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# A local, gender lens to define effective policy options for women's employment in Africa

By Angela Hawke

Rural women in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are – and always have been – working. Yet recent research supported by the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) finds that their contribution to rural and national economies is often under-valued and uncounted.

In this article, Angela Hawke summarizes research findings on policy options for women's employment in nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, all of which rely on agriculture for employment and prioritize rural development as an engine for economic growth.

The research teams were supported by the PEP research and capacity building initiative for Policy Analysis on Growth and Employment (PAGE) in developing countries, with funding from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Local research teams who understand the context worked closely with policymakers from the outset to identify critical research gaps and co-produce the knowledge required to fill them.

While the policy options and countries covered are diverse, once common finding is that gender gaps in rural employment hamper national prospects for sustainable development. Another is that a gender lens can reveal the unplanned and gendered consequences of some policies.

Hawke concludes that 'context is all', and that gender-sensitive research can sharpen the design and implementation of policies, enhancing their chances of success.

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# Key messages

- The contribution of rural women in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to the rural and national economies tends to be undervalued and, therefore, uncounted.
- Rural women face significant challenges to their livelihoods, including a lack of access to land and other productive resources, often underpinned by deeply entrenched gender norms.
- The challenges to the full economic participation of women undermine the economic prospects for entire nations, with gender gaps hampering the prospects for sustainable development.
- A gender lens is crucial for the success of rural and employment policies that aim to promote women's entrepreneurship, employment and empowerment.

***“For too long, there has been a disconnect, with data on one side, and policy on the other.***

***We aim to bring them together to drive real policy action, to increase women's opportunities for decent and productive employment.”***

Professor Jane Mariara, Kenya<sup>1</sup>  
Executive Director, PEP

- Without a gender lens, policies to promote rural development and women's employment may fail to achieve their aims or may even have unintended consequences.
- Findings from PEP-supported research teams in the 9 SSA countries demonstrate the value of examining policy options from a gender perspective to enhance their impact.

## About the author

Angela Hawke is a consultant writer and editor on gender and child rights. She has worked closely with researchers across a range of spheres for more than three decades, from UN agencies and Special Rapporteurs to development think tanks, and from international non-government organizations to grass-root organizations.

Recent collaborations on gender include editorial support for the work of Equal Measures 2030 and the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) platform at ODI.

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## About this article

This article draws on the findings of 13 research projects across nine countries, selected for support under the PEP research and capacity building initiative for Policy Analysis on Growth and Employment (PAGE II) in developing countries. It has also been informed by a review of relevant literature from international and regional bodies, think tanks, research centres, academia and civil society organizations, as well as the rich archive of the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP).

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# Introduction

Rural women in sub-Saharan Africa are – and always have been – working. Their contribution to their families, communities and entire economies is vast, yet it is often undervalued, unpaid and uncounted. They are, overwhelmingly, ‘employed’, but their heavy workload often fails to generate a fair return. A review of recent research confirms that it is time to ensure that women are rewarded for the work they do. However, this will require a far stronger focus on the challenges they face at local level and on the true impact of policies.

This article draws on new research by local teams in 10 countries across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) supported by the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP). All 10 countries rely heavily on agriculture in terms of employment and all, to a greater or lesser extent, prioritize rural development in their national policy frameworks as an engine for economic growth.

The research projects were selected for support under the final funding round of the PEP research and capacity building initiative for Policy Analysis on Growth and Employment (PAGE) in developing countries. All projects were funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The research has been driven by the expressed needs for evidence in each country, as defined by government counterparts working with national researchers, and aims to fill specific knowledge gaps.

In each case, researchers focused on a specific area and set out policy options that would strengthen the employment of women in these spheres. From access to finance in Benin, to the impact of land re-allocation in South Africa, the research teams have provided insights into a range of programmes and policies to gauge their impact on rural development and on women's employment. The research examines whether the former drives the latter and, if not, why not.

Why is it that some rural development approaches that should, in theory, benefit women, do not ‘land’ – what other factors are at play to hinder their traction for women? What additional measures are needed to ensure that traction? Can general policies to improve overall well-being have positive spill-over effects on women's employment?

