

Bello-Bravo, Julia

**Article**

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CASE STUDY

Open Access

# Rural-urban migration: A path for empowering women through entrepreneurial activities in West Africa

Julia Bello-Bravo

Correspondence: juliabb@illinois.edu  
Center for African Studies, 210  
International Studies Building, 910  
South Fifth Street, Champaign, IL  
61820, USA

## Abstract

**Introduction:** Migration has contributed to the economic empowerment of women in West Africa. Empowerment can be accepted as a way to open up entrepreneurial opportunities that could contradict the established gender norm. Thus, in some cases migration can be part of an economic empowering process for women.

**Case description:** This paper addresses the question of entrepreneurial empowerment (perceived as positive economic impact even when women did not participate in the decision of migrating to another place) based on the answers of a group of women living in Ibadan, Nigeria.

**Discussion and Evaluation:** This study captured their perceptions regarding how migration has financially improved their lives through entrepreneurial activities. One hundred and sixty three women participated in this pilot case study.

**Conclusions:** The results showed how trading instead of family and tradition influenced the success of this group of women in terms of migration.

**Keywords:** Migration; Rural; Urban; Women; West Africa; Empowerment; Disempowerment

## Background

Migration from rural to urban areas has been the norm since colonial times for some groups in West Africa. Historically, migrants regarded the sub-region as an economic unit within which the trade in goods and services have typically flowed, and where people moved freely (Adepoju 2005). Migration from and within the West African sub-region has included temporary cross-border workers, traders, farm laborers, professionals, clandestine workers and refugees. Overall migration in West Africa has essentially been an intra-regional and short-term response to the interdependent economics of neighboring countries (Adepoju 2005). Historically, males dominated short-to-long-distance migrations in West Africa, though some women traders and farm laborers were part of the migrant force during colonial times, such that, recently, female migration has grown faster in contrast to male population shifts. Migration from and within West Africa is now increasingly feminized (Adepoju 2004). A growing number of recent studies on migration with a focus on gender (Beauchemin and Bocquier, 2004; Collinson et al. 2006; Reed et al. 2010) have provided data that show the feminization of migration in sub-Saharan Africa. Until

recently, many studies examined the impact of male migration in Africa in general or West Africa in particular, but less work has focused on women's migration in West Africa. Sudarkasa (1977) and Hill (1972) reveal the substantial female migration in West Africa especially from rural to urban communities; other studies have focused on different patterns of women's migration depending on the cultural groups (Olofson 1976; Pittin 1984). Most of the studies reveal that some of the factors that condition women's migration in West African countries are due to education, labor, marriage, trading, etc. Female migrants are also increasingly drawn to the wage labor market (both formal and informal) as a survival strategy to augment meager family income. Among the educated, emigration of unaccompanied married females has blossomed, this being a particular phenomenon in the sub-region's migration scene. However, among the undereducated and uneducated women, migration tends to be more a common phenomenon of married women accompanying their husbands.

Women's migration from rural to urban areas offer a diverse range of advantages that can be associated with their financial and social empowerment such as independence, economic attainment through trading, and networking to find better economic opportunities. The phenomenon of females migrating independently, even internationally can in some cases enable them to fulfill their economic needs rather than simply joining their husbands (Adepoju 2005). Female migration can indirectly help alleviate poverty by raising the productivity, education and health of the females and their families, all key in reducing inequality and poverty in the home. It also provides opportunities related to marriage or remarriage for single, divorced or widowed women. On the other hand, migration can also disempower women through isolation and dependency in the receiving place.

In West Africa, there has been an increase in female migration from the rural areas to more urban settings. Within this context, this paper addresses how women have participated extensively in migration and cross border commercial trading in West Africa. This trend indicates a greater mobility for migrant women who move from rural to urban areas. Economic participation of women through entrepreneurial activities contributes to the process of empowering women. Women entrepreneurs are able to make a living in a new environment giving them self-esteem and more power in the household decision-making. Migration and entrepreneurship have the realistic potential to empower women financially in the new urban setting.

### **Case description**

This pilot study included a survey by a non-government organization (NGO), which has a long history of working with these groups of women. This method allowed the breaking down of barriers to get at the real experiences of the women who often will not tell their stories for a variety of reasons. At the same time, since all the interviews relied on one staff working at this NGO who already knew all the women, there was a predetermined assumption that the interviewer knew each participant reality. The focus of this paper is to capture the impact that migration had on these groups of women and their trading activities who migrated from rural areas to the city of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The creation of Ibadan as a city dates back to 1829 as a war place for soldiers coming from Oyo, Ife and Ijebu. The economy of Ibadan focused mainly on agriculture, manufacture and trading. Trading constitutes the primary activity of the city among women as more than 70 percent of women in Ibadan are usually involved in trading. Trading and crafting were the two main activities that contributed to the growth employment of the informal sector in the 1980s (Akerle, 1997).

