

**OCCUPATIONAL DIVERSIFICATION AMONG RURAL WOMEN
IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A REVIEW**

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ABSTRACT

Rural women need to diversify their occupations since farming in sub-Saharan Africa is rain-fed and, therefore, seasonal. This is to enable them to acquire additional income to take care of economic responsibilities during off-season periods. This paper reviews current literature in the field in both farm and non-farm occupations and effects of occupational diversification, which varies from negative to positive effects. One major negative effect is withdrawal of critical labour from the family farm which serves as a distress push factor while the positive effects include raising agricultural household income which is also referred to as demand pull factor. The paper also discusses government initiated programmes aimed at reducing poverty, vulnerability and targeted towards economic empowerment of rural women in Nigeria such as Better Life Programme (BLP), Family Support Programme (FSP), Agricultural Development Programme (ADP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS) and Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP). Worthy of note is that some of these programmes have failed to achieve the aims of their establishment, mainly because most of these government initiated programmes were highly politicised to the detriment of the beneficiaries. This left rural women with the option of involvement in diversification of occupations. This is to enable them generate additional income to empower themselves economically to meet their family obligations thus reducing vulnerability and poverty among members of their households. Occupational diversification is of increasing importance for women's economic empowerment. This paper asserts that the contribution made by occupational diversification to rural livelihoods is a significant one that has often been ignored by policy makers who choose to focus on agriculture. The paper recommends the need for government policies and programmes to promote the development of human capital among the rural women to equip them with the necessary skills to work in non-farm activities.

Key words: Occupation, Diversification, Rural, Women, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture led growth plays an important role in reducing poverty and transforming economies rural communities in many developing countries, but the same has not yet occurred in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Most countries in SSA are yet to meet the criteria for a successful agricultural revolution [1]. This has led to growing doubt about the relevance of agriculture to growth and poverty reduction in the region, especially in Nigeria. Occupational diversification reduces poverty and vulnerability among rural women [2].

The concept of occupational diversification is emerging as a survival strategy for rural households in developing countries [3, 4]. Women have become more occupationally flexible, spatially mobile and increasingly dependent on non-agricultural income generating activities. Rural people are looking for diverse opportunities to increase and stabilize their incomes which are determined by their portfolio of assets - social, human, financial, natural and physical capital [5]. Non-agricultural activities vary markedly from place to place, ranging from modern to traditional, high to low-income earning, and formal to informal.

Occupational diversification becomes pertinent in order for the rural women to cope with the aforementioned factors. Occupational diversification involves incorporating all economic activities in rural areas, except crop and livestock production, fishing and hunting [5]. According to Tacoli [6] occupational diversification is defined as non-farm income generating activities undertaken by rural residents and farming by urban residents [7]. Occupational diversification in rural areas can be defined as the re-allocation and re-combination of all economic activities which display sufficiently strong rural linkages, irrespective of whether they are located in designated rural areas or not [8].

Looking at the definitions of occupational diversification by different authors, the writer now defines occupational diversification in this context as all economic activities which involve farm and non-farm activities in rural areas.

Thus, the growing importance of non-agricultural activities of rural women is often hardly recognized in notions of status and propriety upheld by the community and in some places, this disjuncture between economic reality and social status serves as a wedge between the generations. These changes have impacted differently across study areas in SSA and in reality, non-agricultural activities of rural women are economically dominant [9].

Recent trends in agricultural modernization have failed to improve the welfare of rural women. Advances in technology and labour market imperfections have accentuated the concentration of rural women in non-farm activities in the rural sector. This has led to de-agrarianisation. De-agrarianisation offers rural women an opportunity for occupational adjustment, income-earning re-orientation, social identification and spatial relocation away from agricultural-based modes of livelihood [10].

Amidst high levels of uncertainty and risk in agricultural production, rural women have become occupationally flexible and increasingly dependent on non-agricultural income-generating activities. This is to overcome seasonality of farming activities, reduce poverty and vulnerability, which are often associated with undue reliance on agriculture [11]. High variability in crop yield and thus income variability arising from the vagaries of weather makes occupational diversification important for the rural women in order to improve their economic status.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is an opinion piece, designed to identify areas of occupational diversification among rural women; effects of occupational diversification; and various governmental and non-governmental programmes/efforts for economic empowerment of rural women. The paper relied heavily on current literature in the area and observations.