The research has generated a set of policy briefs that capture diverse challenges and opportunities across very diverse contexts, including gender gaps that hamper the prospects for sustainable development. These gender gaps are exacerbated by data and evidence gaps. Policies and programmes are too often driven by assumptions that broad approaches to promote rural development, for example, will yield automatic benefits for women in terms of their employment and income.

In each case, the research teams went beyond traditional research approaches to explore ‘what lies beneath’. They have generated findings that have sometimes seemed counter-intuitive or that have even over-turned original hypotheses, as seen in the analysis of Malawi's former farm input subsidy programme (Karim et al., 2021) to challenge often long-held assumptions. They have provided timely insights, with the analysis of the gender impact of Democratic Republic of Congo's Plan National Stratégique de Développement (PNSD) by Joshi et al. (2021) coinciding with the planned revision to the strategy. And there have been surprises. Research by Njikam et al. (2021) in Cameroon has found that the provision of inputs, not only to the poorest farmers, but also to those who are wealthier, could help to narrow the gender gap in agricultural productivity.

**The research has confirmed that policies need to be shaped by research that is grounded in local realities and informed by local voices – and the voices of women in particular – to overcome the many challenges to their employment and their well-being.**



# Challenges

Rural women in SSA face a mass of challenges that often combine to create a 'perfect storm' of disadvantage, fuelled by gender-based discrimination. This discrimination sustains persistent gender gaps in rural labour markets, where women are, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization et al. (FAO et al., 2020) over-represented in unpaid, seasonal and part-time work and often receive lower wages than men for the same work. Of the 95% of women thought to be working in SSA's informal economy<sup>2</sup>, over 60% are estimated to work in agriculture, and particularly in time- and labour-intensive activities that are either poorly paid or not paid at all (Bonnet et al., 2019), and that offer few opportunities for advancement.

As noted by FAO et al. (2020) "rural women face massive constraints that limit their access to productive resources, credit, market information and skills enhancement opportunities and their ability to make decisions and seize emerging employment and entrepreneurial opportunities". These challenges hold back their employment, undermine their economic and social well-being, and hinder the economic growth of rural communities and their capacity to contribute to agricultural production and food security.

## The 'invisible' woman: under-valued and uncounted in the data

Many of the challenges to employment for rural women in SSA are caused by (and cause) their 'invisibility': in the labour force, in decision-making, and crucially, in data. As a result, the invisible African woman – her work unseen, under-valued and, therefore, uncounted – is often doing the most, but getting the least. The PEP studies respond to the urgent need for evidence on her contributions and her needs, on the norms that stifle her ambitions, and the extent to which she is helped or hindered by current policies. They aim to address significant data challenges, from what is being measured to generating the gender-sensitive evidence that countries need for lasting economic and social development.

The challenges facing rural women are often rooted in this lack of visibility and appreciation, coupled with debilitating gender norms described by the ALIGN platform<sup>3</sup> as 'patriarchal brakes' (Harper et al., 2020). The combined impact can be seen in the frequent exclusion of women from resources, assets, inputs and mechanisms that aim to enhance rural productivity overall, yet benefit rural men disproportionately.

Research by Rodgers and Akram-Lodhi (2019) in five countries<sup>4</sup>, finds that gender gaps in agricultural productivity do not arise because women are less efficient farmers, but because of inequity: they have less access to agricultural inputs, high-yield crops, pesticides and fertilizer (Rodgers and Akram-Lodhi (2019). To this list we can also add gender gaps in relation to access to credit, education, land rights, asset ownership, digital technology, and, very often, decision-making (FAO et al., 2020; UN Women, 2019; Lardies et al., 2019).

These norms may be deeply entrenched. Lardies et al. (2019) note that while girls in Africa may now have the same chance as boys of getting an education, a large and persistent education deficit, coupled with "tenacious 'men-first' attitudes" contribute to the continued disadvantage of women in labour-market participation and employment. Men are still considerably more likely than women to control assets and make financial decisions, and most Africans of both genders say a family is better off if a woman, rather than a man, is responsible for home and children (Lardies et al., 2019).

The exclusion of rural women is well-documented across the PEP policy briefs and can be seen in their lack of access to productive resources (Njikam et al., 2021), such as: land (Joshi et al., 2021; Ikhida et al., 2021; Mbanda et al., 2021); finance (Fiamohé et al., 2021; Ky et al., 2021); and farm input subsidies (Karim et al., 2021). And it is exacerbated by continued data gaps.

