinesses development, the researcher noted that female farmers and workers need to be equipped with IT knowledge for agribusiness development. This is validated by Irene (2021:78) who stated that “Other ways to report labour challenges in agribusinesses include both farmers and workers using new technology to hold online meetings, and all complaints being recorded on the phone; the stored information could then be reported to the relevant state departments to intervene on labour-related issues”. The researcher noted that having female farmers equipped with IT might assist address female-owned agribusiness have their difficulties easily reported to the relevant government departments. The following sub-topic discussed building a single-joint interdepartmental collaboration structure to address challenges facing female farmers in the agricultural sector.

Building a single joint interdepartmental collaboration structure

Based on the results of the study, the departments that deal directly with agricultural activities from all spheres of government (Department of Labour and

Employment) must create a single joint planning and coordination structure to discuss development priorities and planned projects to address challenges facing women in agribusinesses. The researcher found that the planning system that the government is currently utilizing remains unsuitable for the task of long-term planning women-led agribusinesses. To improve the challenges faced by women in agribusinesses mentioned in this study, it could be recommended that all spheres of government should incorporate stakeholder insights, lay a policy foundation for a whole-of-government approach to planning, and set the direction for agricultural workers planned future. The study found that creating a coherent planning and coordinated system could assist government institutions in ensuring that better outcomes are achieved from the delivery of support services to women in agribusinesses. When a team has a strong bond, it is easier for them to develop answers to the problems that they confront. The researcher applied collective leadership theory since it promotes the collaborative working of different people to achieve a common goal. This theory is relevant for all spheres of government to have a strategic planning and collective decision-making process when dealing with the challenges facing women in agribusinesses. The female farmers can also work with agricultural workers and have a well-constructed plan to challenge the labour regulations and policies that hinder agribusiness development.

Monitored labour inspections on agribusinesses (Department of Labour and Employment)

The Department of Labour is the key state department with the responsibility to regulate the South African labour market, enhance enforcement and monitor compliance with policies, laws, and regulations. Despite the Department of Labour and Employment's effort to reach out to all agribusinesses, this study found

that there are many agribusinesses that have not been inspected in years, which makes it difficult to resolve labour issues faced. This study further revealed that women in agribusinesses are often not granted an opportunity to fully express their labour challenges in case labour inspectors visit the business. It can therefore be recommended that government must find mechanisms to deploy well-trained and professional labour inspectors to invade agribusinesses. Proper labour inspections will assist all state departments responsible for the development and improvement of the agricultural sector to make effective and efficient decisions in the future for the agricultural sector. Below is the verbatim from study participant:

The labour farm inspectors must make follow-ups with the female farmers to assess the working conditions since the last visit. The department of labour must have a tracking mechanism to assess the work conducted by farm inspectors. This might minimise the situation where government sends farm inspectors to check labour conditions and the inspectors do not peach and provide invalid reports as if there are no major issues that need urgent government intervention (WIAB, 2025).

The study also stated that the Department of Labour must develop reporting procedures to ensure the accountability and visibility of labour inspectors on agricultural farms. Furthermore, this department should develop a database of agribusinesses that have been interviewed and aided by labour inspectors, allowing other officials within the department to conduct follow-ups to authenticate the legitimacy of labour inspector results. The department must strengthen the labour inspectors' reporting methods. One example could be a thorough 'day-to-day plan of action' that farm inspectors will employ to engage women in agribusinesses.

Establish women empowerment educational trainings

In this study most participants stated that women in agribusinesses face many challenges which may be attributed to the lack of business management skills and trainings. Below are some of the verbatims from study participants:

Most female farmers are unaware about agricultural sector policies. Most of the female farmers also do not have basic business management skills to run an agricultural farm, and this is due to being illiterate. I therefore believe that maybe the Department of Labour together with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must prioritise adding more trainings that teach women in agribusiness labour relations policies in the agricultural sector. Even though there are some trainings going on, I strongly believe government can do better in addressing issues facing female farmers (WIAB, 2025).

The local government must have well-coordinated platforms for women farmers in agribusinesses to speak out about labour challenges and funding opportunities available. To achieve this goal, the local, provincial, and national governments must work together with ward councillors, traditional leaders, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to investigate factors affecting the performance of women-led agribusinesses and how this affects the agricultural sector. The inclusion of private sector institutions interested in agribusiness development and women empowerment programmes might also assist women to be more empowered as a result thrive in their businesses (WIAB, 2025).

The above verbatims are validated by Irene (2021:35) who noted argued that “Due to insufficient education, rural women business owners are unable to adopt new manufacturing techniques, marketing trends, or government initiatives that would otherwise encourage them”. Furthermore, as attested by Karasi (2018), many women in South African rural

communities lack adequate training because of their educational background, which is an obstacle to women starting their own businesses because few banks want to fund people who have no formal training or skills. Ojah and Mokoaleli-Mokoteli (2021:94) proffered that because “Most rural women lack administrative skills and education, some women find it challenging to run, oversee, coordinate, and supervise their businesses. Sometimes, they also lack adequate training, and as a result, a potential firm collapse owing to a lack of management abilities”. The study therefore recommends that for effective agribusiness development, there is a need for the establishment of more well-coordinated education trainings by the local government in collaboration with other spheres of government and private section institutions.

