

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FIREWOOD PRODUCTION AMONG THE GBAGYI WOMEN OF CENTRAL NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates firewood production among the Gbagyi women in Central Nigeria, employing a qualitative exploratory research. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis, the study explores the historical experiences, challenges, and cultural influences shaping the involvement of Gbagyi women in firewood production. By adopting feminist economics, the research highlights the intersectionality of gender, culture, and economic resilience, aiming to identify the often-overlooked contributions of Gbagyi women to socio-political and economic development of central Nigeria. The study concludes that Gbagyi women significantly contribute to poverty reduction, sociopolitical and economic development of central Nigeria in the face of modernization and changing energy preferences. It recommends policies supporting rural women's economic agency in the global South.

Keywords: *Rural Economy, Gbagyi Women, Central Nigeria, Firewood Production, Gbagyi Culture.*

Introduction

Despite the critical role played by Gbagyi women in firewood production in Central Nigeria, little research has investigated the socio-economic dynamics and challenges associated with this activity. This study seeks to address the existing gap in scholarly knowledge by examining the **economic resilience and gender dynamics** of firewood production among rural Gbagyi women in

Central Nigeria. The research aims to uncover the historical, cultural, socio-political and economic dimensions of this practice, exploring the impact on women's lives, community development, and the evolving dynamics in the face of modernization.

With the growth in science and technology, firewood is now seen as a means of providing energy to the underdeveloped, rural and or less privileged class. The collection of

firewood varies across regions and some places have specific areas for the collection (Aina and Odebiyi, 1998; Jacob et al., 2017). Other places may integrate the collection of firewood in the cycle of preparing a plot of land to grow food as part of a field rotation. For this study, firewood production means collection, cutting and selling of woods or log of woods that are used as fuel for heating or cooking.

The Central Nigeria is peopled, among others, by the *Gbagyi* ethnic groups that are hardworking and contributing to the socio-economic development of their area of abode (Bala, 2008). The role of *Gbagyi* women in the socio-economic development of the Central Nigeria area cannot be over-emphasized as no sector of the economy today that women cannot be found, apart from the dominant role they assumed in their communities. In some families, because of their integrity and economic wellbeing, women became the breadwinners (Osemeobo, 2005).

The study explores the socioeconomic life of *Gbagyi* women in central Nigeria and focuses on an important lifestyle of the rural *Gbagyi* women in the economic development of their area. The *Gbagyi* women are so distinct and pronounced when the issues of firewood production come to mind. Rural women have

made it an occupation to collect, process and sell firewood. Such economic contribution by *Gbagyi* women demonstrates their resilience and significantly adds value to the socioeconomic activities of the region and gives women a special family and community role. Despite challenges, *Gbagyi* women exhibit economic resilience in the face of changing circumstances. Their ability to adapt to new market dynamics, participate in commercialization, and navigate socio-economic shifts underscores their resilience in sustaining this traditional economic activity.

The significance of this study lies in shedding light on the often overlooked yet vital role of *Gbagyi* women in the economic development of Central Nigeria through their engagement in firewood production. By exploring the historical, cultural, sociopolitical and economic dimensions of this activity, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic dynamics within the region. Furthermore, the study's findings have broader implications for gender roles, rural economies, and sustainable resource management. Recognizing the significance of *Gbagyi* women's contributions could inform policies and initiatives aimed at supporting and enhancing the economic

empowerment of women in similar contexts. This could foster sustainable practices, and preserving cultural heritage.

By identifying challenges of Gbagyi women firewood production such as resource scarcity, environmental implications, and changing energy preferences, the study contributes insights into sustainable practices and policy considerations in the region. It is a novel contribution to the historical account of rural women's contribution to development that most literature about the economic history of north-central Nigeria has neglected. The spill-over effect of Gbagyi women's firewood production is visible in reducing the poverty level of most rural communities, societal recognition and relevance of womenfolk in the development of most communities, and the support for their children's education and social festivities.