The present paper is organized in the following way. First, I outline some of the factors that conditioned opportunities in the receiving place based on the answers of a selected group of female participants in a survey that took place in the city of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria between September and October 2011, focusing on age, social status and level of education. All the participants agreed to participate as volunteers in the sampling. Second, a set of questions were structured to elicit the data. The majority of the participants were migrants of differing ages. I present data that describes some of the main causes of migration for single, married, divorced and widowed women. Third, I present a discussion regarding the opportunities and challenges in the process of migration that could economically empower or disempower women. By comparing migrant women of different ages, marital statuses, education levels and working loads I aim to determine if all these factors have a strong correlation with the economic and employment opportunities that condition how migration affect the personal and professional life of the selected group of women in Ibadan, Nigeria.

### **Conceptual clarification**

The educational system in Nigeria is divided into six years of primary school, six years of secondary school (including three years of junior secondary and three years of senior secondary) and four years in a tertiary institution. The tertiary education includes attending a university, college, polytechnic or technical school.

According to the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) (ILO 2000) employment in the informal sector is defined as comprising all jobs in informal sector enterprises, or all persons who, during a given reference period, were employed in at least one informal sector enterprise, irrespective of their status in employment and whether it was their main or a secondary job. Informal sector enterprises were defined by the 15<sup>th</sup> ICLS on the basis of the following criteria:

1. Private unincorporated enterprises (excluding quasi-corporations) such as enterprises owned by individuals or households that are not constituted as separate legal entities independently of their owners, and for which no complete accounts are available that would permit a financial separation of the production activities of the enterprise from the other activities of its owner(s).
2. All or at least some of the goods or services produced are meant for sale or barter, with the possible inclusion in the informal sector of households which produce domestic or personal services in employing paid domestic employees.
3. Their size in terms of employment is below a certain threshold to be determined according to national circumstances, and/or they are not registered under specific forms of national legislation (such as factories' or commercial acts; tax or social security laws; professional groups' regulatory acts; or similar acts, laws or regulations established by national legislative bodies as distinct from local regulations for issuing trade licenses or business permits), and/or their employees (if any) are not registered.
4. They are engaged in non-agricultural activities, including secondary non-agricultural activities of enterprises in the agricultural sector.

The informal sector in this case refers to small-scale businesses that range from production to service activities such as ones dealing with hairdressing, food, bakery,

beverages, and others. Usually the self-employed women in this sector have basic or little formal education, are unskilled and possess limited capital. As a result, their income is lower in the informal sector compared with the formal sector (Todaro and Smith 2003). On the other hand, jobs in the informal sector are more accessible for migrant women and can lead to their economic empowerment.

Economic Empowerment can be defined in different ways. It refers to a process that focuses on consolidating, maintaining or changing the distribution of power (Morgan and Bookman 1988). The empowerment as the freedom of choice to have control over the resources and decision that affect one's life. Therefore, in the context of this paper, I considered economic empowerment as an association between perceptions in women's responses related to women's positive attitude toward migration based on their personal and professional interactions.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were 163 women who were asked to answer a set of questions related to their migration experiences; thus, the research protocol for this study focused on how migration has improved or not improved economically their personal lives and professional entrepreneurial activities in the city of Ibadan. The recruitment process took place between September and October 2011. The participants were recruited by a volunteer staff of an NGO in Ibadan; therefore, she knew all the participants based on her professional relationship with them. She is a volunteer counselor on HIV/AIDS as well as a children's club facilitator for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). She provided them with information about the study and invited them to participate and because those women approached were well-known by her they all agreed to participate in the study.

### **Procedures for data collection**

Participants were asked key questions to determine the reason for their migration and if migration had empowered them personally and economically. Participants were informed about the focus of the study and the questions were read and explained before they decided to participate in the survey. Furthermore, participants were informed that they could stop at any moment and that they could decide not to answer any question if they did not feel comfortable regarding the question. Survey questions were related to personal factors: marital and educational status, work and another set of questions related to migration such as place of origin, length of time living in Ibadan, cause or reason of migration, family support for migration, and how migration had affected their daily existence personally and professionally. The characteristics of the participants appear in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Among the participants, 9 of the women were single, 134 married, 6 divorced, and 14 were widows (Table 1).

### **Evaluation**

The status of the woman, whether single, married, widowed or divorced and with children, is a vital factor in determining autonomous or accompanied migration. Migration occurred with the approval or disapproval of the nuclear and extended family. For most

**Table 1** The marital status of the participants

Marital Status of Participants	Number
Single	9
Married	134
Divorced	6
Widowed	14

single women, the internal migration follows the category of moving with other relatives or extended family for working and studying in the receiving place. The migratory flow to the city of young women with or without their parents’ consent has been well documented. We asked questions about how their families supported them in the migration process; 133 answered that they had support from their families while 23 answered that they did not have the moral and economic support from their families (Table 4). There is a shift in the decision of young single women in the sense that it is not based on a male managing this issue. In our sampling study we found that single women decide on their own to migrate with or without their family consent. In this study the reasons for migration of single women were for educational reasons or to find better economic opportunities like a better job in Ibadan. Among the single participants in the study 6 of them claimed that the reason for migration was for educational reasons.