## ***“How to address the problem if you can’t quantify it?”***

***We still have a huge problem in Nigeria, with different sources having different data on the same things. Faced with massive inconsistencies, you have to make the best of the information you have.”***

Dr. Opeyemi Akinyemi, Nigeria<sup>5</sup>

Data issues matter. How, for example, do you gauge the level of ‘employment’ or ‘work’ (whether ‘decent’ or ‘productive’, paid or unpaid)? Women’s labour on family farms – like their cooking, cleaning, fetching water and childcare – is critical, yet it is often unpaid, often overlooked and rarely measured. PEP Gender Adviser Marzia Fontana notes, in relation to SSA, that it is “frustrating, because you can’t use a text-book vision of how the labour market works. Unemployment figures are not good indicators in countries where few people are either officially unemployed or officially employed.”<sup>6</sup>

This, coupled with the ‘invisibility’ of so much of the work carried out by rural women, makes it difficult to estimate their employment rates in any meaningful way, and particularly their participation in agriculture or microenterprises (whether farm or non-farm). The World Bank suggests that agriculture is becoming increasingly feminized in the developing world (World Bank 2016). FAO et al. (2020) suggest that rural women comprise about two-fifths of agricultural employment globally, with wide variations by region: from 46% in SSA to 21% in Latin American and the Caribbean<sup>7</sup>. According to UN Women, women make up 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, rising to 59% in SSA (UN Women, 2019).

The PEP studies themselves offer some national figures. Sawadogo et al. (2020), for example, note that agriculture employs more than 80% of women in Burkina Faso and is the main economic activity for 65% of the country’s women. However, only 8.2% of women own arable land and they are more than twice as likely as men to be unemployed (9.3% versus 4.1% of men). Njikam et al. (2021 and 2020) report that women smallholders in Cameroon are responsible for 80% of the country’s food production and 60% of its cash crop production. Fiamohe et al. (2021) note that nearly 65% of women in Benin are engaged in rural microenterprises. In Senegal, the studies by Mamno Wafo et al. (2021) and Ngom et al. (2021) note that women were more than twice as likely as men to be unemployed in 2017, and spent longer in the labour ‘queue’. And Ikhide et al. (2021) stress that the issue in Nigeria is not that women are ‘unemployed’ (indeed, they provide over 70% of agricultural labour); it is that – as in so many other countries – their work is simply not counted.

Other challenges include the digital divide, with the largest regional gender gap in access to digital technologies found in Africa, at 23% (UN Women, 2019) – and gender-based violence (GBV), which remains a gross and persistent challenge.

The vulnerable nature of so much of the work women do is heightened by crises such as climate shocks and pandemics, which intensify the impact of pre-existing inequalities and structural injustices. In Senegal, Mamno Wafo et al. (2021) note that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the already fragile situation of vulnerable groups – primarily women – in the labour market. There are also questions about whether any positive trends in women’s employment can be sustained in the face of such crises, or do families and communities fall back on ‘default’ norms that, for example, prioritize jobs for men and domestic care responsibilities for women (Harper et al., 2020)?

### *2. Excluding South Africa*

*3. Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALiGN) is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers, practitioners and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality ([www.alignplatform.org](http://www.alignplatform.org)).*

*4. Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, and United Republic of Tanzania.*

*5. Dr. Opeyemi Akinyemi, personal communication, 22 avril, 2021*

*6. Marzia Fontana, personal communication, 22 April, 2021.*

*7. Calculated from ILOSTAT modelled world estimates for 2020 from ILOSTAT.*

It is not all doom and gloom, however. Gender norms around employment are not static, and challenges can be overcome if change is supported by well-targeted and well-resourced policies and programmes (Harper et al., 2020). Given the obstacles so often placed in their way, the impressive achievements of so many rural women in Africa are truly inspiring and offer many lessons on 'what works' (see 'key findings').

## Even the best policies need hard evidence

There is no lack of policy commitment to gender equality and rural development in SSA. Every country in the region is pushing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work. All countries have signed up to the relevant ILO Conventions, from the 1951 Convention on Equal Remuneration to the 2019 Convention on Violence and Harassment<sup>8</sup>.

The region itself has set out a clear vision of its future: Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 calls for "An Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth...", while Article 3 of the Protocol on Amendments of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) requires the AU "to ensure the effective participation of women in decision-making, particularly in the political, economic and socio-cultural areas." (AU, n.d.).