Origin of Gbagyi People: A Historical Review

The *Gbagyi* language is part of the "Kwa" sub-division of Niger Congo language family. The people speak two dialects called *Gbagyi*"Yamma" and *Gbagyi*"Ngenge"; while they are loosely called "Gwari" by Hausa-Fulani and Europeans during pre-colonial Nigeria. They are predominantly

found in Central Nigeria states of Niger, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Kogi and Federal Capital Territory (Baba, 2000). They arrived and settled in Central Nigeria for two reasons. When they were driven away by wars from Borno and Zamfara, they gained stability in their present settlements because it provided them with defensive cover against external attacks. The terrains have long stretches of rocks and hills for military strategy. Another fundamental reason was the rich agricultural potential of their new settlements. The *Gbagyi* have two major occupations, farming and hunting in order of priority.¹ The Central Nigeria favours the cultivation of varieties of crops.

According to oral traditions, the *Gbagyis* are believed to have originally migrated from "Yaman" (Middle East) to Borno where they might have settled with the *Koro* people. They and the *Koro* people were driven westward from Borno by the Kanuri through wars in the 16th century, from where they sojourn to their present location in Central Nigeria (Baba, 2000).

The name Gbagyi

The name *Gbagyi* came as a result of what man ate and regarded as his stable food, when the art of farming was yet to be discovered

and man lived a non-sedentary life and survived on the collection of fruit. These fruits are called "*Gbagyi*" by the people referring to a person who eats fruit. Subsequently, they therefore referred to every human being as *Gbagyi*, meaning, the one who eats fruits. The use of the term and the act of protecting every *Gbagyi* tree around him marked the beginning of the development of farming and the art of farming developed as an occupation among the *Gbagyis*. The art of farming, coupled with their intellectual ability to create for themselves a better condition of living distinct from others gave them their identity and firmly established their name "*Gbagyi-Za*" (Bala, 2008: pp1-2).

Meanwhile, their Hausa neighbours who could not pronounce the word *Gbagyi* called them *Gwari* and made reference to them as a people from the bush (Baba, 2000). This could not be divorced from the *Gbagyi*' preference to live in isolation or refusal to be intimidated by any foreign culture and being mindful of residing close to their lands to farm. In most occupied lands originally indigenous to *Gbagyis*, the *Gbagyi* people shift to the outskirts/suburbs of towns and cities because they don't want to be disconnected from their farmlands. The *Gbagyi* people always demonstrate honesty,

and transparency in their dealings and are accommodative in nature. These attributes gave birth to the slogan "*mu yishi gwari gwari*", meaning let's do it in its dearest, cleanest and most honest terms (Ciroma, 1995: p67).

Gbagyi dialects

Language with dialect has become so common among Africans today and the *Gbagyi* language is not an exception. This is because of the pragmatic nature of the language with about thirty-five dialects (Yaro Sada, 1996: p3). It is common to find a *Gbagyi* village with a dialect which may only be understood by their neighbour. The *Gbagyi Ngenge* (aka *matai*) covers Minna, Bosso, Kuta, Paiko, Kaduna, Nasarawa and its environment; while the *Gbagyi Yamma* (aka *Nkwa*) covers Izom, Gawu, and F.C.T. Within the *Ngenge*, there are also *Gbagyi Nkwa* and out of this there is the *Kwange* and the *Paiko's*. Within the *Kwange* again, there are some in Minna, Bosso, Maikunkele, Shatta, etc. that also have minor differences between them. For example, Bosso/Maikunkele will say "*Nche*" meaning myself, while Minna, Kuta, and Kaduna will say "*Ngye*".^{2,3} Despite dialectic differences, it is difficult for strangers to differentiate between them but not within themselves. Basically, the language remains the same

except for cases of minor differences and or in the meaning of some words.