Occupational diversification among rural women

Rural women can diversify occupations in different ways. However, non-farm employment now offers the most common diversification strategy for rural women. Several classifications of activities included in rural occupation portfolios have been proposed focusing on different criteria (farm vs. non-farm; on-farm vs. off-farm activities; local vs. migratory; self-employment vs. wage labour) [12, 13, 14]. All these classifications are useful to make sense of the nature of the choices entailed by occupational diversification processes [15]. Majority of rural women have historically diversified their productive activities to encompass a range of other productive areas. Many of the diversification activities pursued by rural women involve micro-enterprises, and the importance of micro-enterprises in generating employment and income in rural areas of Africa has become increasingly recognised. Past empirical studies have indicated that they provide 20% to 45% of full-time employment and 30% to 50% of rural household income in Africa [16]. Many women in Africa are engaged in the lowest levels of micro enterprise: household-based income generating activities [17]. There are no substantial barriers to entry into this type of activity in terms of skills and capital, but they yield dismally low incomes.

De Janvry confirms this view, noting that non-farm rural incomes are necessary for successful income growth in SSA [18]. They are, therefore, critical to the achievement of sustainable livelihoods [19]. Similarly, Bryceson states that rural non-agricultural employment is of increasing importance in SSA [20]. Although the employment of women is increasing in non-agricultural occupations, they form the largest sectoral share only in agriculture. Bryceson [21] provides empirical evidence that this region is steadily becoming less agrarian (both as a long-term historical process, and as an integral part of rural households' livelihood strategies). Bryceson concludes that de-agrarianisation in SSA appears to be proceeding on the basis of individual activity diversification with limited intrasectoral diversification. Occupational specialisation is largely missing in SSA.

Economic diversification within rural households is an increasingly important reality, even in SSA where the degree of economy wide diversification is the lowest in the world, reflecting the low levels of development and structural transformation in most countries. Based upon a survey of 27 case studies from all over Africa, Reardon concludes that, though most rural households depend on agriculture and livestock activities, the average share of income from non-farm activities was about 45% [22]. Non-farm activities mainly include wage or self-employment in rural areas or migration (and remittances). Although there is now a better understanding of both the determinants of household income diversification and its consequences for poverty and inequality, much less is known regarding the role and implications of gender-related factors. This is quite surprising, considering not only what is known about the stratification of roles by gender in African households, but also because the sporadic evidence at disposal seems to suggest that these differences may be relevant.

Households headed by women or with a larger proportion of female members seem to be more involved in agricultural production (to be less diversified). When devoted to off-farm activities, they focus more on self employment rather than in the more remunerative activities, which are, in African contexts, non-agricultural wage employment [23]. Not surprisingly, in households with a higher proportion of women, the returns from non-farm activities are lower than in households with a higher share of adult men. The rural non-farm activities would then include activities such as petty trading, household and non-household manufacturing, processing, repairs, construction, transport and communication, community and personal services in rural areas. The rural non-farm sector does not involve a homogeneous set of activities in terms of income and productivity levels. Fisher *et al* emphasise heterogeneity within the rural non-farm sector, where different activities require different entry qualifications [24].

Impacts of occupational diversification among rural women

The impact of occupational diversification varies from negative effects - the withdrawal of critical labour from the family farm- to positive effects - the alleviation of credit constraints and a reduction in the risk of innovation. The contribution made by occupational diversification to rural livelihoods is a significant one, which has often been ignored by policy makers who have chosen to focus their activities on agriculture [25]. Reardon highlighted the importance of earnings from non-farm activities [26].

Non-farm income increasingly plays an important role and exhibits an increasing share in agricultural household income [27]. Thus, the non-farm employment has been generally recognized to have the potential of raising agricultural household income, thereby reducing rural poverty. Previous surveys of Ellis reports that an estimate of about 40% of African rural household's income was derived from non-farm sources [28]. Occupational diversification activities are of increasing importance for women empowerment [29]. The non-farm activities undertaken by women can be permanent or casual in nature. An increasing number is establishing small rural processing or handicraft enterprises [30].

Pursuing non-agricultural activities, therefore represents a risk minimisation strategy to achieve basic household subsistence needs [31]. Many analyses of income diversification conceive of diversification in terms of strategies employed to earn cash income in addition to primary production activities from a variety of sources. Women dominate many of the non-farm activities that will grow most rapidly during structural transformation-activities such as food processing and preparation, tailoring, trading and many services. They, likewise, hold a major interest in many of the declining rural non-farm occupations - basket making, mat making, ceramics and weaving. Consequently, women will be key actors in the economic transition of Africa's rural economy [32]. While these are important income-generating activities, it must still be emphasized that the greater body of evidence suggests that diversification activities open to women are often less lucrative than those pursued by men. Rural women in Burkina Faso normally obtain 25%-50% of their income from non-agricultural activities [33]. The significance of such activities was shown in the study of the Department of Zabre, South-Eastern Burkina Faso carried out in 1989. Here, participation in non-agricultural activities allowed women living near to subsistence levels to acquire cash to supply their basic needs in addition to those supplied by own production. The activities pursued include: small-scale food processing, artisanal activities (example, basket making), sale of prepared food in markets, carry out petty trading in cereals, sale of shea nuts and butter, sale of groundnut oil, and processed grains (such as soumbala, a flavouring for sauces made from the grains of the neem tree) [34].

