

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Women in nonfarm rural employment: implications on the social and economic empowerment of rural women in Uganda**

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**Nonfarm employment is an increasing form of employment in rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is partly because many of the workers in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa are self-employed workers. Most women in Uganda do not own land since customary land ownership system deprives women of owning land. This has pushed women to nonfarm employment in urban areas, semi-rural, and rural areas. This paper explored the implications of nonfarm rural employment on the social and economic empowerment of women in rural areas. The findings revealed that nonfarm rural employment boosts women's income, puts women in leadership positions in women's groups such as the savings groups, and empowers women to become independent by reducing economic dependence on men or their husbands while also providing women with decision making power both in the community and households. Additionally, successful women in nonfarm employment, especially self-employed women, are role models and a motivation to other rural women to venture into nonfarm employment. Being successful as a woman in nonfarm employment also comes along with leadership roles and high social status in the community.**

**Key words:** Nonfarm employment, women empowerment, rural nonfarm economy, Uganda.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In developing countries, the majority of the population is still employed in the agricultural sector and especially in farm agricultural activities (Djido and Shiferaw, 2018; Lanjouw and Lanjouw, 2001). However, the growth of nonfarm activities in rural areas in developing countries has increased (Van den Broeck and Kilic, 2019). Nonfarm activities in rural areas include vending or operating small

rural shops, selling clothes and shoes, operating restaurants, buying produce from farmers, transport services, salon, and hairdressing, repair services for different things, etc. Africa is rapidly urbanizing (Adams and Opoku, 2016; Birch and Wachter, 2011) and with urbanization taking place, the rural economy must be impacted and one of the major impacts that can be

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attributed to urbanization in Africa is the expansion of the rural nonfarm economy which includes services in the rural areas. Uganda is still mainly an agricultural economy and the population that depends on agriculture especially farm employment still high. There are still several people not directly employed in farms but are involved in the agricultural sector indirectly for example acting as middlemen who transport agricultural products, buying agricultural products from farmers, selling pesticides and seed varieties etc.

## WOMEN AND RURAL NONFARM EMPLOYMENT

Although the rural nonfarm economy is dominated by men, women engagement in nonfarm economy has been growing over time, with women playing a very important role in nonfarm economy (Ackah, 2013). The nonfarm economy is expanding in several countries of Africa as the continent continues to witness population increase and urbanization (du Toit, 2019; Nneka and Rafiu, 2020). Nonfarm economy is an employer of many, especially those with entrepreneurship skills (Ahmed and Nwankwo, 2013; Igwe and Icha-Ituma, 2020). Nonfarm rural economy therefore directly employs entrepreneurs, while on the other hand, it provides employment opportunities to those employed by the entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs in rural areas engage in nonfarm economy as own-account workers or self-employed workers who employ others too. In Africa, few women own lands, despite the majority of the women staying in rural areas (Adeniyi, 2010). Women can own the land upon purchase of land but many women in Africa are poor, which further makes them vulnerable. The option of engaging in nonfarm employment either as entrepreneurs or as workers working for others in rural areas can be a foundation for women to own assets and other properties. Land ownership rights in several African societies place women in precarious situations (Meeker and Meekers, 1997; Tripp, 2003). Women find themselves in situations where they work hard on farms yet they have little or no decisions over the produce from the land. They have no ownership of what is produced and therefore men determine the appropriation of the benefits from the land. Women must explore other alternatives through which they can have decision making powers over what they do. Nonfarm employment can be an alternative for women to escape precarious situations of laboring on land or farms for long hours yet in the end they have no ownership rights over what is produced. Cultural set up of society gives men an upper hand in the ownership of properties like land which makes it hard to break such cultural beliefs. This makes efforts to empower women in rural Africa quite hard to achieve the intended targets. In rural areas, women are limited from participating in nonfarm employment because of gender stereotypes (Esuruku, 2010; Shema and Mutarindwa, 2017). Nonfarm

employment can therefore, play an indirect or direct role in women's empowerment and emancipation.