2020 to 2030 is the Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion, with African leaders committing to progressive gender inclusion to promote sustainable development at the national, regional and continental levels (AU, 2020). The continent also has high hopes for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in January 2021, which will make it cheaper for informal traders (many of whom are women) to operate through formal channels and connect to export food markets. It is hoped that this will enable women-led businesses to graduate from micro- to macro-enterprises (AU, 2021).

The concern is that the full implementation of such ambitious, visionary and, in principle, transformative policy commitments and interventions will continue to be hampered by a lack of robust and disaggregated evidence. Rachel Marcus of the ALIGN platform argues for far more "sensitivity to the nuance of shifts and changes. There is a tendency to 'go to macro', with a binary division between men and women, and little exploration of age or location."<sup>9</sup>

As the ILO (2020) has noted: "The failure of existing data to fully convey the contributions of women limits the ability of governments to design and implement programs and policies that can strengthen women's economic empowerment and ultimately improve their livelihoods, as well as those of their families and communities."

These concerns are validated by the PEP studies, many of which describe policies that have been hampered (or that have even had a negative impact on gender empowerment) because they have failed to recognize that rural women are not one single homogenous group, or worse: have failed to factor in gender aspects at all. The studies tease out the nuances that are needed for effective policy. They show, for example, that age matters, as Fiamohe et al. (2020) conclude in their analysis on finance for rural microenterprises in Benin; and that location matters, as found by Njikam et al. (2021) in their research on access to productive resources in Cameroon.

Strong, disaggregated data are essential to develop effective policies, recognizing that what works in one context for one group of rural women may not work for another group in another part of the country, or even in the next village. What works for a young, uneducated rural mother who tends the family fields may differ markedly from what works for an older rural woman whose non-farm microenterprise is already well-established. So, what happens when researchers apply a gender lens to policy?

8. For example, the ILO Conventions on Equal Remuneration, 1951 (No. 100); Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958 (No. 111); Workers with Family Responsibilities, 1981 (No. 156); Maternity Protection, 2000 (No. 183); Domestic Workers, 2011 (No. 189); Violence and Harassment, 2019 (No. 190).

9. Rachel Marcus, personal communication, 1 April, 2021.

10. <https://www.presidence.sn/en/pse/presentation>

# Key finding and policy recommendations...

One key characteristic of the research has been the importance of the local perspective, with local researchers best-placed to understand the local context and its socio-cultural norms. Another has been the co-production of knowledge, with local research teams working closely with policymakers from the outset. Policymakers have identified the research gap to be filled and the research questions to be asked, and the researchers have identified the methodologies that will provide the answers. The findings that have emerged have often turned conventional wisdom on its head to challenge long-held assumptions.

## ...to address long-term unemployment and create jobs

Two policy briefs from **Senegal** (see Mamno Wafo et al., 2021; Ngom et al., 2021) explore the impact of the country's Plan for an Emerging Emergent Senegal (PES)<sup>10</sup> in two key areas. First: women's long-term unemployment. Second: job creation in a labour market characterized by gender inequalities and long queues for work.

Mamno Wafo et al. (2021) (see also Mendy et al., 2020) have explored the impact of sectoral public policies on how much time women and those with educational qualifications spend in the labour queue. They find that being female, being young and – perhaps counter-intuitively – being educated appears to present a 'triple risk' for unemployment.

Their research suggests that a combination of two policy options would reduce the number of unemployed women and graduates by over 40%: an increase in capital in the civil engineering and hotel and restaurant sectors; and an increase in tariffs on imported agricultural products.

However, only the first option – more investment to create jobs in civil engineering and the hotel and restaurant sectors – would drive a faster reduction in unemployment levels for women than for men.

Ngom et al. (2021 and 2020) have looked more specifically at priority sectors identified in Phase 2 of Senegal's PES (2019-2023): agriculture, agribusiness and infrastructure. The authors have explored two policy options to address the gaps in job creation and the distribution of employment between men, women and young people: halving the production tax and a 10% subsidy on the wages of young people and women.

Their findings suggest that a combination of investment in key sectors of the economy and wage subsidies for women and young people would be more effective in terms of the objectives of the second phase of the PES than the halving of the production tax.

