THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL INCLUSION IN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

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Abstract

The inclusion of women into the financial system promotes economic development. However, in Nigeria, women face disproportionate financial exclusion. The main purpose of this study was to examine the role of financial inclusion in women's economic empowerment within the Nigerian context. Employing a quantitative approach, the study surveyed Nigerian women in two self-help groups to evaluate the extent to which financial inclusion had contributed to their economic empowerment. The results indicate that financial inclusion significantly facilitates women's economic empowerment in terms of improved access to financial systems, affordable financial products, and investment avenues. These underscore the role of financial inclusion in elevating women's economic empowerment. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can leverage these findings to inform tailored interventions promoting women's financial inclusion and empowerment. The researcher's unique contribution lies in the comprehensive exploration of the relationship between financial inclusion and economic development significantly furthering the expansion of specialised scientific literature by enhancing discourse on the intricate relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment. The study encourages further research to explore the connection between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment by assessing diverse social, cultural, and economic contexts, the long-term impact of financial inclusion, and gaining deeper insight into the role of this inclusion through qualitative inquiry.

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1. Introduction

The concept of financial inclusion has garnered substantial scholarly interest in recent times. This is because of its vital role as a pivotal catalyst for fostering economic expansion and advancement (Badullahewage, 2019; Hendriks, 2019). In particular, women's inclusion in the financial system has been identified as a crucial factor in promoting economic development. The financial inclusion of women facilitates gender equality and women's economic empowerment (World Bank, 2018; International Monetary Fund, 2018). However, this sense of gender equality is yet to be attained. This is because women and girls continue to earn less, learn less, own less, as well as wield limited economic power compared to their brothers and husbands (Hendriks, 2019). Female-headed households are among the poorest. A large portion of the hardcore poor tends to be women since they face social barriers to accessing economic assets including credits and property (Jedi, 2022). This makes it difficult for them to overcome poverty. Therefore, this is a situation that has led to negative effects on women's health, employment prospects, education, and the extent of control that women have over their lives and choices (Hendriks, 2019).

Nigeria, like many other developing countries, consists of a large informal economy and a significant proportion of its population is unbanked (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019). This has led to limited access to financial services for a significant portion of the vulnerable population, particularly women (Onukogu, 2021). Despite being a major contributor to the economy, women in Nigeria face significant barriers to economic empowerment, including limited access to education and training (United Nations Development Programme, 2020), and a lack of access to credit and other financial services (International Labour Organization, 2018). Additionally, women have to contend with systems that are entrenched with considerable biases excluding them. For instance, there is a lot of bias in financial, market, legal, and agricultural systems that hinder women from accessing productive and economic resources (Hendriks, 2019). Some examples of this include women engaging less with financial institutions, therefore, making a larger portion of the unbanked population

(Hendriks, 2019). Another example is the difficulty that female entrepreneurs face in securing resources or capital. This is an occurrence that has relegated many of these female entrepreneurs into smaller, home-based enterprises encompassed in low-growth sectors.

Financial inclusion is significant because it has the potential to address some of the above difficulties by providing women with access to credit, savings, and other financial services (United Nations, 2020). This can help women to start and grow businesses (World Bank, 2017), invest in education and training (African Development Bank, 2019), and manage their finances more effectively (International Monetary Fund, 2018). In addition, financial inclusion can help to promote gender equality by addressing the cultural and social norms that limit women's access to financial services (United Nations Children's Fund, 2016). An additional benefit of financial inclusion is women's empowerment. Women's economic empowerment is the process of increasing women's ability to participate in and benefit from economic activities (UN Women, 2013). Women's empowerment remains a significant area of interest in many parts of the world especially in developing economies. This level of empowerment is among the recent priority issues in developing nations because of the disadvantages that women face (Siddik, 2017). This form of empowerment plays an integral role in fostering gender equality. Women's economic empowerment acts as a powerful lever for change which can enable gender equality outcomes contributing to broader intergenerational benefits for women, their children, and households (Adera & Abdisa, 2023; Hendriks, 2019). Economically empowering women is indispensable as a means of upholding their rights and attaining broader developmental goals (Golla et al., 2011; Sadiq et al., 2023). Some of these goals are poverty reduction, economic growth, and social welfare.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of financial inclusion in economically empowering women and promoting gender equality, there remains a significant research gap regarding the current state of financial inclusion in Nigeria and its impact on women's economic well-being and freedom. Studies that have examined the problem of financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment have done so mainly in isolation (Anyanwu et al., 2018; Bhatia & Singh, 2019; Nguse et al., 2022). Thus, there is still a lack of adequate research exploring the interplay between these two factors within the Nigerian context. Therefore, the research purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment in Nigeria identifying the related challenges and opportunities for expanding financial inclusion for the women of this country.

