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Wilson, Merezia; Rutashobya, Lettice Kinunda; Gaddefors, Johan et al.

## Article

### The role of spatial context for women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship in Tanzania

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#### Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics  
Düsternbrooker Weg 120  
24105 Kiel (Germany)  
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)  
<https://www.zbw.eu/econis-archiv/>

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## The Role of Spatial Context for Women's Engagement in Rural Entrepreneurship in Tanzania

Merezia Wilson<sup>1</sup>, Lettice K. Rutashobya<sup>2</sup>, Johan Gaddefors<sup>3</sup>, Lemayon Melyoki<sup>4</sup>, Opira Otto<sup>5</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*This paper intends to explore the role that spatial context plays in women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship. Positioned in a social constructivist perspective, spatial context is taken not as a background, but rather as an entrepreneurial milieu with its elements constructed and experienced. This paper argues that in order to understand how spatial context influences and is being influenced by women's engagement in entrepreneurial activities, scholars need to move away from considering spatial context as merely geographical locations, which allow for free flowing social relations and exchanges, and look at it as an active ingredient that may influence the entrepreneurial process. The paper theorises entrepreneurship as not merely an economic process but also a social-spatial process which draws from spatial structures as entrepreneurs embed within their context. The qualitative examination of women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship finds that spatial context plays a key role in shaping the process of engaging through thinning and/or thickening women's entrepreneurial agency. However, recognition, realisation and utilisation of spatial resources depend on the entrepreneurs' understanding of the spatial structures. This paper's contribution lies in its illustration of the role of spatial context in entrepreneurial processes, in particular for marginalised rural women. The paper furthers the understanding of spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu for enhancing literature about women and entrepreneurship.*

**Key words:** spatial context, rural entrepreneurship, women, embeddedness.

### INTRODUCTION

Women in developing economies who engage in small entrepreneurial activities usually do so as the only available alternative for survival in addition to subsistence farming (Shah & Saurabh, 2015). This type of entrepreneurship has been referred to as “necessity entrepreneurship” (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014). In other words, small entrepreneurial activities act as a “last resort” for rural women (Tambunan, 2008, p. 165). Further, research on women entrepreneurship shows that rural women encounter many challenges when trying to engage in entrepreneurial activities. For example, factors such as mobility and lack of access to financial resources, have been shown to play a vital role in women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship (Kodithuwakku & Rosa, 2002; Little & Jones, 2000; Sachs, 2018). With an increased interest in understanding women's engagement in entrepreneurship (Baker & Welter, 2017), these factors continue to attract scholarly attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Lecturer- University of Dar-es-Salaam Business School-Tanzania: email of the corresponding author: mmpawenimana@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Professor – University of Dar-es-Salaam Business School - Tanzania

<sup>3</sup> Professor- Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences - Sweden

<sup>4</sup> Senior Lecturer- University of Dar-es-Salaam Business School - Tanzania

<sup>5</sup> Researcher- Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences - Sweden

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The impact of local context on entrepreneurial processes and outcomes has been progressively studied over the past few decades (Gartner, 1988; Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006). Indeed, increased attention has been directed towards spatial context (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2019). Contemporary researchers in the field of entrepreneurship have turned their focus to understanding how entrepreneurship is spatially embedded in different ways and why this matters in understanding entrepreneurship (Korsgaard, Ferguson, & Gaddefors, 2015). Spatial context has been taken to encompass the physical and material geographies of locations, as well as the socio-cognitive aspects related to representations, meanings, communities and attachments (Korsgaard, Ferguson, & Gaddefors, 2015; McKeever, Jack, & Anderson, 2015). Consequently, rural settings are receiving increasing scholarly attention as they offer a particularly well-suited context to analyse the role of these spatial dimensions (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2017). In rural settings, society seems to be spread thinner, hence social processes, influences and trends are likely to be more transparent and easier to observe than in other areas that appear confused and diluted by population size (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2019).

Like other spatial contexts, rural areas host a number of entrepreneurial activities which unfold differently in different places, combining both traditions and non-traditions (Meccheri & Pelloni, 2006). In regard to resource scarcity, studies have found rural entrepreneurs interacting and maximising the benefits of available spatial resources, such as natural amenities, socio-material and cultural landscapes (Korsgaard, et al., 2015). In the conducted studies, local embeddedness was found to be an enabling factor for rural entrepreneurs to engage amidst the constraining environment (Gulumser et al., 2010; Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006; Welter & Smallbone, 2010). By being embedded, rural entrepreneurs were able to construct new combinations of place-based resources and create value not only for the entrepreneurs but also for the rural places (Korsgaard et al., 2015).

Unlike in advanced industrial economies, a large proportion of people in developing economies live in rural areas and are predominantly engaged in agriculture, women being the majority (FAO, 2011; Sachs, 2018). Historically and traditionally, entrepreneurial activities related to agricultural production have been intimately linked to the physical structures of the spatial context (Ilbery et al., 2005). Notwithstanding the fact that people in rural areas engage in rural entrepreneurship differently, due to the heterogeneity of the contextual structures, studies have shown that in most developing economies, women are the most disadvantaged group when it comes to entrepreneurship (Langevang, Hansen, & Rutashobya, 2018; Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010). Women are found to be more engaged in small-holder agricultural primary production, while their presence in large-scale agriculture and business-related activities is limited (Hawassi, 2006; Quisumbing et al., 2013).

Realising that merely considering women entrepreneurs out of their context offers relatively limited understanding of entrepreneurship, scholars on female entrepreneurship have directed their attention towards the context of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). Nevertheless, as Ahl (2006) noted, most researchers have followed the mainstream view of entrepreneurship research with an economic or institutional focus, which has led to a call for more attention to be paid to the spatial context (Hughes et al., 2012; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2019).

While there is a growing body of literature discussing how contextual factors of rural areas constrain women's entrepreneurial engagements (Shah & Saurabh, 2015; Yunis, Hashim, & Anderson, 2018), the way rural women make sense of and engage entrepreneurially with their

spatial context is less understood. In fact, a body of research has looked at the effect of institutional and social contexts on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship (Langevang et al., 2018; Welter & Smallbone, 2008). However, studies that incorporate spatial context in their design are limited. Consequently, it is the objective of this study to use a contextualised approach to explore the role of spatial dimensions on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship. The aim is to investigate how rural women engage entrepreneurially with their spatial context. In particular, we focus on the process of their engagement and spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu, which involves dynamic interactions between actor's agency and spatial structures. This study is set to contribute to the literature about women and entrepreneurship by enhancing understanding of the role of spatial context on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, in particular rural women.