The authors also argue that investments in priority sectors should be reinforced by positive discrimination policies in favour of women and young people. This, in turn, requires a wage subsidy policy that would not only promote the economic empowerment of young people and women, but also the reduction of gender inequalities in the Senegalese labour market.

### Policy recommendations

1. The Government of Senegal should make the business climate more attractive during the second phase of the PES (2019-2023) to draw major investments to the hotel and restaurant sectors (Mamno Wafo et al., 2021).

2. The Government of Senegal should consider introducing a 10% wage subsidy for women and young people to stimulate job creation, given their disadvantage in the labour market (Ngom et al., 2021 and 2020).

## ...to address women's structural disadvantage

Njikam et al. (2021 and 2020) have examined the determinants of gender productivity gaps for **Cameroon's** Sahel, Western Highlands and Bimodal Rainfall Humid Forest regions.

Their findings confirm that rural women in Cameroon have only limited access to productive resources and are, as a result, less productive than men, even though they are responsible for 80% of the country's food production and 60% of its cash crop production.

The findings suggest that persistent gender gaps in productivity are driven by women's structural disadvantage across income levels, plot headships and agro-ecological zones.

Njikam et al. find that the impact is greatest for both the richest and poorest farmers in every region. They conclude that targeting women's structural disadvantages can reduce the gender productivity gap among smallholders and, surprisingly, that inputs to wealthier farmers as well as the poorest could narrow the gender gap in Cameroon's agricultural productivity.

### Policy recommendation

The Government of Cameroon should tackle gender differences in returns to productive resources by, for example, reducing the cost of fertilizer, improving levels of education and farming experience and enhancing access to cultivated land (Njikam et al., 2021 and 2020).

## ...to increase women's access to land

Three of the PEP research studies have set out policy options related to land, using a gender lens to explore the potential impact of greater access to land for women's employment and welfare in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria and South Africa.**

The **DRC** study by Joshi et al. (2021) offers timely insights to inform the 2021 revision of the country's Plan National Stratégique de Développement (PNSD), revealing the need to increase land allocation and cash transfers to women to promote their employment.

The research team has examined two policy options: a 40% increase in land allocated to women; and a doubling of government cash transfers to rural female households. They find that both policy options would improve women's employment and reduce gender inequalities in the labour market. However, increasing land allocations to women would achieve two goals: the reduction of gender inequalities and greater economic diversification as a result of increased agricultural production and exports.

The study on **Nigeria** by Ikhida et al. (2021) reveals another 'win-win' scenario, with the potential of land reform to increase women's access to agricultural land, improve food security and promote effective and equitable agricultural development. The issue in Nigeria is not that women are 'unemployed': they provide over 70% of agricultural labour: the issue is that their farming activities are often unpaid and unmeasured, leaving their productivity uncounted.

Ikhida et al. have examined the economic impacts of the government's National Food Security Programme (NFSP) and three other policy options: more land for female-managed farms; reduced import duties on agricultural commodities; and reduced value added tax (VAT) on such commodities. They have found that increasing access to land for women farmers is the most effective and economically efficient policy option for the goals of the NFSP, particularly on agricultural development and food security. While the NFSP production subsidy option appears to be the least costly, it is actually the most inefficient in terms of economic cost-benefits.



In **South Africa**, Mbanda et al. (2021 and 2020) have assessed the gendered impact of rural economic policies for land reallocation and agricultural capital spending to identify any distinct impacts for rural and urban people and for men and women.

Their findings suggest that both options have positive impacts, particularly for women, and that increasing capital spending for agriculture is more effective than land reallocation in addressing unemployment and gender inequality while strengthening the wider economy.

However, the benefits are relatively less for rural households and are not enough to eradicate unemployment, poverty and inequality.

### Policy recommendations

1. The PNSD in DR Congo should include policies to increase land allocation to women and government transfers to rural female-headed households (Joshi et al., 2021).
2. The least costly option for the achievement of the goals of the NFSP in Nigeria involves structural and land reform. This requires legislative changes and a restructuring of the NFSP itself (Ikhide et al., 2021).
3. The South African policies of land reallocation and agricultural spending should be reinforced with other corrective strategies for rural development, such as pro-poor and gender-sensitive interventions so that women are not left behind (Mbanda et al., 2020).