Conducting this research study is significant for several reasons. First, Nigeria has a large population of women who face various socio-economic constraints, limiting their access to financial services and opportunities for economic empowerment. Second, understanding the relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment is crucial for formulating effective policies and interventions that can enhance women's economic participation and well-being. Finally, by addressing the research gap in this area, this study contributes to the existing literature on financial inclusion and women's empowerment, providing valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners working towards gender equality in Nigeria. Therefore, undertaking this study aims to bridge the knowledge gap in the vital relationship between financial inclusion and women empowerment within the context of Nigerian women.

The paper is organized as follows: First, the paper offers an overview of the current state of financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment in Nigeria. This will be followed by a review of the literature on the relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment. Next, the research methodology and data analysis will be presented. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

Financial inclusion has been widely recognised as a crucial aspect of economic development and poverty reduction (Eton et al., 2018; George & Thomachan, 2018). Over the past few decades, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the role of financial inclusion in various areas of the economy (Hendriks, 2019; Musa et al., 2015). This literature review aimed to examine the role of financial inclusion in women's economic empowerment, highlighting the importance of access to financial services and the challenges that women face in accessing these services within the context of Nigerian women.

There are several definitions of financial inclusion presented in the literature. Financial inclusion refers to access to useful and inexpensive financial services and products that meet the needs of people and companies (World Bank, 2018). Further, financial inclusion is the ability of individuals and households to access and use financial products and services, such as savings accounts, credit, and insurance. Financial inclusion is also the process of enabling banking and financial services for persons, therefore, supporting growth and the broader development of economic goals (Nguse et al., 2022).

Extant research explores the significance of financial inclusion. Financial inclusion is important because it allows people to save money, access credit, and manage risks, enabling them to improve their livelihoods and financial stability (Agarwal & Jack, 2011). The significance of financial inclusion also includes serving as an effective catalyst for the economic growth of nations (Nguse et al., 2022). Further significance of financial inclusion is enabling people to successfully manage their financial obligations, reducing levels of poverty, and providing wider economic growth (Fareed et al., 2017). Consequently, financial inclusion facilitates economic growth by increasing the financial resources needed to enable economic activities (Alenoghena et al., 2020). Increasing access to and use of quality financial products and services is vital to enabling economic growth and poverty reduction (Holloway et al., 2017). Participation in the financial system results in people who can manage risk and start and invest in a business.

Access to transaction accounts serves as the initial step towards financial inclusion. This is according to Shaah and Dubhasi (2015) who explain that a transaction account enables people to send and receive money as well as store it. Further, this sense of access should encompass supplying financial services to people including banking and payment services (Eton et al., 2018). This needs to take place without discrimination. Accordingly, providing access to financial services is instrumental in reducing poverty.

A well-developed body of literature show illustrates that women are disproportionately affected by the lack of financial inclusion. A study published by the World Bank (2018) found that globally, the majority of unbanked adults were women. The gender gap in account ownership is 4% with 78% of men and 74% of women around the world. The average gap between developed and developing economies is now 6% down from 9% after many years of stability (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2021). In 2021, 74% of men and only 68% of women had accounts in developing economies. The study attributes this disparity to a lack of access to financial services, as well as to legal and cultural barriers that limit women's ability to open and use bank accounts. For this reason, addressing this issue is crucial for achieving economic empowerment and improved living standards for women (Eton et al., 2018; Jedi, 2022; Siddik, 2017).