The remaining part of the paper presents the review of literature on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu, and embeddedness as a mechanism to rural entrepreneurship. Thereafter, the methodology used in this study is described followed by the study findings. Finally, we provide the discussion and conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *Women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship*

Research indicates that patriarchal power relations and the resultant gender-based division of labour have shaped women's engagement in entrepreneurship (Langevang et al., 2018). Research on women's entrepreneurship has revealed that, other things remaining the same, cultural values, traditions and norms have greatly influenced the way women participate in entrepreneurial activities (Mori, 2015). Studies point to women's systematic lack of access to productive resources to explain the different entrepreneurial behaviour of women as compared to men (Islam, 2018; Shah & Saurabh, 2015).

Likewise, the economic, social and institutional perspectives have been successful in explaining women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship (El Namaki, 1986; Langevang et al., 2018). However, an explicit articulation of the role of spatial context is missing in women's entrepreneurship studies, which renders our understanding of the phenomenon incomplete. In summary, the study of spatial context is an important research gap in female entrepreneurship literature. Considering the differences and variation in rural entrepreneurial processes, investigating the role of spatial context (in addition to other studied contexts) helps in furthering entrepreneurship literature and women's entrepreneurship in particular.

### *Spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu*

Although a less dominant approach, extant research on entrepreneurship has progressively moved to embrace spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu (Kimmit & Muñoz, 2019). Müller and Korsgaard (2018) argued that a strategic use of spatial contexts can provide a unique set of resources in entrepreneurial processes. McKeever et al., (2015) emphasised the use of a socio-spatial approach in understanding how entrepreneurs engage in redeveloping deprived places. Similarly, a number of research findings (such as Bergman Lodin et al., 2019) have identified some of the challenges that spatial context can impose on entrepreneurship processes, such as difficulties with connectedness and access to resources. However, they have also pinpointed the usefulness of the available local resources, including the meaning and emotional attachments to places (Müller & Korsgaard, 2018).

From a social geography perspective (Cresswell, 2004), spatial context is considered to be an entrepreneurial milieu that goes beyond the physical environment to encompass social constructions linked to social norms and representations. It thus includes geographical location, material elements and the meanings and values attached to them, which makes the context a meaningful entrepreneurial milieu (Cresswell, 2004; McKeever et al., 2015). In this regard, spatial context becomes an active ingredient in the entrepreneurial process, which both influences and is influenced by the entrepreneurial process.

Studies show that rural entrepreneurs make use of the unique resources in their rural areas, while drawing on the rurality of their spatial context (Anderson, 2000). Some rural entrepreneurs were found to engage by first exhausting the locally available resources before reaching out for the non-local resources (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, the socio-cognitive elements of spatial context have been reported as important aspects, which can intervene in entrepreneurial processes, both as resources to be used by the entrepreneur and as factors affecting various decisions in their engagement (Lang, Fink, & Kibler, 2014).

The aforesaid manifestation informs us that exploring spatial context is not a straightforward matter, as it can be approached from a number of different perspectives (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2019). However, it would be problematic to focus only on either the socio-cognitive elements that construct a location as meaningful or the material dimensions, as both can be effective enablers and constraints of entrepreneurial activities, hence the conceptualisation of spatial context as a socio-material phenomenon (Gaddefors, Korsgaard, & Ingstrup, 2019). This conceptualisation entails looking at spatial context as the location of entrepreneurial ventures with its socio-material aspects demarcated by natural geographical boundaries, such as mountains and water bodies as well as socio-cognitive boundaries such as communities and location-bound representations and meanings.

As alluded to earlier, this line of research is missing in the female entrepreneurship literature. Extant literature does not provide much information about the underlying processes of rural women's engagement with their spatial context. The exploration of the mechanisms and spatial processes that configure women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship and the functionality of rural places is not nearly as advanced as research on the social and institutional contexts. In this paper, we argue that looking at spatial context from both a social (McKeever et al., 2015) and geographical (Cresswell, 2004) perspective is a fruitful conceptual device in expanding our understanding of the entrepreneurship process in rural areas.

#### *Embedding in rural place*

Defined as the nature, depth and extent of individuals' ties with their environment, embeddedness has been referred to as a configuration element of the general business process (Jack & Anderson, 2002). Looking at entrepreneurship as a process of creating and extracting values from the environment, being embedded impacts how entrepreneurs engage in the entrepreneurial process (Müller & Korsgaard, 2018). It entails understanding and enacting contextual structures while developing credibility and acquiring knowledge of how business is conducted. In this theorisation, contextual structures are treated as part of the entrepreneurial process in which entrepreneurs are embedded (Lang et al., 2014).

In their work, Jack and Anderson (2002) demonstrate how entrepreneurs embed as a mechanism to pursue and exploit commercial opportunities. They indicate how embeddedness impacts entrepreneurs' activities and influences the way in which their businesses are established and

managed. Being embedded enhances the entrepreneur's agency in accessing the locally available resources and exploiting opportunities found within the structures (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Also, Welter and Smallbone (2010) show how embedded women entrepreneurs in the former Soviet societies were able to change their context by offering other women jobs and being positive role models.

The above illustrates how being or becoming embedded is important for entrepreneurs. It is thus argued that if entrepreneurship is a contextual embedded process, it must also involve drawing on spatial structures. The structures may play a role in the way entrepreneurs perceive and create opportunities out of available local resources. They also impact how available local resources are accessed and used, hence impacting the entrepreneurial process. As Korsgaard et al. (2015) note, a comprehensive understanding of rural entrepreneurship must consider how entrepreneurs' embeddedness in spatial contexts enables entrepreneurial activities. Also, with regard to female entrepreneurship, Baker and Welter (2017) explained that our eyes should remain open to women entrepreneurs' embeddedness as they deal with a myriad of socio-spatial constraints that may differ in a number of ways to those facing men. This does not imply that embeddedness is more of a women's issue, but rather that it is pivotal to all entrepreneurship (Baker & Welter, 2017). Consequently, this study uses the concept of embeddedness to understand how women's entrepreneurial engagements are anchored and rooted within their spatial context. The concept also highlights the mutuality of the relationship between entrepreneurship and socio-spatial structures

#### *Entrepreneurship, structures and agency*

Structuration theory has been used in various organisational and business studies due to its capacity to explain complex social interactions (Sarason, Dean, & Dillard, 2006). Similarly, in the domain of entrepreneurship, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory has been proposed as a useful framework for better understanding entrepreneurial processes, as it theorises the interdependence of context (structure) and actor (agent) in the moment and across time and space (Jack & Anderson, 2002). It provides insights regarding the nature of the entrepreneurial processes by looking equally at both structure and agency (Sarason et al., 2006).

On the one hand, structure refers to rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action, which are at the same time the means of structure reproduction (Giddens, 1984:15). This implies that human actors or agents are both enabled and constrained by structures which are the result of previous actions by the agents and are carried forward by the agents as memory traces (Dyck & Kearns, 2006).