It is pertinent to note that more *Gbagyi* dialects exist among the *Gbagyi* of Minna, Paiko, Izom, Gwagwalada and Kwali, among others. Those around Kuta, Dikko, Kaduna, Bwari and Nasarawa have less number of dialects. However, better communication between these dialects is being enhanced with colloquialism, now that there is greater integration within the *Gbagyis*.⁴

Characteristics of Gbagyi women

The *Gbagyi* woman is a wife, mother and nurse. The upbringing of a child is mostly her sole responsibility; she prepares her children for a long life achievement. She guides children to the path of knowledge, righteousness and prosperity. The woman is the first child agent of socialization. The *Gbagyi* woman is extremely industrious as she always engages in commodity production and participates in agricultural endeavours. She is often not part of the practical farming activities, yet participates in clearing the land for cultivation and planting seeds or seedlings on ridges prepared by the men. The women harvest groundnuts and extract the oil from various nuts and crops. They gathered firewood; some make locally prepared bear (*Oje*) which is consumed pleurably on

occasions (Shednayi, 1999). They also prepare local soup ingredients.

The women keep the home and surroundings clean lay the floor of the house and help men bring home harvest. The harvests they bring home are usually rewarded with the proportion of the crops harvested. All these are of course in addition to the fetching of water, cooking and other domestic chores. A *Gbagyi* woman is a pillar and supporter of her husband in so many ways. While the husband provides raw food, she takes the responsibility of soup. She provides warm water and washes his back when he comes back from the farm or other activities.⁵ There are no limits to the number of wives a man could marry. In fact, the more wives a man has, the more he is considered successful, wealthy and rated highly in society. Indeed, a woman bearing children is considered more valuable, because children are seen as economic assets.

Women in Firewood Production: An Empirical Review

While there is no extensive body of literature specifically dedicated to women in firewood production and selling, studies related to gender roles in forestry, rural livelihoods, and the informal economy dominate insights into the experiences of women engaged in these activities. In their respective studies,

researchers have investigated the multifaceted impacts of firewood use in various regions, shedding light on crucial aspects related to gender, health, environmental degradation, and socio-economic implications. Carol et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted relationship between gender and forestry, offering valuable insights into the roles of women across various dimensions of forest-based livelihoods.

Nathan et al. (2018) investigate gender-related factors influencing cooking fuel use in rural areas, suggesting that the value of women's labour plays a pivotal role in fuel adoption. However, Swapnali (2015) investigates the physiological exertion and musculoskeletal problems faced by tribal women in Meghalaya during firewood collection. Highlighting the unnoticed work of rural women in fuel and water collection, cooking, and child care, Nagbrahmam and Sambrani (1983) noted how this contribute to their increased drudgery and poverty. Elena (2015) studies time allocation in rural Ethiopian households, emphasizing women's involvement in time-consuming fuel collection.

Margaret and Clancy (2020) focus on gendered health issues arising from firewood use in rural areas. They underscore the

neglect of negative health impacts, particularly on women, emphasizing the necessity of incorporating social issues like gender and health into energy policies. Wole-Alo et al. (2022) also explore the health impact of firewood use on rural women in Ogun State, Nigeria, advocating for alternative energy sources with fewer health hazards. Raimi et al. (2015) investigate the environmental degradation resulting from women's reliance on firewood in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Rooted in Materialist Feminist theory, their study highlights women's material marginalization and its contribution to biodiversity loss, increased carbon emissions, and sustained flooding. The research provides policy recommendations to address these challenges. Austin et al. (2012) concentrate on the role of firewood in deforestation in South-Eastern Nigeria, emphasizing the interconnectedness of trees and women in household economies. They argue that deforestation poses a threat to sustainable development.