In the context of Nigeria, the country faces a significant and growing gender gap in financial inclusion (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019). Between 2012 and 2020, Nigeria's gender gap in financial access increased from 10.2% to 12% (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019). Further, forecasting illustrates that the gap will not reduce below 10% until 2027 (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019). This is even more so if interventions are not taken at both regulator and industry levels. Women in Nigeria typically earn less than men and their income is often designated for daily household spending (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019). Thus, this results in little or no disposable income they can make investments, save, or purchase larger goods (Onukogu, 2021). Further, women are usually not permitted to make independent financial decisions. In Nigeria, women in the North tend to be more excluded compared to their peers in the South (Onukogu, 2021). A major reason for this is conservative socio-cultural gender norms. Some of the financial products and services that women are excluded from in Nigeria include payment systems, structured savings solutions, family-oriented financial products and services, informational services, and structured group finance products (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019).

The review of the literature reveals that there are several meanings to empowerment. Rahman (2013) defines empowerment as the change in the balance of power within a society. Thus, empowerment encompasses the redistribution of power specifically in a household. The empowerment of women is an essential element of research focus today. This empowerment of women encompasses developing women as people with more awareness, politically active, independent, and economically active, and making decisions on matters impacting their lives (Mamta, 2014). Attaining security in social, environmental, economic, and political factors, is crucial to the empowerment of women and promoting gender equality (Badullahewage, 2019). Therefore, empowerment leads to women gaining equal access to and control over resources.

While there is a need for fostering social and political empowerment of women, this study focused on their economic empowerment. The economic empowerment of women entails women having the opportunity to access and control productive resources and having some form of financial autonomy (Eton et al., 2018; Manoj et al., 2023). According to Golla et al. (2011), the economic empowerment of women occurs when the women attain the ability to succeed and advance economically including making economic decisions. Moreover, the economic empowerment of women is the process of providing women with the opportunity to attain equal access and control over economic resources while ensuring that they can utilize them to achieve more control over their lives (Hunt & Samman, 2016). Additionally, economic empowerment is the capacity to contribute towards the growth processes in a manner that recognises the value of contributions and undertaking fair wealth distribution enabling access to economic resources (Bhatia & Singh, 2019). Attaining economic empowerment further entails women being granted access to educational and occupational resources thus increasing the opportunities for professional development (Hendriks, 2019). This type of empowerment can also mean that women can take part in economic activities, access savings, and have control over their income as well as other productive assets including business, land, and industries (Eton et al., 2018). Additionally, the economic empowerment of women includes the allotment of some proportion of credit, foreign exchange, and public spending as well as enhancing and funding women's organizations such as cooperatives and trade unions (Eton et al., 2018).

The ability of women to participate in economic activities as indicated by their economic empowerment is one of the most essential criteria applied for the measurement of the progress and growth of societies (Bhatia & Singh, 2019; Siddik, 2017). This is even more so within the context of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Accordingly, the empowerment of women and the improvement of their status need to be national priorities. Women who are economically empowered can control and reap the benefits of resources, assets, and income (Kumari, 2022). Governments, corporations, communities, and other organizations may gain from enacting programs and policies that embrace the idea of female empowerment.

Financial inclusion is widely recognized as a crucial aspect of economic development and poverty reduction and has been shown to play a key role in women's economic empowerment (Eton et al., 2018). Access to financial services can increase women's income, reduce their vulnerability to financial risks, and improve their decision-making power (Hendriks, 2019). Despite the potential benefits of financial inclusion, several challenges remain in ensuring that women have access to financial services. Some of these challenges include limited access to information, discriminatory social norms, a lack of affordable financial products, and a lack of financial literacy (George & Thomachan, 2018; Hendriks, 2019).

Studies have shown that women face significant challenges in accessing financial services, including limited access to information, discriminatory social norms, and a lack of affordable financial products (Eton et al., 2018; Hendriks, 2019). Further, there are barriers to financial inclusion for women including lack of access to financial services, legal and cultural barriers, lack of collateral and limited access to credit, lack of access to financial education and information, and discrimination and bias within the financial sector (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2019; George & Thomachan, 2018; Musa et al., 2015).