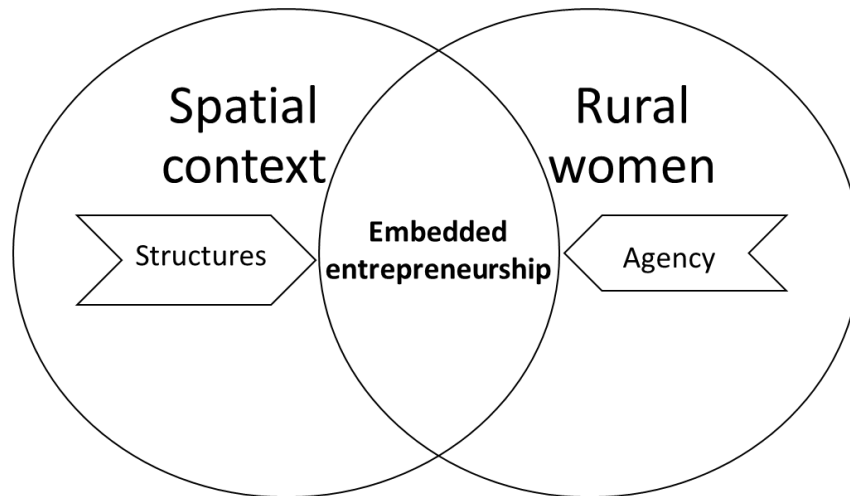
On the other hand, agency refers to 'doing' (Giddens, 1984:10) and is critical to both the reproduction and the transformation of society. Through actions, agents produce structures; through reflexive monitoring and rationalisation, they transform the structures (Giddens, 1984). To be an agent implies the ability to deploy a range of causal power, including that of influencing others, and exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is embedded. In turn, this implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

In explaining how agency works, Klocker (2007) assumes that some agency is always operating, although it is constantly attenuated or amplified depending on the contexts and relationships (structures) that "can act as thinners or thickeners of individuals' agency, constraining or expanding actor's range of viable choices" (Panelli et al., 2007 pp. 85). Within the framework of structuration, this study will also make use of Klocker's notion of 'thinners' and 'thickeners' of

agency in expounding how women’s agency is attenuated or accentuated as they engage with their spatial context.

Structuration theory provides insights regarding the nature of the entrepreneurial processes in a number of propositions encompassing salient structures in the entrepreneurial process. Among the structures are the domination structures which are associated with the transformative relationships manifested as control over resources (Giddens, 1984). While Giddens (1984) categorises these structures, Sarason et al. (2006) relate them to entrepreneurial processes. To understand the interaction of these structures and agency, Sarason et al. (2006) comment that the focus should not be the characteristic of an entrepreneur that can marshal resources independent of context, nor should it be on the contextual effect, independent of the entrepreneur’s ability to transform resources. The focus should be placed on the iterative and reflexive transformation of resources (Sarason et al., 2006).

In a similar vein, Jack and Anderson (2000) suggest that to understand entrepreneurship we must take into account both structure and agency. Through this, we can then appreciate how structural influences shape entrepreneurial agency and how agency redefines or develops structure. In this paper, structuration theory will be used as an analytical framework to explore the links between entrepreneurial agent and the structure as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: The interrelation between agency and structure  
Source: Researchers’ own construction*

In Figure 1, rural women entrepreneurs are conceptualised as agents engaging with their spatial context. Empirical insights generated in this study help to understand how the spatial structures (as sources of opportunity), are acted upon by the agents and how the agents are affected by the structures. This study aligns with O’Hara (1998) and Bock (2004) on the need to focus on how women themselves understand and experience their situations and give shape to their lives, despite the constraining context. As phrased by O’Hara (1998), the emphasis is placed more on conceptualising women as agents rather than victims. This study views rural women as actors with varying and dynamic capacities for engaging with their spatial context. Guided by this framework, the analysis will focus on how rural women entrepreneurs frame, articulate and interpret entrepreneurial possibilities out of their spatial context and create enabling structures for exploitation of opportunities.

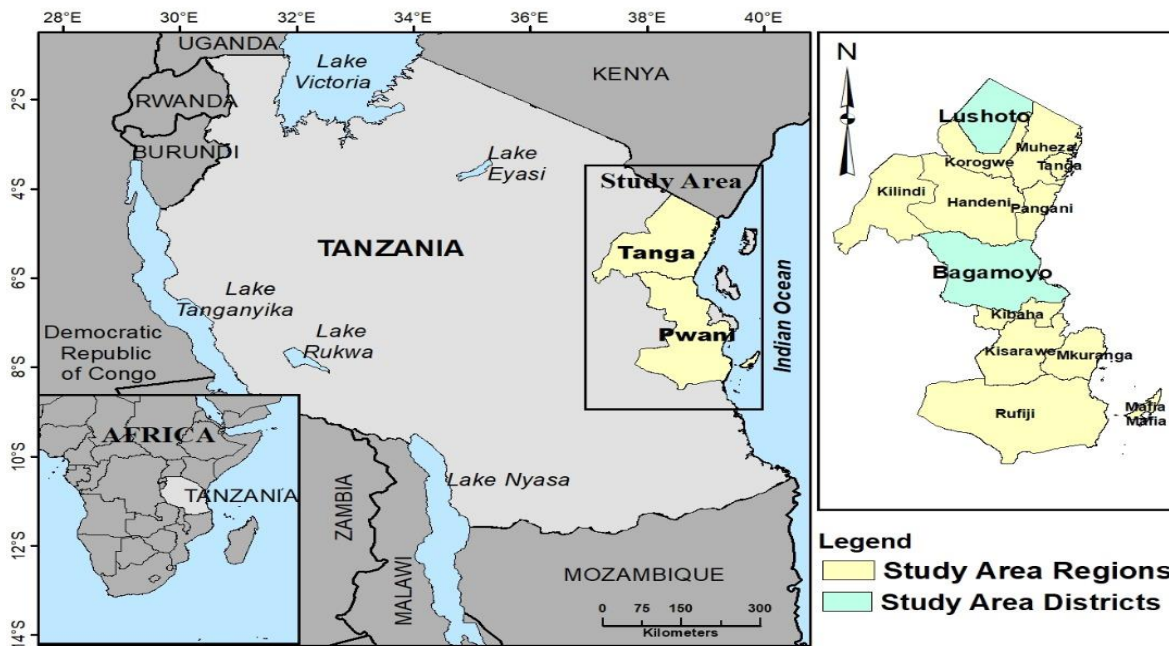
**METHODOLOGY**

In order to gain an understanding of how women entrepreneurs interact with their spatial context, the selected method required a capacity to explore the social constructions of agency and subjective experiences (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009). This capacity was enhanced by the social constructionist perspective, which allows the researcher to explore the complex interaction processes, subjective meanings and multiple constructed realities, as women seek to make sense of the world in which they live (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018; Creswell, 2003). Within this perspective, entrepreneurship is constructed in social interactions between the agent and structures and the researcher has the task of enhancing the understanding of these interactions (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006).

In gathering empirical materials, the study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2007). A case study mode of inquiry was deemed best, as it provides for a deep understanding of the phenomenon in question within its real-world context (Creswell, 2007).