The widowed and divorced women are another category of women who migrate on their own with or without their children. A marital breakdown in rural areas sometimes influences the decision of women to migrate to urban areas. The lack of support and social exclusion of women in the case of divorce impacts the decision of women to migrate out of the comfortable zone of the cultural group. The same response occurs in the case of widowhood, especially if the inheritance system denies control of the land to women and she needs to be looking after her children. Sometimes elderly widows who were married migrants at one point will return to their village and participate in farming (Peil et al. 1988). In our sample study 4 of the 14 widows migrated to the city to help their children who were already living in the city.

The reasons for migration in the sample study were diverse, ranging from educational purposes, in the case of single women, to helping their children, in the case of widows, and due to the relocations of husbands in the case of married women, and overall to find better entrepreneurial activities in the receiving place.

Education was a factor that we addressed in the survey to find out if women seek migration to get an education or if they are more willing to migrate to find professional opportunities when they already have pursued an education. The majority of the participants in this study who migrated to the city of Ibadan had some level of formal education: 14 completed primary school, 62 completed secondary school, 42 obtained diplomas from technical schools, 36 attended the university and received a degree and

**Table 2** Level of education of the participants

Level of Education	Number
Illiterate	9
Primary	14
Secondary	62
Tertiary	78

**Table 3** Form of employment of the participants

Type of Job	Number
Unemployed	8
Private Sector	8
Education (Teaching)	17
Health	1
Public Sector	8
Entrepreneur (Self-employed)	123

9 were illiterate (Table 2). However, we did not observe a strong correlation between the decisions to migrate to obtain or pursue an education. Only a small group of the participants, 6 single women, migrated to get an education in the city but the majority of the married participants migrated to follow their husbands.

Helping their children was another reason why widowed and divorced women seek migration in this study from rural to urban areas. In this sampling study we found that 4 of 14 of the widows migrated because their children were already living in the city and therefore they moved with them. For instance, some women migrate for a relatively short period of time when their daughters were having babies to help them. This is the case of 2 of 16 widows in our study who moved to the city temporarily to help raise their grandchildren with the idea of moving back to their home state after a few years.

Migration from rural to urban areas in West African countries is still a male-dominated decision, especially for married women. Joint migration occurs within the family unit but it is more likely that women will be the followers of their husbands in the migration process. Job opportunities and relocation of their husbands were the main causes for married women migration in our study. 137 married participants in this study migrated to Ibadan because of their husband’s relocation. Women in our study focused on the family needs and unit more so than on their own personal goals; therefore, the decision to migrate was based more on job opportunities for the husband.

Migration from rural to urban areas increases entrepreneurial activities for women in the informal sector. Many of the migrant women fall outside of the wage-sector; therefore, they find entrepreneurial activities that allow them to succeed in the city. We did not find that women in this survey migrated to the city to pursue or expand their entrepreneurial activities. Some of these women were already working in the informal sector and moving to the city opened new opportunities to expand their trading activities. Even though the primary reason for migration of the participants in this study was not primarily looking, expanding or increasing entrepreneurial activities, the end result was that migration brought new opportunities for business activities. In this

**Table 4** Reasons for migrating, did the participants receive support from their family to migrate, did the migration result in an important in their personal life circumstances and where participants considering migrating again

	Reasons for migrating			Family support	Improvement of personal Life	Considering migrating again
	Children	Husband	Personal Decision			
<b>Yes</b>	20	137	8	133	143	23
<b>No</b>	131	10	150	23	10	136
<b>No Response</b>	12	16	5	7	10	4

study 143 women responded that migration had positive outcomes in their personal and professional lives in terms of networking for business in Ibadan.

After analyzing the personal factors that could have influenced women's decisions to migrate and their economic opportunities in the city of Ibadan, the second part of the survey concentrated on questions related to whether migration had improved participants' personal and professional lives as well as their entrepreneurial activities. In order to understand the impact of migration in the job market (formal sector) and informal sector, we asked the participants about the type of formal or informal jobs they were doing in the city of Ibadan. Participants worked in a variety of areas but the majority of the participants, 123, worked on their own businesses, while 8 participants were unemployed, 8 worked in the private sector, 17 worked in education as teachers, 1 worked as a nurse, and 6 worked in the public sector. Those with their own businesses operated in a variety of fields, most commonly retail. However, 26 worked in services, and 1 in wholesale (Table 3). The question about if their business had improved in the city was a very open question with open answers. In fact, 59 participants answered that their business had improved in the city and they were making more money. The participants associated business with monetary terms; therefore, their answers were just based on the economic factor that allow them to expand their business. In this survey we considered business as an entrepreneurial activity.