Additionally, the challenges that women face in attaining financial inclusion are limited access to information, discriminatory social norms, a lack of affordable financial products, and a lack of financial literacy (Chaudhary & Kumari, 2022; Saluja et al., 2023). For example, studies have shown that women often face discriminatory practices in accessing financial services, such as lower loan amounts, higher interest rates, and discriminatory collateral requirements (Agarwal & Jack, 2011). Additionally, women may face limited access to information about financial services and limited financial literacy, making it difficult for them to make informed decisions about financial services (Jedi, 2022).

Research by Saluja et al. (2023) found that despite progress in recent years, women still face significant barriers to financial inclusion. These include a lack of access to financial education and information, as well as discrimination and bias within the financial sector. The study also found that digital financial services can play a key role in increasing financial inclusion for women, but that these services must be designed and implemented in ways that consider the specific needs and constraints faced by women.

Additionally, gender inequality is yet another challenge towards the economic empowerment of women. This relates closely to social stigma relating to the position of women in society which is closely connected to their socially defined gender roles (Hendriks, 2019). Roy and Patro (2022), make similar findings and assert that in some countries, women lack financial inclusion because of social norms and gender differences. Thus, there are gender-related barriers preventing women from gaining the ability to access financial services undermining their sense of empowerment. In the same way, Jedi (2022) observed that gender inequality becomes a hindrance to financial inclusion when women are less likely than men to access formal financial services. For instance, some women's access to financial services entails dependence on family members resulting in many of them relinquishing their financial powers to male family members. According to Holloway et al. (2017), many women are highly dependent on their husbands.

Many of the above challenges towards women attaining financial inclusion are experienced in Nigeria. Some of these challenges within the Nigerian experience include a lack of education and limited financial literacy, limited social and physical mobility, and the digital divide (Financial Alliance for Women, 2022). The low education and high rate of illiteracy have made it difficult for Nigerian women to access financial services. The lack of social and physical mobility is a barrier to financial services for Nigerian women as they are less mobile particularly those living in socially conservative communities. The digital divide prevents Nigerian women from accessing financial inclusion because few women own mobile phones compared to men. Additional challenges to Nigerian women accessing financial inclusion are eligibility, affordability, and lack of income (Alliance for Financial Inclusion, 2016).

Literature reveals that financial inclusion is an essential aspect of attaining economic empowerment among women. Financial inclusion can serve as a significant motive for women's economic empowerment (Jedi, 2022). Unfortunately, literature covering financial inclusion and women empowerment is scarce especially, for an emerging economy such as Nigeria (Anyanwu et al., 2018).

This inclusion empowers women to become included in the formal financial system. That is, financial inclusion allows for the attainment of economic growth and poverty reduction goals of countries (Siddik, 2017). Economically and socially excluded people can integrate better into the economy and protect themselves from economic shocks thanks to access to the financial system, which also helps create equal opportunities. Access to basic financial services assists the poor and vulnerable, particularly women, in breaking free from the vicious cycle of poverty and empowering themselves and their families (Chaudhary & Kumari, 2022). Similar findings are made by

Jedi (2022) who asserts that financial inclusion fosters women's economic empowerment by improving their economic participation, reducing poverty, and developing equitably.

Financial inclusion initiatives have been shown to have a positive impact on women's inclusion, by increasing access to financial services, improving the quality of financial products and services, and reducing gender-based discrimination (Rojas-Suarez, 2016). Therefore, financial inclusion is considered to play a key role in empowering women and promoting gender equality, as access to financial services can increase women's income, reduce their vulnerability to financial risks, and improve their decision-making power (Kabeer, 2015). An example of these financial services includes savings accounts. Ownership of financial accounts is yet another element of women gaining economic empowerment. This ownership of financial accounts empowers women to become financially independent (Jedi, 2022). Women who have access to individual private savings accounts are better able to make financial decisions, purchase more durable goods, and have more bargaining power with their spouses and other household members (Dupas & Robinson, 2013).