This study was conducted in two districts in Tanzania, namely Lushoto and Bagamoyo as shown in Figure 2. Although Lushoto and Bagamoyo are both rural areas, they differ greatly in terms of climatic and other geographical features. While Lushoto is a mountainous area, with farmers growing temperate vegetables and fruits, Bagamoyo is a coastal area with land plains and farmers growing typical tropical fruits such as pineapples. As the study focuses on spatial structures including location (rurality and connectedness to places) and resource endowments, the two areas were considered to be capable of generating empirical insights useful for the study. From the two districts, cases were selected from villages located in the rural wards as per the districts and wards indicator<sup>6</sup>.

**Figure 2: Map of Tanzania showing the study areas**



Source: Department of Geography, UDSM

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/tanzania/northern/admin/>



We obtained a list of prospective respondents and their contacts from the regional managers of the Small Industries Development Organization (SIDO), the regional representatives of the Tanzania Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture (TCCIA) and from the coordinator of the Amsterdam Initiative for Malnutrition (AIM) project<sup>7</sup>. A total of twenty potential respondents were obtained from the list. Out of the twenty potential respondents, purposive sampling was used to select respondents who would fit in the study. This was necessary as some of the suggested respondents were no longer in agriculture-related businesses and some had moved away. Alongside the selected respondents, the snowball technique was used concurrently with the interviews to add to the respondent list. The respondents' selection criteria were: i) a woman smallholder engaged in the commercial cultivation of fresh fruits and/or vegetables and, ii) a woman engaged in food processing activities, processing either vegetables or fruits. Case selection was based on those cases which seemed to have the potential for a theoretically rich offering of useful examples of the phenomena. Each case was treated as unique and resourceful until the saturation point was reached. Table 1 describes the selected respondents.

**Table1: Respondents' profile**

<b>Name<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>Place/<sup>9</sup> Village</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>In place since</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Background, experience, career &amp; other business</b>
Miri	Maluati, Lushoto	Late 40s	Married	Teaching college	1988	Farmer	Former primary school teacher in Kenya. Moved to Lushoto to join her Tanzanian husband. Left teaching to engage in farming.
Lete	Dochi, Lushoto	Mid- 40s	Widow	Vocational education	1993	Processor	Moved to Lushoto to join her late husband, who worked with the Montessori mission; worked as an assistant to nuns in Montessori. Left employment, started a local restaurant before going into fruit processing.
Asia	Lushoto centre, Lushoto	Early 50s	Married	Secondary education	2008	Processor	Poultry business. Moved to Lushoto to join husband working for a forest conservation agency. Joined a fruit processing group. Owns a family spice processing business.
Fatu	Mavumo, Lushoto	Early 40s	Married	Primary education		Farmer- broker	Farming, local restaurant.
Tidi	Bagamoy o centre, Bagamoy o	Late 40s	Widow	Vocational education	2000	Processor	Former sales manager of a cultural souvenir shop. Opened cooked food business. Started a processing business. Owns a burger restaurant.
Mta	Mtae, Lushoto	Early 70s	Married	Primary education	1946	Processor	Farming. Started fruit processing in 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Agricultural development project between Tanzania Horticulture Association (TAHA) and the National Microfinance Bank (NMB) in Lushoto

<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this study, respondents have been given randomly assigned fictitious names for anonymity.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with some women were conducted at a chosen meeting point, hence noted as either Lushoto centre or Bagamoyo centre.

Heri	Yoghoi, Lushoto	Late 20s	Single	University		Processor	Secondary school teacher.
Mwaju	Kiwangwa, Bagamoyo	Mid-50s	Married	Basic military training	1963	Farmer	Farming and processing.
Edi	Lushoto centre, Lushoto	Mid-50s	Married	Secondary education	1990	Processor	Hide factory worker. Cloth sewing business. Vegetable drying business.
Rehe	Mavumo, Lushoto	Early 40s	Married	Primary education		Farmer-broker	Farming and trading.
Dori	Ubiri, Lushoto	Late 40s	Married	Paralegal education	Birth	Processor	Ceremony hall decoration. Paralegal officer with a legal agency. Fruit processing.
Titi	Mbago, Lushoto	Early 60s	Widow	Basic court administration training	Birth	Processor	Farmer, processing wild vegetables. Retired court assessor. Retired primary court assessor. Chairperson of women's wing of the ruling party (UWT).
Helen	Yombo, Bagamoyo	Mid-30s	Married	Primary education	Birth	Farmer and Processor	Farming and processing orange fleshed sweet potatoes. Also in fish-selling business.

Four rounds of field work were conducted between December 2018 and July 2019, two in each district. These field visits were made according to the study plan and they had no influence on the materials to be collected from the field. During the field work, empirical materials were primarily gathered using semi-structured interviews. A previously developed and tested interview guide was used during the interviews. For the thirteen selected cases, interviews were conducted and recorded by the interviewer using either a mobile phone or a digital recorder as deemed convenient. In addition to recording, key points were also noted. Researchers also employed unstructured participatory observation which took place at the respondents' homes or place of work/farm. Documentary reviews were also used for supportive information such as the profiles of the study areas and other statistical information, which, taken together, enhanced researchers' understanding of the phenomena.

After the empirical materials had been collected, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim and compiled together with the field notes and secondary information to build up case narratives. The earlier processes of analysis involved an in-depth examination of each of the cases, where insights were drawn from detailed case narratives. This allowed for familiarity with and creation of early patterns for each of the cases, before embarking on the development of patterns across cases. During the analysis, we focused specifically on the spatial processes that configure women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship and the functionality of rural places, combining material resources and meanings articulated by rural representations. As the coding progressed, we grouped the concepts that emerged into primary and organised themes, as shown in Figure 3.