Women in sub-Saharan Africa have exhibited great entrepreneurship potential (Chinomona and Maziriri, 2015; Langevang and Gough, 2012). Although women face several challenges, there is an increase in entrepreneurship among women. In Sub-Saharan Africa, entrepreneurship and nonfarm employment are closely related because in several cases entrepreneurs venture into nonfarm activities, especially as self-employed workers. African women are involved in several small-scale businesses where they are own-account workers in rural, semi-urban, and urban areas. Nonfarm employment is therefore stimulated by entrepreneurship and self-employment.

From the literature reviewed in this paper concerning women in the rural nonfarm economy, empirical research or previous studies indicate that women are increasingly getting involved in the nonfarm rural economy and their contribution cannot be underestimated. This paper, attempts to answer the question: What is the role of nonfarm employment in the socio-economic empowerment of rural women in a developing country like Uganda? To answer this question, data was collected from a typical rural setting in Uganda from women who are employed in nonfarm employment. It is worth mentioning that Uganda is mainly an agricultural economy with the majority of the population living in rural areas (Mukwaya et al., 2012). This means that the rural economy plays an important role in the livelihoods of Ugandans as the major employer and contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

## DATA COLLECTION METHOD

To understand the experiences and choices of women employed in nonfarm employment, we used individual semi-structured in-depth interviews for data collection. The participants were identified through a snowball purposive random sampling technique in which participants were able to recommend other participants for the study. One of the authors of this paper whose relatives reside in Busolwe west sub-county in Butaleja district made the initial contacts and she got the first two participants who were ladies that own retail shops businesses, through these two ladies we got recommendations for other participants and the chain continued until we had the required number of participants for the study. In total 20 women were interviewed, and the age range of participants was 19 to 36 years. The participants were all from Busolwe West Sub-county in Butaleja district in Uganda. The participants' responses were recorded and transcribed during the data analysis process. The participants engaged in nonfarm activities employment that included selling food items in the market, selling clothes and shoes, operating small restaurants, operating Mobile Money, sewing, operating small retail shops dealing in several items, operating bars, buying produce from farmers, etc. In addition, we also observed the daily lives of some participants both at their workplaces and at their homes. This helped us understand their experiences of working as nonfarm workers and their roles in the community.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of the findings is derived from major themes that emerged from analyzing data, using thematic analysis and coding in Nvivo; these themes included self-employed workers (own-account workers and self-employed workers who employ others) and those working for others for wages; we identified these as categories of women in nonfarm employment. The other themes from our data analysis included land ownership rights, the desire to be self-employed, and the low benefits from farm employment which we grouped under the motivations of women for engaging in nonfarm employment. The last set of themes included increase in women's income, enhancement of women's savings and social status, the reduction of income poverty, the reduction of dependence on men/husbands and the promotion of women's groups which we categorized under the impacts of nonfarm employment on women's socioeconomic empowerment during the paper writing.

## CATEGORIES OF WOMEN IN NONFARM EMPLOYMENT

Rural women in nonfarm employment can be divided into 2 categories; self-employed workers (own-account workers or self-employed workers who are employers) and those employed by others by working for wages, for example, Participants A, D, G, E, I, J, etc. were own-account workers or self-employed employers while B, C, K, L, N, O, etc. were employed by other nonfarm workers in their enterprises. Several studies have been done on self-employed women in rural areas in various countries (Datta, 2003; Robinson, 2001; Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). These women engage in self-employment either by choice as entrepreneurs or because of the necessity for survival in rural areas. In Uganda, many workers are self-employed workers like in several other developing countries. Women especially the young women are attracted to self-employment through which they can employ other workers or work as own-account workers.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR NONFARM EMPLOYMENT