The findings of Hendriks (2019) further illustrate that financial inclusion facilitates women's empowerment by providing them with financial tools. Women can utilize these financial tools to make decisions and gain better control over resource allocation. An example of these financial tools is microfinancing. Kabeer (2015) found that access to microfinance services increased women's economic empowerment by increasing their income, improving their decision-making power, and reducing their vulnerability to financial risks. Another study by Agarwal and Jack (2011) found that access to formal financial services increased women's economic participation, improved their ability to manage risks, and reduced their dependence on informal financial services.

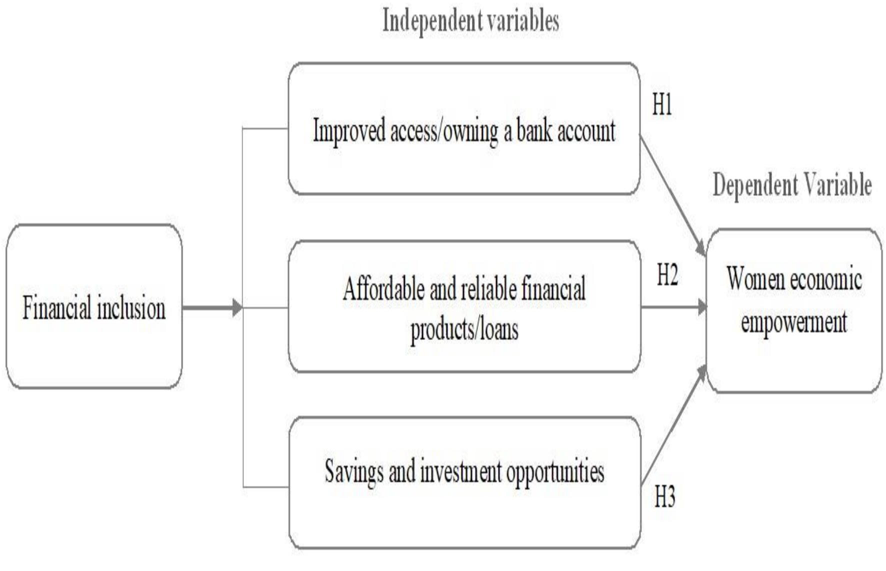
To investigate the potential impact of financial inclusion on women's empowerment in Nigeria, the formulation of research hypotheses was essential. Research hypotheses serve as the fundamental building blocks for conducting research (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022). Therefore, this study formulated three research hypotheses, outlined as follows.

- *H1: Improved access to financial systems through bank accounts positively influences women's economic empowerment.*
- *H2: The availability of affordable and reliable financial products such as loans positively influences women's economic empowerment.*
- *H3: Savings and investment opportunities positively influence women's economic empowerment.*

The conceptual framework depicts the potential relationships between the independent and dependent variables therefore guiding the investigation of the impact of financial inclusion on women empowerment in Nigeria. The figure below illustrates the integration of the research hypotheses and the conceptual framework. This integrated approach makes sure that the conceptual framework and the research hypotheses mutually support one another, facilitating a thorough understanding of the research topic. It depicts how the various components of financial inclusion interact with the theories put forth in the research.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of the study



3. Methods and materials

This section highlights the research methods applied for this study and rationalizes their selection based on the study objectives and context. Selecting these research methods entailed ensuring their alignment with the research questions, allowing for successful data collection and analysis, and providing reliable and valid results. Thus, in the case of studying the role of financial inclusion in women's economic empowerment in Nigeria, the following research methods were applied.

This quantitative research study involved the collection and analysis of statistical data to investigate the impact of financial inclusion on women’s economic empowerment. The use of a quantitative method provides a structured and rigorous approach to explore the phenomenon under investigation and draw unbiased conclusions (Mohajan, 2020). Quantitative research analyses and interprets data using numerical data and statistical methods, allowing for generalization and the identification of trends and relationships (Stockemer, 2019). The primary aim of this quantitative study was to quantify and measure the variables, bank accounts access to financial services, and financial products like loans that were related to the research topic, enabling the provision of objective and statistically significant results. This research design allows for the testing of the three hypotheses, the identification of correlations or associations between variables, and the generalizability of findings to a larger population (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022). By utilizing a quantitative research method, this study aimed to provide empirical evidence and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the research topic.