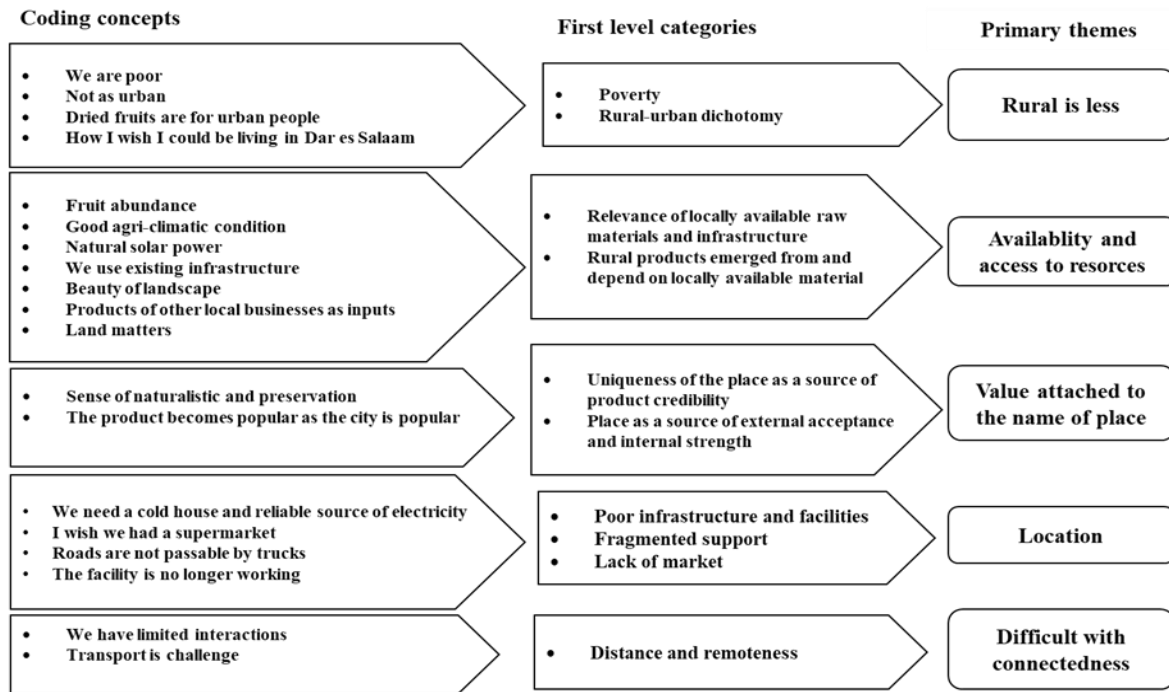


Figure 3: From coding concepts to primary themes  
 Source: Researchers' own construction

In connecting the empirical insights with existing literature, the constructed themes are considered in tandem with the concepts derived from the theoretical framework as shown in Figure 3. This serves as the basis for presentation, interpretation and the discussion of the findings in the next sections.

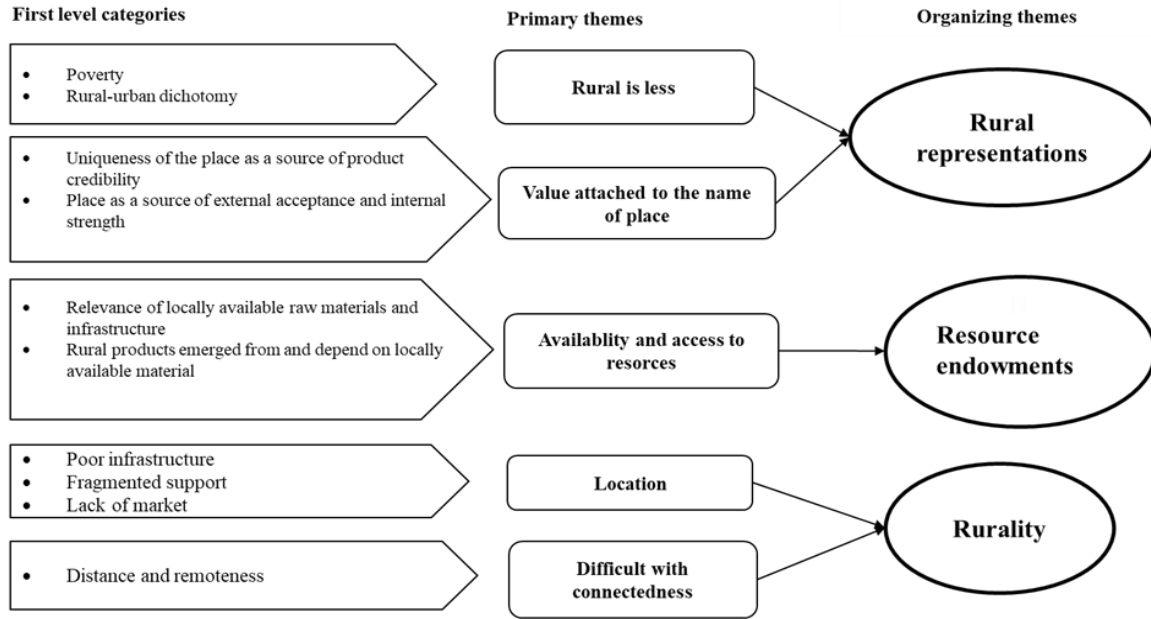


Figure 4: Organising the empirical and theoretical concepts  
 Source: Researchers' own construction

**RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The first sub-sections of this section present findings on women’s engagement in rural entrepreneurship. The last sub-section explores the ‘how’ questions related to spatial context and women’s engagement in rural entrepreneurship.

*Engaging in rural entrepreneurship*

The women in our cases were mainly engaged in three different activities related to entrepreneurship: farming, processing and farming-brokering, as described below.

Women in farming activities: In order for farming to be deemed entrepreneurial, we looked for innovative activities, which add value to farmed products or the farming process. Thus, we were able to select those women who engage in commercial and innovative farming, as opposed to those who are typically involved in traditional subsistence farming. The selected cases were those women who, apart from cultivating fruits and/or vegetables for their in-house consumption, also cultivate fruits and/or vegetables that are purely for business purposes. Under this category, we selected a case from Bagamoyo, a woman (Mwaju) who grows pineapples commercially to sell fresh at the local markets, engages in pineapple drying businesses and at times, sells to large fruit-processing companies. We also selected a case from Lushoto, a woman (Miri) who engages in cultivating and selling special types of fresh vegetables for export purposes. Miri collaborates mainly with other women (and a few men), in growing green beans, sugar snaps, baby carrots, yellow and red peppers, zucchini and snow peas, which are exported to European countries through an exporting agent. These women cultivate vegetables, find markets and engage in trade. What was of interest in the selected cases was the process of their engagement: how these women moved from simply farming for food to commercial farming and marketing, which were previously taken to be more masculine roles, in particular the trading aspect of farming, and how they organise other

women to engage in entrepreneurship. While examining processes is a tricky task, we had a particular interest in the role of spatial structures on the process of their engagement.

Women in processing activities: In order for the processing to be deemed entrepreneurial, we looked for activities that add value to local fruits and vegetables through processing. Within this category there were two groups: those who engaged in the processing of purely locally available fruits and vegetables and those who combined locally available fruits and vegetables with other fruits and vegetables from nearby regions.

*“...we make many products such as fruit pickles, jams, passion juice and wine,”* says Lete.

Women in this category were found to engage mainly in the processing of plum jam, mulberry jam, gooseberry jam, mango pickles, orange marmalade and tomato sauce. Passion fruit is mainly used for fresh juices and hibiscus for wine. They also dry carrots, mangoes and bitter tomatoes. Several factors were of interest in the selected cases, such as how these women started to engage in processing locally available fruit, which was normally ignored except for fresh consumption, how they moved from home-based to full commercial processing and how they organise other women to engage in entrepreneurship. However, as previously stated, the focus is more on the role of the spatial structures.