The motivation for engaging in nonfarm employment for rural women is driven by 3 major factors: land ownership rights, desire to be self-employed and low benefits from farm employment. The women stated that they are deprived of management and control of the land due to ownership rights that grant men the ownership, management and control of the land on which farm work depends, also the desire to be self-employed than working on people's farms and the low financial benefits from agriculture or farm employment pushes women to engage in nonfarm employment. A poor return on

agriculture is one of the factors that push women into rural nonfarm employment. Farming in developing countries mainly depends on nature with low investment in irrigation (Mukhoti, 2019; Nobe, 2019). This accounts for low returns on farming and makes depending on farm employment unattractive for many people. Self-employment is predominant in developing countries (Burchell and Coutts, 2019; Fields, 2019), therefore, young women are attracted to nonfarm employment to be self-employed and financially independent from their spouses or parents. The land ownership rights in Uganda are also partly responsible for women's participation in nonfarm employment; land in Uganda is mainly owned by men and yet the majority of the women depend on the land for agriculture (Mpiima et al., 2019). Although more women in Uganda are employed in agriculture especially farming than men, the majority of men own land than women. This means that most women have no control over the land on which farming is done. Women in rural areas as part of looking out for alternatives are employed in nonfarm employment. These 3 major factors were clearly stated by the participants when they were asked what motivated them or the reasons for participating in nonfarm employment. They narrated that:

"I am engaged in nonfarm work because as a woman I do not own land, besides nowadays there is no big land to use for farming. I decided to start selling some items as a woman who also wants to be self-employed." – Participant A.

"I was discouraged because farm employment was less yielding. I would earn less from what I used to plant, I also do not own land as a lady, and I do not like to depend on my husband for everything. I have many friends who sell essential commodities in the market these motivated me to be involved in nonfarm employment." – Participant G

"I am currently working in a small restaurant and this is because it provides me with daily income, unlike farm employment where it takes longer for one to get financial benefits. Farming also involves unexpected setbacks and natural disasters affect crop production. Also, in this area, we do not have much land and it is owned by men, so as a woman I prefer working in the restaurant to save my money." – Participant J

As already discussed, majority of the women do not own land in Uganda just like in several developing countries (Daley and Englert, 2010). Nonfarm employment is an alternative for ownership rights. The women especially own-account workers or self-employed workers in rural areas get empowered through ownership rights. Not owning land is replaced by the ownership of small enterprises through which the women can work and meet their needs. Through nonfarm employment, women can save and buy land and other properties for

**Table 1.** Participants' approximate monthly earnings.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Nature of employment</b>	<b>Approximate Monthly earnings (Uganda shillings)</b>
A	Self-employed	100,000
D	Self-employed	150,000
F	employee	50,000
H	employee	60,000
K	employee	50,000
L	employee	40,000
M	Self-employed	200,000
Q	employee	70,000
R	Self-employed	250,000
T	Self-employed	300,000

Approximately USD 1 = UGX 3600.

themselves.

## **IMPACTS OF NONFARM EMPLOYMENT ON WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

### **Nonfarm employment increases women's income**

The most notable benefit of nonfarm employment is that it creates a source of income which is more dependable compared to farm employment. Previous studies have concluded that nonfarm employment has a positive correlation with rural households' income (Bezu et al., 2012). In this study, the participants demonstrated that nonfarm employment comes with several benefits especially offering a source of daily, weekly, or monthly income that they can depend on for their livelihoods. Table 1 shows a list of selected participants' approximate monthly earnings from nonfarm employment. Nonfarm employment for women in rural areas empowers them economically in several ways by providing a source of financial support and savings. The participants in the research reported that some of the benefits of being in nonfarm employment were the ability to get daily or monthly income which boosts their earnings and contributes to savings. Previous studies have demonstrated that nonfarm employment increases income for rural women in Sub-Saharan Africa (Machethe, 2004; Ovwigho, 2014). This increase in income or creation of a source of income comes with financial independence which empowers women economically and socially due to their social status as nonfarm employed women. Although this study did not explore in detail the relationship between the nature of employment and income earned, from the research findings there seems to be a correlation between the nature of employment and level of income. Generally, women who were self-employed or own-account workers earned more than those who were working for others. This partly explains why self-employment is an increasing choice for many persons in Sub-Saharan Africa especially the young.

Self-employment is flexible and self-employed workers can increase their earnings through expansion, diversification, and hard work. Several participants who were not self-employed expressed their wish to work as self-employed workers.