Nabinta et al. (2007) examine rural energy challenges in Nigeria, emphasizing the need for integrated energy packages to foster sustainable rural development. For Daniel et al. (2017), on firewood marketing in Uyo Capital City, they identify factors influencing profitability and recommend the evaluation

of firewood species production. While examining energy burdens on women in rural Kenya, Njenga et al. (2021) propose solutions such as farm residues and efficient cookstoves. Inayatullah and Pervez (2015) discuss gender time poverty and the impact of introducing improved cooking stoves on fuel wood consumption and women's time. Nuratu (2016) examines the gender dimension in fuel wood management, recommending women's involvement in decisions on alternative clean energy sources. Bina Agarwal (2010) critically examines the governance structures and challenges faced by women in community forestry. These works not only deepen our understanding of gender dynamics but also highlight the need for more inclusive and equitable forest management practices.

Comparing perspectives on well-being between firewood and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) users in rural India, Yuwan et al. (2020) highlight shifts in perceptions after transitioning to LPG. Even though Larinde and Olasupo (2011) investigated the socio-economic aspects of fuelwood collection in Oyo State, Nigeria, emphasizing profitability and the need for education to promote rational exploitation and tree preservation, research in other areas is needed. The Gbagyi women in Central Nigeria have a history of

involvement in firewood production and peculiar ways of confronting emerging challenges of sustainability and energy shift. This aspect of Gbagyi women's economic resilience and dynamism has not received adequate academic attention.

Feminist Political Economy: A Theoretical Review

Challenging conventional paradigms and advocating for a more inclusive and gender-aware approach to economic analysis, feminist economists have collectively reshaped the landscape of economic thought. Waring's (1988) work emphasizes the undervaluation of women's unpaid work in traditional economic measures. She calls for a reevaluation of economic systems to recognize and account for the significant contributions of women in various spheres, challenging the gender biases inherent in economic indicators. Elson's (1999) research focuses on the intersectionality of gender, class, and race in economic structures. She emphasizes the need for policies that address the specific needs of women in economic development, highlighting the interconnected nature of social identities and economic outcomes. Folbre's (1997) contributions centre on the economics of care and household production. Her work explores the

economic implications of caregiving and challenges traditional economic models that often neglect the importance of unpaid care work in sustaining societies.

Sen and Nussbaum (1993), through the Capability Approach, provide a framework that goes beyond traditional economic indicators to assess human well-being. Their approach emphasizes the importance of individuals' capabilities and freedoms, offering a broader perspective that aligns with feminist goals of addressing human development and agency. Sen's (2007) contributions encompass issues related to women's health, development, and economic empowerment. She has advocated for gender-sensitive policies and programs, recognizing the importance of addressing women's specific needs to achieve meaningful and sustainable development.

Van Staveren (2011) has worked on feminist methodology, economic modelling, and the economics of development. Her contributions include advocating for pluralism in economic thinking and promoting diverse perspectives that better capture the complexities of economic interactions, including gender dynamics. Ostrom's (1990) work on commons and collective action has implications for understanding the role of women in resource

management. While not exclusively focused on feminist economics, her research contributes to discussions on gender and economics, particularly in the context of shared resources. Nelson (2001) advocates for incorporating feminist perspectives into economic analysis. Her work challenges gender biases in economic models and promotes a more inclusive approach that considers the diverse experiences and contributions of women in economic systems.

Methodology and Theoretical Underpinnings

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research to investigate the involvement of Gbagyi women in firewood production in Central Nigeria. The research is anchored in feminist economics, aiming to uncover the intersectionality of gender, culture, and sociopolitical economic role of women. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the historical experiences, challenges, and cultural influences that shape the involvement of Gbagyi women in firewood production.

The study utilizes a purposive sampling method to identify 35 key informants who provide rich, relevant data on the topic. These

informants include 10 Gbagyi women actively engaged in firewood production (28.6%), 8 community leaders (22.9%) with insights into the cultural and economic aspects of firewood production, 7 local market traders (20.0%) involved in the buying and selling of firewood, 5 environmental and academic experts (14.3%) with knowledge of the ecological impact of firewood production, and 5 social/civil society groups and policymakers (14.3%) focusing on rural economic development and women's economic empowerment. Data collection involved in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews provided insights into personal experiences and sociopolitical and economic impacts, while participant observation offered a physical understanding of the daily activities and social interactions involved in firewood production. Additionally, content analysis of documents and records contextualized the findings from interviews and observations.