Women in farming and brokerage activities: These are women from Lushoto, who are farmers but also vegetable sales brokers. Unlike the farmers in the first category (entrepreneurial farming), this group was found to engage in cultivating vegetables consumed in-country. They mainly cultivate cabbages (both green and red), broccoli, cauliflowers, carrots, butternut squash and beetroot. In order for farming-brokering to be entrepreneurial, we looked for value-creating activities performed by these women, both as farmers and as brokers. These women cultivate, collect orders from big markets in the big cities, prepare the supplies and ship them to the market. What was of interest in the selected cases was how these women engage in both commercial farming and brokering and the process of collecting and dispatching the orders, as well as how they organise other women to engage in entrepreneurship, with particular focus on spatial context. Table 2 gives a summary of women entrepreneurial engagements.

**Table 2: Summary of women entrepreneurial engagements**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial engagements</b>
<b>Women in farming activities</b>	Women from Bagamoyo and Lushoto who engage in commercial and innovative farming. They cultivate fruits and/or vegetables that are purely for business purposes.	Commercial farming for local and export markets. Engaging more women into agribusiness. Struggle to get new markets. Engage in voluntary community work.
<b>Women in processing activities</b>	Women from Bagamoyo and Lushoto who are engaged in activities that add value to local fruits and vegetables through processing.	Adding value to horticultural products through processing fresh fruits and vegetables. Train more women in processing. Creating new markets for farmers. Engage in environmental conservation community work through tree and flower growing.
<b>Women in farming and brokerage activities</b>	Women from Lushoto who are farmers but are also vegetable sales brokers.	Farming and brokerage activities. Engage more women in vegetable trading. Engaging in environmental conservation community work through tree nurseries.

*Engaging with spatial context: embeddedness and value creation*

Since most of the rural women entrepreneurs in our cases engage in agricultural-based activities, physical resources such as land and other natural resources were found to be of vital importance for their entrepreneurial engagement. Apart from rainfall-dependent farming, farmers use water from natural water bodies such as rivers and waterfalls for irrigation activities. They also leverage the pleasant agri-climatic condition and landscape. The findings show that these rural women entrepreneurs are not only present in their local spatial context, but are embedded in place, as they expressed a strong understanding of their place, the available resources and how to access and use those resources.

*“... in February and March, we are off. We don't grow the vegetable in February because it's heading towards the long rains...we plant the seeds in June and harvest in August and September...,”* says Miri.

From the empirical materials, local embeddedness could be observed not only through the entrepreneur's demonstrated understanding and use of the local resources, but also through their popularity and the relationship they have built with the local community. Miri, who is well-known in her village, has used her popularity to organise other women to engage in agribusiness and related entrepreneurship activities.

*“...yes, the motorcyclists, the council workers, social workers, business workers and more, those from the agricultural office know me very well. We have invested more socially...,”* says Miri.

Similarly, Tidi has used her popularity to organise other women by employing them as casual labourers in her wine processing business. She also organises women in voluntary community work such as gardening and servicing public parks and roads. During the interview, Tidi said:

*“...since advertising the product by myself has been with some challenges, I have decided to cooperate with other women in doing it. I have facilitated the exercise of providing seeds to other women so that they grow the hibiscus used for wine production and by doing so, we have been promoting the product....”*

It was obvious that being embedded was a useful mechanism which facilitated women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship. Embeddedness enables women farmer-brokers to organise the farm-market chain through maintaining closer relations and keeping in touch with both the local growers and the buyers from the distant markets. With regard to the local growers, they usually keep themselves updated about what is currently available and from whom they can get it. Thus, they ease their correspondence with the buyers. Being embedded facilitates their task of knowing details about nearly all the local producers, their capacity, location and accessibility, as well as the quality. In order to service the orders, they usually collect the vegetables from other growers, in particular from the rural interior. They transport them to the market or make them ready for buyers' cargo trucks to come and collect. Their success largely depended on their ability to access the required resources and the market opportunities.

However, the degree of embeddedness among the rural women entrepreneurs was found to differ. The observed differences could be associated with two factors: the nature of the entrepreneurial engagement and locality (either locally born or non-locally born). While farmers seem to be more

embedded in their context, processors seem less so. Farmers were found to be more embedded as they leverage more on the physical materials of the spatial context. On the other hand, processors demonstrate the possibility of moving their business to somewhere else if the need arises. The rationale is that, while there is an attachment for some processors, for the majority there is no direct attachment between their products and the place other than that they use locally available fruits and vegetables. This makes them less embedded in the physicality of the place.

*“I can easily move my business from here to somewhere else.... what I will do is just find the easiest way to transport these fruits,”* says Lete.

Apart from the nature of the engagement, whether or not these women were born locally was found to influence how they engaged in rural entrepreneurship. Most of the women in the selected cases were not born locally. Women born locally were found to be more embedded in their local traditions, in which the coastal-Swahili and Islamic cultural norms restrict women’s engagement in business and related entrepreneurship activities. On the contrary, while those not born locally were found to be embedded in the place through resource use, they were less embedded in the local traditions, and hence had more freedom to participate. The findings were of particular interest as they showed how entrepreneurs can be more embedded in some spatial dimensions while at the same time less embedded in other dimensions. The rationale is that women gain agency as they leverage this mix in various ways to enable them to navigate across the different spatial dimensions and overcome spatial constraints.

#### *Spatial context and women’s engagement in rural entrepreneurship*

##### *Rural is less: socio-cognitive representations of rural areas*

In the cases studied, negatively constructed meanings of the rural areas were found to have a negative impact on women’s engagement in rural entrepreneurship. The rural-urban dichotomy placed rural context as a weak entrepreneurial milieu, incapable of supporting entrepreneurial engagements. Also, poverty and related challenges were found to impact how women perceived themselves as agents. Although not explicitly mentioned, the impact of these representations could be found in such statements as:

*“...there are more opportunities in Dar es Salaam than here at Lushoto. If I were in Dar es Salaam, because of its coverage area and the possibility to move around, I would be able to finish my products at once, I could be supplying my products to one place and going to another place the following week,”* says Lete.

Similar examples can be seen when Mwaju said:

*“It is common for customers in the big city to visit supermarkets to buy dried pineapple than here in the village.”*

These statements indicate how the rural place has been socially constructed as a weak entrepreneurial milieu. Implicitly, the actors’ entrepreneurial agency is lessened as they perceive themselves to be in a weaker position as far as entrepreneurship is concerned. In another words, these actors have been constructed as actors without agency.

However, the notion of ‘rural is less’ is counteracted by the values attached to the names of those rural places. Respondents referred to the exquisiteness of their rural settings as an important resource endowment, as it provides a sense of nature and preservation.

*“Lushoto has a unique profile and people believe they can get natural products from Lushoto,”* says Lete.

Despite its mountainous, remote location, Lushoto is among the most popular areas in Tanzania when it comes to high value vegetables and non-tropical fruits. The temperate climate, with substantial rainfall throughout the year, gives Lushoto a unique type of climatic condition, which has led people to attach values such as natural and fresh to the products coming from Lushoto. This thickens the agency of the rural women entrepreneurs, as they believe they are producing products of superior quality based on the physicality of their rural setting. The uniqueness of the place serves as a source of credibility for their products.