### **Nonfarm employment boosts women's savings and social status**

Nonfarm employment boosts the savings for future investment. Women employed in nonfarm employment can save some little money through savings groups. In Uganda, these groups are commonly known as village Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs). SACCOs must be legally registered but it is common to find groups in the villages which are not registered and are managed by an elected committee. In this study, almost all participants were members of certain groups where they saved money weekly. The participants stressed out that they have village groups where they save money for example US\$1.2 (Uganda shillings 5,000) per week. Through these women's saving groups members can get loans which they can invest in small businesses and earn more profits:

"I am a member of a women's group where we save Uganda shillings 5,000 per week. At the end of each year, we sit down and divide the money according to what each person saves from January to December. The group has a committee headed by the chairperson; the treasurer keeps the money." –Participant M

"Our group has grown in number, we are over 50 women saving every week, and we also give small loans to women who are into businesses like selling clothes and other items in the market. Our group also decided that we give loans to non-members of the group including men at a higher interest rate than group members. Every year we sit down and calculate what each member must get." Participant Q

These kinds of women's groups have been effective in the empowerment of women not only in Sub-Saharan Africa. A previous study in the same district of Butaleja district -Uganda, pointed out that women SACCOs were essential in rural development because they contribute to economic empowerment (Mahago, 2018). In Uganda, several women are in SACCOs (Johnson and Nino-Zarazua, 2011; Meier zu Selhausen, 2016).

The groups where many of the participants are women in nonfarm employment contribute positively towards women socio-economic empowerment in 3 major ways. First, economically women are encouraged to save for future investment which enables them to acquire assets like land and cattle which they previously did not own. They are also able to boost their small businesses with money from their savings and contribute towards the development of the households. Participant R did mention during the interview that nonfarm employment helped her save money which she used to acquire a small plot of land. Several other interviewees explained that the reason for saving was to buy land, cattle, and other properties. Secondly, women who are in nonfarm employment are the most active members of the SACCOs through which they take up leadership roles. This improves their social status as leaders in the community. Saving groups of women are managed by women themselves and some of the groups give out loans to men in the community. These groups act as a springboard for attaining a high social status for women who are involved in the management. Participant T stated that "...as the chairperson of a big SACCO in this sub-county I am respected in the community and given chance to speak at community events or functions, this was not the case before". Thirdly, nonfarm employed women through their savings act as role models to other women, since the most active members in these groups are women in nonfarm employment who earn either daily, weekly or monthly; the women in farm employment look up to these women as role models whom they would like to emulate. Several of the participants stressed that they were attracted to nonfarm employment after seeing how much those in nonfarm employment were saving weekly in the SACCO. Participant L highlighted that:

"I was attracted to nonfarm employment after seeing that women in nonfarm employment were saving much and received much more at the end of the year compared to those who were in farm employment. For farm employment, it is possible to lose the whole season because of crop failure or drought and other natural factors".

### **Nonfarm employment reduces income poverty among women**

Nonfarm employment is a great contributor to rural poverty eradication and the improvement of livelihoods.

The participants demonstrated the fact that due to nonfarm employment they were assured of income that would be of use to meet their needs. In the study, the participants were asked to evaluate their standard of living before engaging in nonfarm employment compared to the current way of living where they are engaged in nonfarm employment. All the 20 participants highlighted that their standard of living had improved due to nonfarm employment:

"Nonfarm employment has helped me improve my way of living, before I could not afford to buy most of the basic needs like sugar, salt, and food for my daughter given the fact that I am a single mother. However, currently, I do not have to worry about the basic needs because through nonfarm employment am working hard and saving for the future." – Participant K

"I was very poor and a dependent on my husband and other relatives but because now I am self-employed and working in nonfarm employment my income has been greatly boosted which has made me one of the admirable women in the community." – Participant R

Poverty is defined in different ways and individuals in different communities define being poor differently. The participants pointed out that relative to most women employed on farms, they are wealthier. Empirical research has demonstrated that nonfarm employment reduces rural poverty and vulnerability (Lanjouw, P. and Shariff, 2004). In rural areas of poor countries, most persons suffer from absolute poverty (Kates and Dasgupta, 2007). Nonfarm employment contributes to the breaking of absolute poverty in rural areas, especially among women.