The sampling technique applied for this research study was simple random sampling. Simple random sampling is a commonly used method in quantitative research that ensures every individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the study (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016; Singh & Masuku, 2014). In this study, the sampling unit consisted of 150 women selected from two women groups in Nigeria.

A survey was conducted to gather data on the current state of financial inclusion, its impact on women's economic empowerment in Nigeria, and the challenges, and opportunities for expanding financial inclusion for women in Nigeria. The survey was administered to a sample of a group of women living in Nigeria who have access to financial services. The survey included closed-ended questions, and covered aspects such as access to financial services, use of financial services, and the impact of financial services on women's economic empowerment. A five-point Likert scale was utilized to rate the answers from 1-5 indicating strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The items for economic empowerment were adapted from Raj et al. (2018) and Postmus et al. (2013). The questionnaire was scrutinized by two academicians and two senior financial specialists with experience in the area of financial inclusion. This was essential in making improvements to the questionnaire ensuring that all the items were easily understood. In addition, the reliability of the responses was checked using the alpha Cronbach's estimation. The value of Cronbach's Alpha was found to be 0.853 which confirmed the reliability of the schedule.

The collected data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize and describe the demographic characteristics of the participants while inferential statistics were utilized to conclude. This included conducting hypothesis testing using regression analysis. The regression analysis was used to assess the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Statistical software like SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to carry out the regression analysis. SPSS is a widely used piece of software for statistical analysis, data management, and data visualisation (Rahman & Muktadi, 2021). It can run different statistical analyses, create regression models, and create graphical displays of the data (Stockemer, 2019). Therefore, it proved invaluable in analysing data and reviewing the relationship between the dependent and independent variables of the research hypotheses.

The study was conducted with the utmost ethical considerations, safeguarding the participants' rights and well-being. Additionally, it adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, benevolence, integrity, and fairness in all aspects of the research process.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Results

The study attained a high response rate. From the 150 questionnaires issued, 121 were returned. This demonstrates a response rate of approximately 80.66%.

Table 1

Distribution of Response Rate

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Returned	121	80.67
Not returned	29	19.33
Total	**150**	**100**

Source: Author

The results provided a comprehensive overview of the demographics of the surveyed women, with a focus on their age, employment status, education, income, and possession of a bank account. In the end, 121 respondents participated in the survey.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Category	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Age group				
26 - 35 years	5	4.1	4.1	4.1
36 - 45 years	98	81.0	81.0	85.1
45 and above	18	14.9	14.9	100.0
Employment status				
Employed	21	17.4	17.4	17.4
Self-employed	100	82.6	82.6	100.0
Education				
Bachelor's degree	23	19.0	19.0	19.0
Post-graduate Degree	13	10.7	10.7	29.8
Secondary School	85	70.2	70.2	100.0
Income (in Naira)				
101,000 - 200,000	9	7.4	7.4	7.4
201,000 - 300,000	22	18.2	18.2	25.6
301,000 and above	90	74.4	74.4	100.0
Bank Account Ownership				
Yes	121	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author

The participants were categorized into different age groups. Among the respondents, 4.1% fell within the age range of 26 to 35 years. Most of the participants, 81%, were aged between 36 and 45 years. Those aged 45 and above accounted for 14.9% of the respondents. Regarding employment status, 17.4% of the respondents indicated that they were employed, while a substantial 82.6% stated that they were self-employed. This distribution suggests a higher proportion of self-employed individuals within the surveyed group. Concerning education, the participants were divided into three categories. Of the respondents, 19.0% held a bachelor's degree, while 10.7% possessed a post-graduate degree. The majority, comprising 70.2%, had completed their education up to the secondary school level. The cumulative percentage of 100% underscores the educational diversity within the sample. The participants' income distribution revealed that 7.4% of respondents earned between 101,000 and 200,000 Naira. A larger group, constituting 18.2%, fell within the income range of 201,000 to 300,000 Naira. Many of the participants, accounting for 74.4%, reported an income of 301,000 Naira and above. The cumulative data illustrates the varying income levels among the participants. All 121 respondents confirmed owning a bank account, representing 100% of the surveyed group.