The analysis of data process began with the transcription and coding of interviews and field notes, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to cultural significance, economic resilience, gender roles, and environmental impact. Data from interviews, observations, and content

analysis were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. The findings were then interpreted through the lens of feminist economics, emphasizing the economic contributions of Gbagyi women and the interplay of gender and culture. Finally, a coherent narrative was constructed to highlight the sociopolitical and economic roles of Gbagyi women in firewood production and their impact on community development.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a feminist economics framework to explore the socioeconomic aspects of Gbagyi women's involvement in firewood production in Central Nigeria. Feminist economics examines how gender roles and inequalities impact economic structures, policies, and outcomes (Agenjo-Calderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019; MacDonald, 2003; Van Staveren et al., 2007; Barker, 2013). By emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, class, and ethnicity, this framework provides a lens to understand how Gbagyi women navigate economic activities within their specific cultural and social contexts. The incorporation of feminist economics enables a comprehensive analysis of the roles,

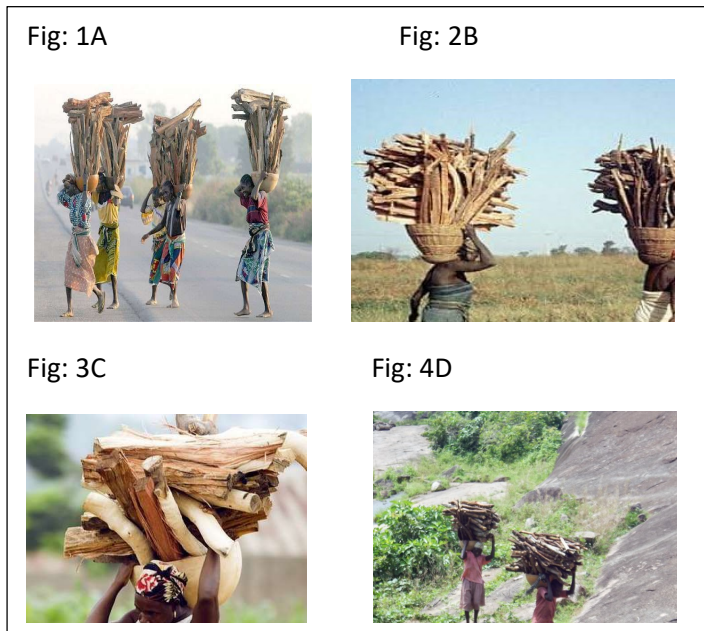
challenges, and contributions of Gbagyi women in the firewood production and its broader societal implications.

Feminist economics emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional economic theories in addressing issues related to gender, inequality, and women's experiences (Agenjo-Calderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019). Key figures who have shaped the field include Marilyn Waring (1988), Julie A. Nelson (2001), Diane Elson (1999), Nancy Folbre (1997), Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (1993), Gita Sen (2007), Irene van Staveren (2011), and Elinor Ostrom (1990). This approach critically examines traditional economic theories and practices, emphasizing the recognition and valuation of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, the significance of the care economy, and the intersection of gender with other social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity. Applying feminist economics to the study of Gbagyi women in firewood production offers valuable insights into how their economic activities are shaped by traditional gender roles and societal expectations. It also highlights their agency,

decision-making power, and the intersectional factors influencing their socioeconomic resilience (Barker, 2013; Njenga & Mendum, 2021).

Gbagyi Women and Socio-Political and Economic Development

In the political structure and power distribution among the Gbagyis, women have no or less role in the decision-making process. However, the culture of the people gives a prominent role to the women in economic engagement and social development of their communities. The progress and development of every community in Gbagyi society depends on the active role of the women folk. Gbagyi women are becoming active members of their communities as significant socioeconomic contributors to community development through their dominance of firewood production.⁶ They collect, transport and sell firewood to earn income to support their families. They traditionally carry a load on their shoulder, including firewood. This is illustrated in the pictures below.