### **Nonfarm employment reduces the dependence on men/husbands**

The participants explained that one of the major impacts of nonfarm employment was the reduction of their dependence on men or husbands especially economic dependence. The women also highlighted the fact that they can make independent decisions which gives them some freedom to determine and do what they want to do. This was stressed by many participants for example:

"I would say one of my achievements has been the fact that I can survive on my own now, I can make independent decisions without necessarily consulting from my husband. I can buy household items that I want without begging for money from my husband." Participant A

"For me, since I started my small business in the market, I no longer have to depend so much on my husband's

finances and also I am saving to purchase some of the things that I need as a woman without getting permission on whether I should save or not.” – Participant N

Through the reduction of dependence on men and attainment of decision-making power, women can reduce the gender inequality that exists in society. This also changes gender role attitudes and perceptions about women. In most societies, women are perceived as housewives, domestic helpers, and caretakers. These gender roles are facilitated by stereotypes against women. These stereotypes that are so strong in rural areas can be broken through nonfarm employment which offers women greater freedom to work hard and achieve their desired goals. Nonfarm employment takes women away from the parameters of their homes, it exposes women to the outside world beyond their homes which influences their lives and contributes to the motivation to work and be successful women.

### **Nonfarm employment promotes women’s groups especially savings groups**

The issue of Savings Credit and Cooperative Societies (SACCOs) has already been discussed but added to this there are several other women’s groups that are present and that have been established due to nonfarm employment activities. These groups include groups for women operating in the market, women who buy agricultural produce, women operating salon and hairdressing, women operating restaurants, etc. In these groups, women can socialize and share knowledge on business management, both government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have been able to use these groups to aid women. These groups also attract other women to venture into nonfarm employment to be members of the groups/associations. In India, the concept of women’s self-help groups has been vital in empowering and transforming women’s livelihoods (Jain and Jain, 2012; Swain and Wallentin, 2009). In Uganda over years, women’s SACCOs and their role in women’s development have increased (Mayanja and Tipi, 2017).

Women’s SACCOs and other women self-help groups and associations are dominated by women who are in nonfarm employment. In the savings groups where the participants were members, they meet weekly to save money:

“I am a member of a women’s group, we meet and save weekly, our group is flexible you save as much as you can. It is a group of women who operate small businesses in the market area.” Participant F

Similarly, Participant H explained that “Our group is among the largest groups, we meet every Sunday at around 4 pm, we save weekly and give out small loans to those who need the loans”.

Besides the SACCOs, other groups such as those for market vendors, salon and hairdressers and restaurants operators among others offer women with an opportunity to share ideas, experiences and solutions for problems they encounter while providing an opportunity for creating a sense of belonging.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nonfarm employment is a strong empowerment tool for women in rural areas both economically and socially. Economically, it reduces women’s dependence on men for their financial needs and enables women to save small amounts of money which they can use to invest in smaller businesses that expand their incomes, also part of the money can be useful in buying assets and properties including land in the long-run. Socially, nonfarm employment for rural women offers an alternative to start-up small businesses that they own and have control over. These businesses empower women to participate in decision making for their enterprises and gain social status because of the ability to help others in the community. The women also inspire other women to move away from farm employment to nonfarm employment which has a positive effect on women’s empowerment and emancipation. Nonfarm employment therefore, breaks stereotypes and social or cultural beliefs that keep women dependent and vulnerable in the society. For rural women, nonfarm employment can be boosted by increasing their savings groups. Therefore, state, and non-state actors should concentrate on boosting such groups while giving freedom to the women to do what they can do or are good at. In several cases, women’s savings groups have received money from state and non-state actors but directed to specific activities which the women have little or no interest in doing. Understanding the interests of women in rural areas is important in designing tailor made policies and interventions for empowerment and emancipation of women.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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