This data offers insights into the demographic and financial attributes of the surveyed group. Most of the respondents belonged in the 36 to 45 age range, with a significant portion being self-employed. Educational backgrounds were diverse, ranging from Secondary School education to advanced degrees. The income distribution was skewed toward higher income brackets, and all participants possessed a bank account, indicating a high level of financial integration.

The inferential results proved indispensable in assessing the research hypotheses central to this study. These findings revealed the relationships among the key research variables through rigorous statistical analysis. This proved significant in validating the proposed hypotheses.

Table 3 (in the Appendix) refers to the determination of the relationship between access to financial systems and its influence on women's economic empowerment. The regression analysis was conducted at a 95% confidence interval (a significant value of 0.05). The P-value of the regression analysis as established from the regression analysis is 0.011, which is less than the significant value of 0.05 (P-value<0.05). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hence, the hypothesis that improved access to financial systems through bank accounts positively influences women's economic empowerment is supported.

Table 4 (in the Appendix) illustrates the determination of the relationship between the availability of affordable and reliable financial products such as loans to enable women's economic empowerment. The regression analysis was conducted at a 95% confidence interval (a significant value of 0.05). The P-value of the regression analysis as established from the regression analysis is 0.004, which is less than the significant value of 0.05 (P-value<0.05). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, the hypothesis that the availability of affordable and reliable financial products such as loans positively influences women's economic empowerment is supported.

Table 5 (in the Appendix) demonstrates the determination of the relationship between savings and investment opportunities and women's economic empowerment. The regression analysis was conducted at a 95% confidence interval (a significant value of 0.05). The P-value of the regression analysis as established from the regression analysis is 0.027, which is less than the significant value of 0.05 (P-value<0.05). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, the hypothesis that savings and investment opportunities positively influence women's economic empowerment is supported.

4.2 Discussion

The first result indicates that improved access to financial systems using bank accounts has a statistically significant positive influence on women's economic empowerment. The obtained P-value of 0.011, which is below the set significance level of 0.05, indicates that the observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance. In other words, the evidence suggests that women who have access to bank accounts are more likely to experience economic empowerment. This finding aligns with the notion in existing literature that financial inclusion can catalyse women's economic advancement (Bhatia & Singh, 2019). When women access bank accounts, they gain a platform to manage their finances, save, and transact securely (Jedi, 2022). This access can lead to increased control over their economic resources, greater financial decision-making power within their households, and enhanced opportunities for entrepreneurship and investment (Badullahewage, 2019; Govindapuram et al., 2023; Hendriks, 2019). Overall, this result supports the hypothesis that improved access to financial systems positively influences women's economic empowerment.

The second result indicates that the availability of affordable and reliable financial products, specifically loans, contributes positively to women's economic empowerment. With a calculated P-value of 0.004, which is below the significance level of 0.05, there is strong statistical evidence supporting this relationship. This implies that women who have access to such financial products are more likely to experience economic empowerment. These results indicate that access to loans can provide women with the necessary capital to undergo economic growth. These results show similarity with those in the literature indicating that financial access such as loans helps women to begin or expand businesses, invest in education or skills development, and seize economic opportunities that may have been otherwise unattainable (Bhatia & Singh, 2019; Eton, et al., 2018). Further, loans can mitigate financial barriers and empower women to take charge of their economic destinies (George & Thomachan, 2018; Hendriks, 2019). This result reinforces the hypothesis that the availability of affordable and reliable financial products, including loans, positively influences women's economic empowerment.

The third result highlights that savings and investment opportunities also have a statistically significant positive impact on women's economic empowerment. The calculated P-value of 0.027, below the set significance level, suggests that the relationship between savings, investment opportunities, and women's economic empowerment is not a random chance. This result underscores the significance of financial resilience and long-term planning for women's economic advancement as illustrated in the literature (Kumari, 2022). By saving and making investments, women can build assets, prepare for emergencies, and secure their financial futures (Onukogu, 2021). Additionally, access to investment opportunities opens avenues for wealth accumulation, asset diversification, and participation in economic growth (Bhatia & Singh, 2019). Ultimately, this result reinforces the hypothesis that savings and investment opportunities positively influence women's economic empowerment.