## ...to address financial exclusion and credit constraints

Policy briefs from **Benin and Burkina Faso** (Fiamohe et al., 2021; Ky et al., 2021) shed light on aspects of finance that affect the quality of – and rewards for – women's work in rural areas. Policymakers who want to increase women's participation in income-generating activities need to know what type of finance to promote, but there is a knowledge gap on how sustainable employment for rural women is supported by finance or hampered by credit constraints.

Fiamohe et al. (2021) have examined gender, types of finance and types of employment in **Benin** to compare self-financing and micro-finance to determine which works best for rural microenterprises.

The authors find that self-financing is more profitable for young women entrepreneurs in rural areas than any other financing option. In contrast, formal, credit-based financing (social network-based) is most likely to benefit women who already lead established microenterprises, and who are, therefore, most likely to benefit from innovative microfinance programmes.

Ky et al. (2021 and 2020) touch on the profound impact of gender norms in their analysis of credit constraints and productivity in **Burkina Faso**. They map the impact of credit constraints – and the easing of those constraints – on per capita consumption and farm productivity by gender. While they find that such constraints are harmful to both male and female farmers, gender differences become more apparent as credit constraints are eased, with a shift in the constraints from medium to low being far better for women (Ky et al., 2020).

They find that policies to ease credit constraints from a medium to low level offer greater welfare gains for women than for men, and that the most effective way to promote women's access to agricultural credit would be a guarantee fund, with a 'gender quota' of 60% in favour of women.

### Policy recommendations

1. In Benin, nuanced approaches are needed that account for differences in the age, education and experience of beneficiaries and replicate the flexible financing conditions found in informal social networks.

Formal microfinance programmes should target established enterprises run by rural women who already use informal finance, while younger women should be targeted for subsidy programmes (Fiamohe et al., 2021; and 2020).

2. Policies to relax credit constraints in Burkina Faso should be accompanied by measures to address women's lack of bargaining power. Interventions to support women's financial inclusion should also favour rural women who have applied for a loan that has been refused (Ky et al., 2021)



## ...to promote farm input subsidies

Some of the most surprising findings emerged from the research by Karim et al. (2021) on the impact of the former farm input subsidy programme (FISP) in **Malawi**. In essence, an approach that targeted the female-dominated food sector was found to benefit men more than women.

Their research demonstrates how a more nuanced research approach can reveal the unintended and often gendered consequences of some policies, and even overturn an original research hypothesis.

The research team has used a gender lens to assess the impact of the FISP (updated to become the Affordable Inputs Programme (AIP) in 2020) on male and female employment through its provision of coupons for the purchase of inputs at a reduced price.

Similar FISPs have been rolled-out across SSA and are assumed to benefit women. The results revealed, however, that while the former FISP improved agricultural productivity, it actually hindered gender equality.

### Policy recommendation

A stronger focus on gender outcomes is needed within Malawi's FISP/AIP – coupled with policy options to improve women's economic empowerment, decision-making power, entrepreneurship and financial inclusion.

Recipient criteria should be modified, with the subsidy going to those who cultivate the land (usually women) rather than the heads of households (usually men) (Karim et al., 2021).



## ...and non-farming diversification

The rural non-farming sector is expanding in **Senegal**, as it is in many other countries. It is not clear, however, how this affects rural women. Research by Diallo et al. (2021 and 2020) on the impact of non-farming diversification on women's employment has explored how this differs by gender and the implications for individual and household well-being.

They have confirmed that participation in non-farming activities improves the well-being of Senegalese rural women and their households significantly, increasing their income, strengthening their economic empowerment and improving their food security.

However, complementary measures are needed to promote non-agricultural diversification strategies for rural women.

### Policy recommendation

In Senegal, Gender-sensitive policies should be designed to promote non-farm diversification strategies as a way to improve livelihoods for rural women and their households, with existing social safety-net initiatives mobilized to encourage the diversification of non-agricultural income among rural women (Diallo et al., 2021).



## ...to promote electrification

Electrification is crucial for rural communities, and particularly for rural women, who provide the greatest share of household and farm labour yet remain the poorest. Local PEP research teams in **Côte d'Ivoire** and **Nigeria** have explored policy options for 'off-grid' electrification that have the greatest potential to enhance employment for rural women.