According to Ndhlovu (2025) empowering women in agriculture can lead to broader economic and social transformation. The researcher recommends that financial literacy is a crucial aspect of any business venture therefore government needs to introduce more business management and educational trainings for women farmers in the agricultural sector. This correlates with Gumede (2021:38) who stated that “Women farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs should be capacitated in budgeting, saving, and investing, as well as accessing loans, business insurance, and managing debt and finances in general, to improve their business operations and financial stability”. When women are uplifted, entire communities’ benefit, which strengthens the sector’s sustainability. “South Africa’s agricultural sector, which is critical to the economy, has long been a male-dominated one. More recently, the sector has been experiencing a significant shift as women have taken on leadership roles, sparking transformation and progress” (Uma, 2020:98). Their growing influence means they are increasingly shaping the future of South African agriculture. Chimucheka and Magadla (2021:93) alluded “Those female

enterprises would benefit from training that stresses developing business skills in a competitive environment, the capacity to analyse an industry for possible market possibilities and niches, and the capacity to utilise information to strengthen an organisation's competitive edge". The study can conclude that capacitating women farmers with necessary education and businesses management skills might help them establish new networks and attract funding opportunities.

Women in agriculture should be empowered with leadership and governance skills so that they can take charge of their businesses and assume decision-making roles within agricultural cooperatives, other organisations, and their communities. The agricultural sector is complex and precarious, and can be daunting, particularly for inexperienced women farmers and entrepreneurs. According to Etim and Daramola (2020:38) "Mentors play a vital role in guiding, offering support, and transferring knowledge to new entrants in the sector to build their confidence, as well as enhancing the skills of small-scale female farmers and entrepreneurs". They can also bridge the gap between conventional extension services support and practical farming business skills, particularly where extension capacity is limited. Mentors provide networking opportunities by connecting mentees with industry contacts, suppliers and buyers. "Mentorship programmes should be formalised, regulated and accompanied by monitoring and evaluation, particularly where public funds are utilised, to ensure that women entrepreneurs derive benefits from the programme" (Alsaedi, 2022:93). The following section proposed the theoretical contribution of the study.

Theoretical contribution of the study

This study applied Collective Leadership Theory (CLT) to explain how structural and institutional fragmentation shapes the challenges faced by women in

agribusiness. CLT emphasises that leadership is distributed across multiple actors and systems rather than concentrated in a single authority, and that effective outcomes depend on collaboration, coordination, and shared accountability (Uhl-Bien, 2021; Crosby & Bryson, 2018). The results show that in the uPhongolo context, weak interdepartmental coordination, inconsistent agricultural support services, and poor monitoring systems reflect limited collective leadership in practice. This is consistent with Ospina et al. (2020), who argue that failures in relational coordination across institutions often lead to ineffective public service delivery in complex governance environments.

The study further demonstrated that collective leadership is also expressed through informal networks, particularly among women farmers who rely on shared knowledge, peer support, and cooperative strategies to cope with systemic constraints. This supports recent scholarship suggesting that leadership in marginalised contexts often emerges through everyday collaboration and adaptive practices rather than formal authority structures (Raelin, 2016; Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012). However, the results indicate that these localised forms of collective agency are constrained by limited institutional support and weak policy implementation. Therefore, the study extends CLT by showing that in rural agribusiness systems, collective leadership is only effective when institutional actors actively enable coordination, inclusion, and resource integration across all governance levels (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study examined structural, institutional, and socio-economic constraints facing women in agribusiness in rural uPhongolo, KwaZulu-Natal, and identified context-specific mitigation strategies. Guided by Collective Leadership Theory, results show that these

challenges are embedded in fragmented governance, weak interdepartmental coordination, and persistent gender inequalities in access to land, finance, infrastructure, training, and markets. Limited state support, inadequate monitoring, unsafe working conditions, and restricted productive resources further constrain women's participation. Despite these barriers, women demonstrate resilience through adaptive livelihood strategies, although these remain constrained by systemic governance failures. The study therefore recommends collaborative governance involving government, municipalities, the private sector, and women farmers in shared decision-making and implementation. Consistent with Collective Leadership Theory, such coordination promotes distributed responsibility and multi-stakeholder engagement in addressing complex rural challenges. The study further highlighted the need for targeted interventions, including Agriculture 4.0 technologies, strengthened capacity-building, improved labour inspection systems, and expanded access to finance and markets. These measures are essential for enhancing productivity, income generation, and gender equality in rural development. Overall, the study provides empirically grounded evidence and supports an integrated governance approach that places women at the centre of agribusiness development.

NOTES:

The study received ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (protocol number: HSSREC/00007621/2024).

- This article is based on Dr WS Ndlangamandla's Master's thesis, which was completed

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- This work is based on the research supported by the authors of this paper themselves.

- There are no competing interests to declare.

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