Moreover, many of the women use the name of the place to brand their products. This was evident through the sales slogans placed on the processed products packaging. *“The produce from Usambara Mountains - Lushoto”* is used by Asia to sell her spices, *“The Pride of Lushoto”* is used by the group of Ubiri women processors, while *“Bagamoyo Harvest”* is the brand name for the wine processed by Tidi. She said:

*“I did not want to make any changes to the name of my product because Bagamoyo is a historical city known all over the world. This being the case, the product becomes popular as the city is popular.”*

Oftentimes, as was shown in the findings, the relationship between the place, venture and products goes deeper than just mere branding. A good example of this was found when Tidi was asked if the wine business (Bagamoyo Harvest) requires her to stay in Bagamoyo. She stated firmly that moving Bagamoyo Harvest to another place would simply destroy its originality. She said:

*“Bagamoyo Harvest has its origin here at Bagamoyo. Therefore, all its successes or failures began here.... If you go to other places, you will just be adapting it.”*

Generally, the analysis shows that values attached to the name of the place play a crucial role in opportunity creation by moulding positive perceptions of the opportunities that are found within the rural areas, despite the thinning representations. It thickens the agency of rural women entrepreneurs by giving them confidence to engage, and thus the place serves as a source of external acceptance and internal strength.

*Resources endowment: availability and access to resources*

Through this analysis, we found that resource availability plays a crucial role in influencing women’s engagement in rural entrepreneurship. The pleasant weather conditions and the mountainous location and landscape of Lushoto afford farmers a favourable situation and opportunity to engage in high-value vegetable farming. Also, the availability of varieties of fruit creates an economic opportunity and gives rural women entrepreneurs the most important resources for their processing activities.

*“I can get almost everything I need for my business, with a few exceptions which can be obtained from other parts of the region.... sometimes we can buy a basket of passion fruit for only, 3,000Tsh, a price you cannot get elsewhere,”* says Lete.

To a large extent, the rural products in the cases studied emerged from and depend on locally available material, as narrated by Mama Mta:



*“The apples pushed me to the processing activities as they are so commonly grown in villages.... a woman could come to the weekly market with her basket full of fruit...she could stay there till evening, when she sees that she has enough for a kilo of sugar, she would offload the rest of the fruit into the pits as she cannot take them back home. In the evening the market area will be full of discarded fruit.”*

Nevertheless, as most of these women deal with agriculture and agriculture-related activities, in order to be successful they need to own (or at least be able to rent) a sufficient amount of land. As Dori said, *“Land matters for most of the activities here.”* Unfortunately, some of the women in the cases studied face challenges, especially when it comes to land and property ownership. It could be established that while the availability of resources thickens the agency, constraints in accessing the resources thin women’s rural entrepreneurial agency.

*Rurality: Location and difficulty with connectedness*

Despite the availability of resources, rurality limits the entrepreneurial capacity of rural women entrepreneurs. Movement of people and goods from the villages to markets requires proper roads and connectivity. In the cases studied, farmers who cultivate fresh fruit and vegetables need to transport their harvests quickly to the destination, before they go bad. Processors need to find packaging materials and other specialized supplies, which cannot be obtained locally. Similarly, women farmer-brokers must use motorbikes to reach the interior producers, as some of the roads are not passable by truck, a practice that endangers their lives. Also, as Miri explains, farmers growing the exported vegetables need cold trucks and storage facilities, which unfortunately they are not able to afford.

*“We need to have a plot to build a house for sorting our produce...a building given by the district authority needs a reliable source of electricity, water and coolers”... “...if we get the cold truck everything will be okay because we will be able to transport our produce,”* says Miri.

Likewise, a lack of supportive infrastructures was found to reduce farmer’s competitiveness. For example, farmers depend on the exporting agent’s cold trucks to transport their vegetables. This weakens their bargaining power and lowers selling prices. Moreover, in the absence of the cooling and cold room for sorting and packing vegetables, vegetables have to be transported to the nearby region to be sorted and packed. Farmers have to wait for the rejection or acceptance rate as per the buyer’s assortment. This works negatively against farmers as the buyer decides how much they are willing to pay.

Apart from supportive infrastructures, distance and remoteness was also found to limit the connectedness of the place and create spatial thinness, which weakens rural entrepreneurial agency. Remoteness and their subsequent high transaction costs were shown to impose constraints on women’s engagement in entrepreneurial activities as they limit accessibility not only to suppliers, but also to customers and new markets. Speaking of this, Lete said:

*“We are surrounded by the same people we know, nothing new... we have limited interactions hence limited business opportunities.”*

On a positive note, in the areas studied, distance and remoteness have favoured the preservation of unique landscapes and environmental features, which offer important natural resources and nurture entrepreneurial opportunities. However, given the spatial uniqueness of the products (for a place like Lushoto), infrastructure development will open up the huge entrepreneurial potential

of the place. Improved roads, cold rooms and cold trucks will open up more markets and increase the production and export capacity. This will result in increased output and improved income, yielding personal as well as regional development.

## DISCUSSION

In the following, we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature on spatial context, embeddedness and rural women's entrepreneurship.

### *Spatial context and reflexive embeddedness*

The findings of this study show that embeddedness plays a key role in opportunity creation, resource use and business sustainability. Being embedded in spatial structures enables rural women entrepreneurs to create entrepreneurial opportunities and use the specifics of their local area. This finding supports what has been reported in other research, such as that by Gaddefors et al. (2019). These studies found that even in the face of severe resource constraints, entrepreneurs can create opportunities which contribute to their personal achievements as well as to the local settings in which they operate. Rural women entrepreneurs in this study were found to benefit from using locally available resources by creatively re/combining and using the resources to create as much value as possible. The resources used include the physical as well as the meaning and representations of their respective rural areas. These findings resonate with Müller and Korsgaard (2018) who found that local resources largely influence rural entrepreneurship. The climate and the topography of local areas, and the name of the place as well as the landscape, largely affect entrepreneurial activity by presenting opportunities through local resource utilisation (Müller & Korsgaard, 2018).