Moreover, several studies indicate that in a variety of regional and local settings rural women who are capable of combining conventional farming activities with innovative rural enterprises enjoy higher income and safer livelihoods [35]. Rural women deriving their income from conventional farming alone or from a combination of conventional farming and wage labour obtain lower income compared with those involved in non-farm enterprises [36].

One of the key areas of discussion in the literature is to understand whether individuals respond to new opportunities in the rural non-farm enterprise (RNFE) - demand-pull-or are driven to seek non-farm employment because there are no opportunities on-farm -distress-push [37]. This distinction suggests a number of specific inferences in terms of the relationship between diversification strategies, household characteristics and the socio economic environment. A study carried out by Reardon suggests that when relative returns are higher in RNFEs than in farming, and returns to farming are relatively more risky, pull factors are at work [38]. Demand-pull also includes any increase in the demand for rural products resulting from increases in income of lower and middle-income rural households and increased demand from urban areas [39]. Conversely, distress-push diversification occurs in an environment of risk, market imperfections and of open and/or hidden agricultural unemployment. Thus, when rural populations engage in economic activities that are less productive than agricultural production and are motivated by the need to avoid further income decreases, push factors are at work [40].

Government initiated programmes for women empowerment

The true success of any comprehensive, economic and social development programme in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily dependent upon the extent to which it contributes to the well being of those living in the rural areas. This is because the bulk of the country's population, resources particularly land, natural and mineral resources are in these areas [41]. Much as the problem of rural poverty has been noted, even globally, there are yet controversies among policy makers on appropriate concepts of rural development and by extension, appropriate policies and strategies for eradication of rural poverty. Various governments of Nigeria have tried several programmes, approaches and strategies aimed at improving the conditions of the rural poor especially women and while some of the efforts are still on course, many have since gone moribund. Central in the varying objectives of the programmes was the target of alleviating poverty, which was heavily biased towards agriculture and rural development. The concern over increasing poverty levels especially in SSA and the need for its alleviation as a means of improving the standard of living of the people has led to the conceptualization and implementation of various poverty alleviation programmes worldwide [42].

In Nigeria, the government and donor agencies have been active in their efforts to analyze and find solutions to the menace of poverty. The federal government has also established programmes which focused on the empowerment of women involved in agricultural and non- agricultural production. Some of the programmes implemented to alleviate poverty include the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), established in 1986 with the major aims of opening up the rural areas and to improve the conditions of the vulnerable poor [43]. However, DFRRI could not achieve many of its objectives due to factors which include lack of standards for project harmonization and effective mechanisms for co-ordination among the three tiers of government and between DFRRI and the levels of government. The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) is also another poverty alleviation programme initiated by the government in 1986 and was the main organ for employment creation. The objectives of NDE include: to design and implement programmes to combat mass unemployment; and articulate policies aimed at developing work programmes with labour intensive potentials. Given that poverty manifests itself in the form of unemployment and underemployment, the schemes/Programmes of NDE could be said to have poverty alleviation focus. For instance, the directorate has four main programmes that not only create jobs but also enhance the productivity and income earning potentials of the youths and other beneficiaries. These programmes include: the Vocational Skills Development Programme (VSD), the Special Public works Programme (SPW), the Small Scale Enterprises Programme (SSE) and the Agricultural Employment Programme. Continuing, they noted that the Better Life Programme (BLP) which was established in 1987 was mostly gender specific; it was meant to improve the lives of rural women. Harnessing the potentials of the rural women in order to boost their economic activities and improving their incomes were the goals of the programme. Poverty in Nigeria is a rural phenomenon and the rural women are worst hit by it; this is due to lack of basic skills and education necessary