Based on the research results and the discussion, the researchers were eager to underscore the distinct scientific contributions of this study to the existing specialized literature. Foremost, our research delves into the intricate interplay between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment, specifically within the unique socio-economic context of Nigeria. This focused examination fills a critical void in current scholarship, offering nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Nigerian women in accessing and benefiting from financial systems. Furthermore, through the meticulous application of quantitative methodologies, our study not only confirms but also quantifies the significant positive influence of financial inclusion on women's economic empowerment, adding empirical weight to existing theoretical frameworks. Additionally, our synthesis of findings from diverse scholarly sources enriches the discourse surrounding women's economic empowerment, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors at play. Importantly, by elucidating the practical implications of our research for policymakers, practitioners, and fellow scholars, we aim to catalyse meaningful action towards gender-inclusive economic development strategies. Ultimately, our contributions not only expand the boundaries of academic knowledge but also offer actionable pathways towards fostering gender equality and inclusive prosperity in Nigeria and beyond.

5. Conclusion

This study's insightful findings indicate that there is a significant connection between women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion. The results demonstrate that improved access to financial systems, the availability of affordable and reliable financial products such as loans, and opportunities for savings and investment all play pivotal roles in facilitating women's economic empowerment in Nigeria. The strong statistical evidence obtained by testing the research hypotheses of this study underscores the significance of these factors in fostering women's economic empowerment.

The implications of this study extend both theoretically and practically. The theoretical implications include the importance of considering financial inclusion as a multifaceted concept that goes beyond mere access to financial services. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge emphasizing the intersection of financial inclusion and women's empowerment. The empirical evidence has practical implications, providing valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners operating in the fields of gender equality and economic development.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are given. For instance, policymakers should prioritize initiatives aimed at expanding women's access to financial systems, promoting the availability of affordable and reliable financial products, and creating platforms for savings and investment. Additionally, financial institutions need to develop tailored products and services to address the unique needs of women, given their disproportionate final exclusion. Furthermore, educational programs can be developed to enhance financial literacy among women, equipping them with the needed skills to navigate and leverage financial systems effectively for growth.

While this study provides valuable insights regarding the role of financial inclusion towards the economic empowerment of women in Nigeria, there were several limitations which emerge as significant areas for future research. First, this study failed to investigate the relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. This can be explored in future research as it will be integral to validating the generalization of the impact of financial inclusion on the economic empowerment of women. Another limitation was the inability of this study to investigate the long-term impact of financial inclusion towards the economic empowerment of women. Consequently, future research can involve conducting longitudinal studies because they can provide additional insights regarding the long-term impact of financial inclusion initiatives on women's empowerment. This includes enabling the exploration of the mechanisms through which financial inclusion results in empowerment using individual experiences and stories.

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Appendix

Table 3

Access to Financial Systems and Economic Empowerment

Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the estimate**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
1	.230a	.053	.045	.663	2.920	1	2.920	6.652	.011

Model	**Unstandardised coefficients (B)**	**Std. Error**	**Standardised Coefficients (Beta)**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	(Constant)	3.127	.499	6.264	.000
	How often do you use your bank account for financial transactions?	.341	.132	.230	2.579

Source: Author

Table 4

Affordable and Reliable Financial Products and Economic Empowerment

Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the Estimate**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
1	.263a	.069	.061	.424	1.585	1	1.585	8.811	.004

Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients (B)**	**Std. Error**	**Standardized Coefficients (Beta)**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	(Constant)	3.254		12.669	.000
	If 1, how would you rate the affordability and reliability of the loan product you used?	.234	.079	.263	2.968

Source: Author

Table 5

Savings and Investment and Economic Empowerment

Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the Estimate**	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
1	.202a	.041	.033	.462	1.074	1	1.074	5.040	.027

Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients (B)**	**Std. Error**	**Standardized Coefficients (Beta)**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	(Constant)	4.850		20.325	.000
	Do you actively save money?	-0.167	-0.202	-2.245	.027

Source: Author