Figure 1. Gbagyi women carrying firewood

Source: A: <https://www.flysafemagazine.com/why-gbagyi-differs-from-all-tribes/>;

B: <https://en.rattibha.com/thread/1569211666377867264>;

C: <https://tr.pinterest.com/pin/666392076089920341/visual-search/>;

D: <https://jujufilms.tv/2014/07/08/fetching-firewood/>

The Gbagyi women as shown above are mostly known for carrying loads on their shoulders or on the upper parts of their backs. They have a lot of respect and attach much importance to the head and believe that there cannot be life without the head. They believed that the head is the powerhouse of every human being and as such it should be free from excessive loads. The neck connects other parts of the body and should therefore not be made a pillar of transporting loads.⁷

Gbagyi women believed that one could carry more and heavier loads on the shoulder which provides the added alternative of shifting the weight from one burden shoulder to another. They also believed that with this system weight of the loads is transmitted to and shared with all parts of the body, unlike the situation when the head is used while the neck suffers most.⁸

How firewood is obtained?

The firewood is mostly obtained during the dry season when the farm produce is brought home and women seem to be less engaged. The season favours much more free movement into terrains that hitherto could not be reached during the rainy season. The season also favours less risk of attacks by wild animals or reptiles and enhances easier cutting and piling of firewood (Graham, 2003).⁹ Obtaining or production of firewood is a woman-organized economic activity among the Gbagyi people. Given the historical significance of notable community perception of the role of Gbagyi women in firewood production, one significant historical factor is the migration of the Gbagyi people. "As we moved and settled in different regions, the practice of firewood collection adapted to the local environments. It became not just a domestic task but also a means of economic contribution, especially for women."¹⁰

This outlined the economic role an average Gbagyi woman attached to firewood. According to an informant, "the tradition of women being responsible for firewood production dates back generations. It's considered a practical task associated with nurturing the household. There's a belief that women, through this activity, contribute to

the overall well-being of the family."¹¹ The process of obtaining firewood is labour intensive especially when considering the tools used, gathering and transporting home from place of produce.

The basic tools used in the process of firewood production are axes of different sizes depending on the user, cutlass and a bowl of either flat shape or oval shape. The axe is used to cut down the selected trees. The cutlass is used to cut attached branches of trees (Baba, 2000). They may be allowed to dry in the forest or where the tree is cut down to reduce the heaviness of the wood. The obtained firewood is transported home immediately or at a later date by individual women involved, or a mother with her children. It may also be taken home if the place of production is not far from home. Gathered firewood can remain in the forest or near farmlands because of the security of the product. The Gbagyi society does not allow taking what doesn't belong to a person and severe punishments await erring members such as public beating or reporting to security agents.¹²

The firewood is also obtained through communal labour (*Gbedogu*), women formed themselves into groups and provided the needed labour to individuals one after the other just as the men used in the farm. In a

typical Gbagyi village, firewood gathered could last for many years, while in every dry season, more and more could be gathered. This gathering serves so many purposes, in case of health challenges and the woman is not strong enough to go and fetch firewood in the forest, the reserved ones at home will be used pending when she recovers. It is mostly common for women to assist one another by fetching water when the need arises, but very rare to assist one another by fetching firewood. It also served as a gift/present especially to a nursing mother, ceremonies, etc when money or relevant materials cannot be afforded.¹³

Among the Gbagyi young girls of Central Nigeria generally, they don't own nor sell firewood of their own, rather they gather, own and sell firewood in conjunction with their mother. The mother designs and directs the sale of firewood. However, on the demise of the mother, the daughter inherits the firewood left behind by the mother, except in some cases where religion has defined the system of inheritance. It's pertinent to point out that all the basic tools used are locally provided by the blacksmith or purchased in nearby markets.¹⁴

Gbagyi Women and Firewood Production as a Sociopolitical and Economic Engagement

Firewood refers to the wood intended to be burned, typically for heat. It could be further explained as the substance making up the central part of the trunk and branches of a tree used as a material for construction, or to generate energy or fuel for heating or cooking (Njenga and Mendum, 2021; Jacob et al., 2017; Larinde and Olasupo, 2011). Among the Gbagyi women, the rocky and mountainous terrains of their ancestral abodes provide rich reserves of treasured trees. Therefore, piling firewood for domestic and market use is a mandatory cultural activity for every housewife, who performs such a task with joy and pride.

