streets. On April ... across the city. "In some areas within the city, ...

Why women lag behind in Uganda's e-commerce boom

BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

GULU. Women in Uganda continue to lag behind men in accessing and benefiting from digital trade opportunities, despite the rapid growth of the country's e-commerce sector.

E-commerce volumes are projected to reach about $5 billion (Shs18.5 trillion) by 2029, driven largely by mobile money usage and social media commerce. This positions Uganda among the fastest-growing digital economies in East Africa.

However, experts say many women risk being left behind due to structural barriers, including low digital literacy, limited access to capital and restrictive social norms.

Ms Claire Gatete, the programme manager at the Federation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (FSME) Uganda, said most women are not fully utilising digital tools for business.

"As a federation, we established that most women, compared to men, are not digitally literate. They have phones, but you find that the average woman really takes more pictures than they actually do transactions on their phone," she said.

She added that between 60 and 70 per cent of women entrepreneurs are unable to effectively use digital platforms to run their businesses.

Beyond skills, high transaction costs also discourage adoption. FSME has proposed reducing mobile money transaction fees from 0.5 percent to 0.25 percent to ease the burden on small-scale traders, particularly women operating in the informal sector.

Ms Gatete said the move would encourage more women to transition from cash-based transactions to digital platforms, which offer wider market access.

KEY GAPS

- 60–70% of women lack digital business skills.
- 35% of SMEs have adopted technology.
- 35.5% of SMEs own a smartphone.
- 53.4% lack both smartphone and computer.
- 9.8% have access to both devices.

She was speaking on the sidelines of a business incubation training in Gulu City aimed at equipping small and medium enterprises with digital skills for business profiling and record management.

FSME, with support from the United Nations Capital Development Fund and the Mastercard Foundation, is implementing the "Business Ku Ssimu Yo" campaign to build entrepreneurs' capacity and confidence in digital finance.

While mobile phones have become essential tools for payments and communication, many women-owned businesses are yet to fully integrate them into operations such as record-keeping and market expansion.

Concern

According to the International Trade Centre (ITC), failure to adopt e-commerce is a key reason many small and medium enterprises collapse within their first year.

Mr Boulelouah Abdelbasset, the ITC programme manager for e-commerce and digital markets, said many Ugandan businesses are not effectively using online platforms to reach customers.

"E-commerce and digital marketing are underutilised in the country. The majority of SMEs are not using platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram effectively, yet many customers now prefer to buy online," he said.

"What is key is to equip businesses with the right tools so they can access new markets, sell more and become more visible," Mr Abdelbasset added.

E-commerce in Uganda gained momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic, when movement restrictions pushed consumers and businesses online. However, experts warn that many enterprises have yet to fully embrace this shift.

A 2025 Ipsos study found that only 35 percent of SMEs have adopted technology in their operations. Limited digital skills and lack of access to devices remain key barriers.