for gainful employment. The targeting of women in the fight against poverty will no doubt significantly reduce the level of poverty in the country. The Better Life Programme, therefore, tried to harness the potentials of rural women and thereby impacted positively on their economic activities and incomes. The BLP improved the quality of life of many women through the distribution of various inputs, granting of easy credits, and the establishment of various educational/enlightenment programmes. Based on available evidence, it was concluded that the BLP made tremendous impact with regard to poverty alleviation. In specific terms, the achievements of BLP include the following: formation of 11,373 women cooperatives by 1993; the establishment of 3,613 processing mills as well as the distribution of farm inputs such as fertilizer to women who ordinarily would not have had access to such inputs though they carry out the bulk agricultural activities. However, the success of the programme was short-lived. The programme was not only hijacked by position-seeking individuals but the resources set for the programme were diverted and used for personal enrichment. Harnessing the potentials of the rural women in order to boost their economic activities and improving their incomes were the goals of the programme. The programme was later replaced by Family Support Programme (FSP) in 1995. Family Support Programme was almost the same with BLP especially in similarity of concept and identical objectives. The difference was that it embraced other members of the family. Agricultural Development Programme (ADP) established in 1975 is a World Bank assisted programme in conjunction with the federal government and state governments. Its principal aim was to boost the productivity of the peasant farmers through supply of farm inputs, extension services, construction and maintenance of rural roads. It also fostered the establishment of cooperatives [44].

Other poverty alleviation programmes established by the government include: Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS). Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) established in 1997 was an employment programme designed specifically for locally based producers of goods and services and potential entrepreneurs in the establishment of cottage industries [45]. Its emphasis was laid on the economic development and empowerment of the rural populace particularly low income families and cooperatives through the provision of loans which rural women were among the beneficiaries. The influence of FSP on the lives of members has been minimal. Family Support Programme did not provide help to most members in starting their businesses or providing training, financial management and marketing assistance [46].

The National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS) established in 2001 is a targeted intervention programme of the Federal Government of Nigeria, developed with the collaborative efforts of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO/UN). National Special Programme on Food Security is a special ongoing programme to ensure food security and poverty alleviation. Its aim is to assist farmers to increase output and income and strengthen extension delivery among others [47]. The expected outcomes of NSPFS include increased employment opportunities, reduced post harvest losses, improved standard of living, improved

quality of life and economic status of farmers and rural dwellers [48]. These programmes could not be sustained due to lack of political will and commitment, policy instability and insufficient involvement of the beneficiaries in these programmes.

The government of Nigeria has not been in short supply of programmes or reforms aimed at alleviating poverty and economic empowerment of rural women, but the aims of these programmes have not been successfully met. They have failed to deliver the expected results needed to create a substantial impact on poverty and economic empowerment of rural women. Several factors have hindered the efforts of government towards economic empowerment of rural women [49]. These included poor coordination; the absence of a comprehensive policy framework; excessive political interference; ineffective targeting of the poor leading to leakage of benefits to unintended beneficiaries; the unwieldy scope of the programme which caused resources to be thinly spread across the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of too many projects.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Occupational diversification is an important strategy employed by rural women in sub-Saharan Africa in order to cope with crisis and seasonal stress in both farm and non-farm activities. The spread of non-agricultural employment among rural women reflects their growing desperation for income-generating opportunities. Non-agricultural employment arises from the survival strategies of rural women unable to obtain employment or self-employment in agriculture. Despite the fact that the rural women are involved in non-farm activities in order to earn additional income to meet up with family responsibilities, farming still remains the dominant occupation of the rural women.

Government should impart training to rural women through extension agents with the collaboration of NGOs, and other rural development agencies. Educational level of rural women should be increased through adult and non-formal educational programmes. Various agricultural development programmes should be initiated by government for the betterment of rural women. Training programmes should also be organized on regular intervals to give targeted groups opportunities to learn and express themselves in public and improve their self-confidence. There arises the need to open up opportunities for women farmers to participate in non-farm employment, through development of rural industrialisation since this will have a positive impact on poverty reduction efforts among the rural households.

Table 1: Some of the poverty reduction programmes established by the Nigerian government, year of establishment, the target group and objectives

Programme	Year of establishment	Target group	Objectives
Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI)	1986	Rural areas	Feeder Roads, rural water supply and rural electrification
National Directorate of Employment (NDE)	1986	Unemployed youths	Training, finance and guidance
Better Life Programme (BLP)	1987	Rural women	Self-help and rural development programmes, skill acquisition and health care
Family support Programme (FSP) in	1995	Families in rural Areas	Health care delivery, child welfare, youth development
Agricultural Development Programme (ADP)	1975	Peasant farmers	Boost the productivity of the peasant farmers through supply of farm inputs, extension services, construction and maintenance of rural roads. It also fostered the establishment of cooperatives
Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP)	1997	Rural areas	Credit facilities to support the establishment of cottage industries
National Special Programme on Food Security (NSPFS).	2001	Farmers	Ensure food security and poverty alleviation.

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