The answer to the question as to whether migration had improved their personal or professional lives was very homogenous. Most of the participants, 143, answered that migration had improved their personal and professional lives while 10 of them answered the opposite, that migration did not improve their lives. Some of the answers were determined by personal improvements and other answers focused on professional, educational and social improvements. For instance, 45 of the women agreed that migration had improved their family lives, 59 of the women answered that migration had improved their entrepreneurial activities with new opportunities to expand their business, 16 considered that migration had improved their professional lives, 6 of them answered that migration had improved their education and 16 of them agreed on how migration had improved their social life (Table 4).

Even though migration had improved the personal and professional lives of the majority of the women in our survey, when we asked if they were considering independent migration as a potential solution, most of the participants, 150, answered that they wouldn't migrate alone without their husbands and 8 of them answered that they would migrate alone if they had to but most of the women were not planning on migrating and if one day they would consider migration, they will do so with their husbands (Table 4). The question about if women were considering migration again was to find out if migration is a single phenomenon that occurs due to special circumstances or migration is a trend that can occur several times. The majority of the women, 136, were not considering migration again; only 23 were considering migration and 4 answered "maybe" to migration but they were not very sure about it (Table 4).

## **Discussion**

This preliminary study of the personal and professional impact on women migrants from rural states of Nigeria to Ibadan, Nigeria, has attempted to examine the relationship



between migration and economic empowering or disempowering of a group of women in Ibadan (Nigeria). Results have showed very homogenous answers in the majority of the participants. One of the reasons why there were very little variants in the answers from the group we interviewed was the fact that the participants were not selected randomly; the interviewer who delivered the survey is a volunteer staff with an NGO and she knew most of the women who participated in the survey. Another strong variable that made the answers so similar was that in this group the majority of the participants were entrepreneurs before they migrated to the city and most of them were working in their own businesses before and after migrating to the city. Perhaps with a more diverse female population the answers would have been different. This is the reason why we are not making statements about the migration of other sectors of the female population from Nigeria but only from this small group of women with similar characteristics. Additionally, the social status as well as the level of education were not strong variables to find opposite and diverse answers; many of the women had a job that allowed them to have a decent standard of living and the majority of them owned and worked in their own businesses. This is consistent with research that focuses on one small group of the population.

It is important to mention some of the limitations that we encountered could have made the results from the survey different. First, there was a problem finding random women who wanted to be part of our survey. If the interviewer hadn't worked as a volunteer for the NGO and knew and worked with many of the participants previously most of them wouldn't have agreed to participate. Second, even though their answers related to the improvement of their lives with migration were very positive, we cannot state that this is real in all the cases. For example, many of the participants migrate because of their husbands so we don't know the extent of their own choice in this decision. Therefore, the present sample cannot be generalized to a different sector of the population.

Despite all the limitations that we encountered the results of this study reinforce the importance of examining how migration, even without a choice, impacts entrepreneurial women in a positive way, both personally and professionally. I still believe that women's short answers provide valuable information, especially coming from first-hand reasons for migrating from the rural village to the urban setting.

## **Conclusions**

This study sought to understand some of the reasons for migration among the surveyed groups of women from rural areas to the city of Ibadan. First, the majority of participants in this study, all women, were self-employed before and after, most of them working in the informal sector; they work on their own business trading in Ibadan. Second, married women typically migrate to a new place because of their husbands and often empower themselves by participating in entrepreneurial activities in the receiving place. Third, because the sense of entrepreneurship and business was very strong among the participants their answers provided positive feedback on how migration has economically improved their lives personally and professionally.

This preliminary study concluded that life improvement in the city of Ibadan among the selected participants was associated with family, friendship interactions and success in entrepreneurial activities among them. As very little hard data exists, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the economic empowerment or vulnerability of the female migration

among the different cultural groups in West African countries because that depends on different endogenous and exogenous factors as well as the diversity of ethnicity and culture. To the authors' knowledge little data exists regarding the positive and negative effects of such migrations on the well-being and financial impacts on women. Additionally, the aforementioned social factors on the outcomes of the lives of these women have also not been well documented. However, the outcomes have significant impact on West African society and there is certainly a need to better define these issues in order to ultimately address governmental policies, NGO programs, and international aid efforts which can have much greater positive impacts on the lives of these women. Thus, there is certainly a need to document how many of the culturally specific parameters outlined in this paper influence the success and failure of migrant women.

#### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

#### Author's contributions

JBB designed this study, analyzed the data and wrote the paper. The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

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