Nevertheless, while local embeddedness was found to be a key enabler of entrepreneurial activities, findings also suggest this is not a general rule, as different levels of embeddedness were shown between women in farming and those in processing activities. This implies that not all entrepreneurial engagement happening in rural areas requires the same level of embeddedness for success. This points to Korsgaard et al. (2015)'s suggestion to consider making a distinction between rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in rural areas, as we theorise on rural entrepreneurship and spatial context. Looking at the tip of the iceberg, it can be said that women entrepreneurs in farming displayed what Korsgaard et al. (2015) referred to as rural entrepreneurship, while most processors displayed entrepreneurship in the rural. However, more is needed to understand the rest of the iceberg. Generally, regardless of the variations in the level of embeddedness, the study noted what Korsgaard et al. (2015) referred to as *placial embeddedness*, where physical resources from the local spatial context are deliberately given high priority and used intensively by many of the rural entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, the issue of embeddedness has been explored from diverse perspectives (Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006). Different studies have shown the benefits of being or becoming embedded in multiple contexts or networks, for example, in-migrant entrepreneurs (Korsgaard, et al., 2015) benefiting from being embedded both in the local context and networks as well as non-local contexts and networks. Our findings contribute to the literature on the rural entrepreneur's reflexive embeddedness. This paper adds to the contention by Kalantaridis and Bika (2006), Korsgaard et al. (2015) and Müller and Korsgaard, (2018) by presenting the entrepreneurial benefits of being embedded differently in different contextual spheres within the same local context. These benefits were evidenced by the entrepreneurs who were not born locally who, despite being embedded in the local spatial context through knowledge, resource use and social

networks, were less embedded in the local traditions, a strategy that provided flexibility in their engagement. These women were found to engage cautiously with their spatial context as they traversed the thinning and thickening spatial structures, hence exercising what this study refers to as reflexive embeddedness.

*Spatial context and women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship*

It is commonly accepted that rural areas in developing economies face significant challenges as far as entrepreneurship is concerned. Studies have shown that rural women encounter a number of challenges and obstacles when trying to build their new businesses; challenges which restrict their opportunities and success (Little & Jones, 2000). However, findings from this study suggest looking at rural areas as entrepreneurial milieus capable of nurturing diverse yet interesting entrepreneurial activities, both within farming-based engagements as well as non-farming activities, such as processing. Similar to Gaddefors et al. (2019) and Korsgaard et al. (2015), we found that availability of resources and uniqueness of place offer distinct advantage to rural entrepreneurs. This indicates possibilities of significant potential in most rural areas for value-creating activities that can improve the overall economic performance and quality of life in rural areas.

Yet these opportunities are not present without challenges. Negative socio-cognitive rural representations accompanied by inadequate infrastructure place rural areas in a weaker position than urban areas. As Kalantaridis and Bika (2006) put it, amidst divergent views of entrepreneurship definition, it is worth taking entrepreneurship to encompass putting together factors of production, as well as contacts with other entrepreneurs and other economic actors in a network of production and distribution. Inadequate and underdeveloped infrastructures in rural areas were found to constrain women entrepreneurs' access to distanced tangible and intangible factors of production, whose availability has been reported to be lower in rural areas than in urban areas (Anderson, 2000; Stathopoulou et al., 2004).

However, Stathopoulou et al. (2004) suggested that infrastructure development such as improvements in transportation and connectivity should be seen as a double-edged sword for rural areas. This is because improved transportation exposes the local economies of rural areas to the wider non-local economic environment, reduces the output of several local sectors and increases imports. This results in economic leakages that reduce the total benefits of economic growth for the local population. On the contrary, Fox and Porca (2001) noted that infrastructure development influences rural economic performance by expanding the use of existing resources, attracting additional resources to rural areas and making them more productive. Following Fox and Porca (2001)'s reasoning, adequate infrastructure will attract new enterprises in the rural areas studied, while the expanded level of economic activity may offer employment opportunities and increase regional output. Similar to what Skuras, Dimara, and Vakrou (2000) observed, rural entrepreneurs in the study area consider investments in infrastructure a highly desirable feature and a genuine necessity for the development of rural entrepreneurship.

That being said, as economic, social and institutional perspectives are progressively being used to explain women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship (Langevang et al., 2018), this paper makes contributions to women's entrepreneurship literature by explicitly articulating the role of spatial context in women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship. This is something of a missing part of the puzzle. This paper has shown how spatial context incubates varieties of entrepreneurial enablers and constraints, which thins and/or thickens rural women entrepreneurs' agency.

Moreover, the paper has shown how, through spatial structures such as physical materials, meanings and representations, rural areas are constructed as a meaningful entrepreneurial milieu within which rural entrepreneurs engage with the rest of the context.

Consequently, the findings suggest that in order to understand the role of context on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, and how being or becoming embedded in rural context enables entrepreneurial opportunity creation, it is important to go beyond social, economic and institutional contexts (Trettin & Welter, 2011). That is to say, a dominant focus of women's entrepreneurship literature on the social and institutional contexts has hidden the role of spatial context on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, and perhaps the importance of the entrepreneur's understanding and use of locally available resources.

The findings also suggest that the relations between spatial context and entrepreneurial engagements are quite complex. For example, on the one hand, distance and remoteness were found to limit the connectedness of the place and create spatial thinness, which dilutes rural entrepreneurial agency. On the other hand, distance and remoteness have favoured the preservation of unique landscapes and environmental features, which offer important natural resources and nurture entrepreneurial opportunities. This resonates with Lang et al. (2014) on complex relations between context and entrepreneurial engagements. These findings suggest that the relations between context and entrepreneurship need a multi-dimensional approach to be understood. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2018) note, the part is always understood in relation to the whole. In the same manner, this study adds the part of spatial context to the whole of literature on context and women entrepreneurship in developing economies.

A question remains about the extent to which the findings regarding the role of spatial context on women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship in Tanzania are transferable to other developing economies. While the exact spatial structures and engagement strategies might depend on the specificity of a particular rural setting, the nature of entrepreneurial engagement and characteristics of the female entrepreneurs in question, the analytical framework used in this paper as well as the spatial structures discussed, which configure women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, might have considerable relevance.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper contributes to existing research on entrepreneurship and women's entrepreneurship in particular, by focusing on the role of spatial context for women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship. It also furthers the understanding of spatial context as an entrepreneurial milieu. The paper demonstrates the relevance of analytical attention to spatial structures and women's agency. Moreover, it provides insights into how spatial structures configure women's entrepreneurial engagement and how entrepreneuring can be seen amidst the challenging environments of developing rural economies.

A significant finding of the study is that rural women entrepreneurs leverage locally available resources for their entrepreneurial engagements. Likewise, embeddedness was found to be a useful mechanism for entrepreneurial engagement. This implies that context does indeed impact entrepreneurial activities and different forms of contexts have varied influence on entrepreneurship as entrepreneurs navigate across the thinning and/or thickening contextual structures. In view of that, our study reinforces the need for empirical exploration of how spatial context influences women's engagement in rural entrepreneurship, and how women exercise their entrepreneurial agency in engaging with their spatial context.

## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As this paper has focused on exploring the role of spatial context in a particular business sector (agribusiness) in rural settings, more research is needed in other sectors in different geographical locations to widen the relevance of these findings in other settings and industries. Our findings enable us to make the following propositions for future research: Proposition one: Women entrepreneurs engaged in farming display more agency in rural entrepreneurship than entrepreneurship in the rural, while the opposite is true for women processors. Proposition two: Despite some challenges, rural areas present an entrepreneurial milieu capable of nurturing diverse entrepreneurial activities, within both farming and non-farming activities.

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