In rural **Côte d'Ivoire**, the National Rural Electrification Program (PRONER) aims to improve rural living conditions through women's empowerment and youth employment. PRONER is, however, costly and relies heavily on fossil fuels, and only 69% of the communities targeted for the first phase of PRONER had been electrified by 2019.

A team of local PEP researchers have assessed the welfare impact of PRONER in comparison to three 'off-grid' (and cheaper) options for the electrification of every community in rural Côte d'Ivoire: biomass, solar and small hydropower plants.

In **Nigeria**, where less than a quarter of rural people have access to electricity, Akinyemi et al. have assessed the current Rural Electrification Fund (REF) policy, which provides capital subsidies to firms that invest in mini-grid development. Little has been known, however, about how the policy affects the productivity of rural women, which means that the assumed costs and benefits may be wrong.

The research team has compared the current 'subsidy only' REF policy to alternative 'subsidy plus productivity' scenarios to confirm that greater access to electricity can benefit rural women by reducing the time they spend on household work. However, the time saved and the gains in income do vary. The best results were achieved by combining a 50% capital subsidy with policies that produced a 10% increase in household productivity and a 10% increase in farm work.

### Policy recommendations

1. In Côte d'Ivoire, the electrification of the entire country should be completed but decentralized approaches are needed to ensure electricity for all. Biomass power plants are recommended as being more cost-effective and environmentally friendly than PRONER (Binaté Fofana et al., 2021).

2. In Nigeria, policies that increase the household and farm productivity of rural women should be implemented alongside the REF capital subsidies, and the REF portfolio should be diversified to include small-scale, off-grid technologies that are cheaper for both the government and for rural women – a 'win-win' (Akinyemi et al., 2021).





# Conclusions and recommendations

***“Part of our job is to scientifically and diplomatically help the government adjust, adjust and adjust, so that the results they want to see are realized.”***

Dr Temilade Sesan<sup>9</sup>

On the research by Akinyemi et al. on electrification in Nigeria

The research confirms that ‘context is all’, and that gender-sensitive research must respond to national and local needs, priorities and realities. The research has challenged a range of policy assumptions, showing how a gender lens can shift and sharpen the design and implementation of policies and, therefore, increase their chances of success.

It has also demonstrated that there can be no single ‘blueprint’ for the promotion of women’s employment in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): rural women – and the jobs and sectors in which they work – cannot be grouped together into one, homogenous category. Equally, not all rural households are the same – and there are often competing interests and goals within households, by gender. Nuance is, as always, vital.

As such, the research chimes with a whole range of previous PEP-supported research and its conclusions on key areas, including the constraints to female entrepreneurship (PEP, 2016), and the factors that can help women overcome such constraints, such as microcredit (Babilla et al., 2016) and education (PEP, 2011).

There are many opportunities that can now be seized by policymakers, including a near closing of the education gap between girls and boys in SSA and the growing visibility of the region’s female leaders and role models (Harper et al., 2020). The question is how researchers can help policymakers seize such opportunities.

Equalizing women’s access to resources and inputs and amplifying their voices is critical to close gender gaps in agricultural productivity. It is how resources are invested that matters – but defining the ‘how’ demands far greater scrutiny of the different kind of investments and interventions that work for different kinds of women. As PEP (2016) notes, female entrepreneurship is hindered more by social and cultural constraints than by lack of access to, say, finance.

## **The PEP research has demonstrated the importance of:**

- **‘going micro’** to gather deep-dive, disaggregated and nuanced evidence that shows what is actually happening on the ground
- **‘going local’**: with data gathered by well-trained local teams who know the context, who work closely with both communities and governments to identify the problem
- research that **explores a range of possible policy solutions**
- a healthy dose of scepticism, including **challenging assumptions** about the true impact of policy, particularly if it has not been informed by a gender lens from the outset
- research that generates clear, **practical, workable solutions** to enhance the impact of policy and that, ultimately, ‘nudges’ gender norms in the right direction.

**The impact of norms** has been a common theme throughout the PEP studies. This reinforces the need for a research lens that promotes **joined-up thinking, holistic approaches and synergies**, with a shift away from siloed interventions that ‘do gender’ and towards support for policies that are truly transformative. Indeed, policies to promote women’s employment need to look far beyond employment, to the norms and other constraints that, as shown in the PEP studies, hold back their participation and engagement.

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