However, it's important to point out here that not all trees are used for firewood.

Some trees are considered more suitable for firewood, not just for their burning properties but also for cultural reasons. For instance, certain trees are avoided due to spiritual beliefs. The choice of wood is often guided by a blend of practicality and cultural considerations.¹⁵

This is a result of some belief in customs and traditions, and this also varies from tribes and as well communities. Trees such as '*koyi*' (*kadenya* in Hausa) (shea nut tree in English),

naknayi or *akagyi* tree (*kiriya* in Hausa) and *loyi*, etc, are mostly used for firewood not just because of the heat they provide, but because of their good potash (*asna*), while '*Za'ani*' tree which is believed to be an abode for ancestral spirit is not used for firewood. However, in the event of a newborn baby, some parts of the tree is cut, boiled and used in bathing and giving to infants to drink. Related to this also is the *kwaayi tree* or *baobab tree* (*itachen kuka* in Hausa). It is believed that this tree when used for firewood, the whole community will face the wrath of mosquitoes throughout the season.¹⁶ Gathering of firewood for domestic and commercial uses is an integral part of Gbagyi culture. Any married woman who fails in this capacity is considered lazy and valueless. Although, Gbagyi are one of the many ethnic groups indigenous to Niger State and FCT, have several cultural attractions for housewives, gathering heaps of firewood, reminiscent of the famed groundnut pyramids, is a cultural obligation fulfilled happily by every woman.¹⁷ However, it is interesting to point out that, the various movements of the Gbagyi people into different abodes searching for shelter and virgin land for cultivation and security during the 16th and 17th centuries, the gathering of wood fire and the way they arranged it has

always been a significant factor in identifying their various settlements. A social historian from Kuta Community said that “in our community, firewood production by Gbagyi women is often seen as a traditional and essential role. It's perceived as part of the gender division of labour, where women are expected to contribute to household needs, and firewood, being a basic necessity, is considered their domain.”¹⁸

The Gbagyi women uniquely arranged firewood, mostly outside their houses known as "*Shuwa Doko*". Firewood is arranged simultaneously according to sizes, starting with the bigger/ heavier ones. Just like their neighbors such as the Koro and Kadara ethnic groups, the Gbagyis arrange firewood in their houses in other to serve two purposes. First firewood is arranged to serve as a fence of a house, especially among the Koro people, secondly; wood fire is arranged in the form of a cage used for rearing/keeping animals, such as pigs among the Kadara people.¹⁹

It is significant to point out that prior to the 20th century, the gathering of firewood by the Gbagyi women of central Nigeria was merely a cultural heritage without any economic significance attached. Sources ascertain the fact that even during the period of trade by barter, there were no shreds of evidence providing that the Gbagyi women used

firewood as an article of trade within themselves or with their neighbours. However, firewood was gathered through communal labour for a new bride and for a mother who gave birth to friends and relatives. The politics in this manner is the importance attached to the number or group of women that participated in the gathering and the amount of loads so gathered. Thus this determines the power and prestige of a Gbagyi woman.²⁰

It is also pertinent to point out that, the amalgamation of Nigeria by the colonial masters in 1914 and the establishment of rail lines in the country in 1908-1918, which passes through the heart of Gbagyi land, led to intergroup relations as a result of socio-economic activities. Among the Gbagyi women of Niger and FCT, this social interaction led to rural-urban migration and urbanization led to the establishment of a market in the present Minna mobile Central area. The Gbagyi Yamma (Nkwa) were the first women to commercialize firewood. They were primarily selling for the migrants and railway workers in the Minna metropolis. People were seen patronizing Gbagyi (Nkwa) women and the women would also carry the firewood home for their customers. The Gbagyi Ngenge (Matai) later joined in the business thereby creating competition

amongst the various dialects. The growth in the trade and competition that followed led to the Gbagyi women hawking firewood across the nooks and crannies in the Minna metropolis.²¹

By the 20th century, the commercialization of firewood among the Gbagyi women assumed a wider dimension. Among the Gbagyi women of Kaduna and Nasarawa states, women sell firewood to raise capital to start other businesses such as small-scale manufacturing goods, and buying and selling of cash crops. The Gbagyi women of Kuta, Paiko, Gawu and Bosso in Niger State, on the other side, sell firewood to obtain money to farm crops such as groundnut, soya beans, etc. and to get funds in preparing children for marriage.²² A Psychologist indigenous to Bosso Community said:

The income generated from firewood sales acts as a financial buffer for families, especially during challenging times. It contributes to reducing poverty levels in our community and supports various economic activities. For instance, some women invest their earnings in small businesses, creating a ripple effect that strengthens the economic fabric of the entire community.²³

Among the Gbagyi of Ushafa in FCT, the commercialization of firewood has become a must, because it provides ample opportunity,

especially among the hard-working widows to fund their children's education. This explains why it's very rare to find a Gbagyi widow in prostitution. Accordingly, a women activist in the Gbagyi community of Abuja said that:

Firewood production is a significant part of our economic activities. By collecting, processing, and selling firewood, we contribute to the household income. We help meet basic needs like food, education, and healthcare. Additionally, our community benefits from the economic activities generated, which, in turn, contributes to local development.²⁴

Some of the women used the income generated from firewood production to grant soft loans to their husbands during the farming season to enable them to acquire farm inputs such as fertilizer and other tools. The loan is paid back in cash or with farm produce after harvest.²⁵ The women right from inception are known to be hardworking. They are seen assuming the position of breadwinners in their families (Biran et al., 2004). This is proven beyond reasonable doubt as the reasons behind the dominant role of the Gbagyi women in this sector of the economy. A popular Gbagyi woman selling firewood along Suleja-Minna road said that:

Firewood sales have played a crucial role in funding our children's education. Many women in our community allocate a portion of their earnings to ensure their children receive proper education. Additionally, during social festivities, the income helps families participate more actively, contributing to the vibrancy and unity of the community.²⁶

The mothers are so close to the daughters; they are often seen as associates. The intimacy is therefore a gradual process towards preparing and providing the items in order of priority for the daughter towards marriage. To achieve this goal, the woman tends not to rely completely on the father's efforts by engaging in selling firewood. By engaging in firewood production, "the Gbagyi women not only create economic opportunities for ourselves but also contribute to poverty reduction in their communities. The income generated circulates within the local economy, uplifting various households."²⁷ Moreover, the collective efforts promote a sense of community solidarity, which is vital for addressing shared challenges and improving overall well-being.

Other economic activities involved and dominated by Gbagyi women, especially of FCT include; the manufacturing/designing of

pots among the women of Wushafa and Kwali. The role of women in the economic development of their communities cannot be complete without acknowledging the significant role of the late icon and pottery model Dr Ladi Kwali.

Unveiling Challenges and Opportunities for Gbagyi Women in Firewood Production

The gathering and selling of firewood among the Gbagyi women of central Nigeria comes with some challenges. While it is recognized as an essential task, “there's a tendency to undervalue the economic contribution of Gbagyi women in firewood production. The traditional gender roles sometimes limit the recognition of the economic worth associated with the hard work these women put into firewood production.”²⁸ This is further elaborated by a political economist and feminist scholar: “since it's viewed as a ‘women's duty,’ there might be less external support or acknowledgement of the economic significance. This can affect things like access to resources, funding, or even policies that would otherwise empower Gbagyi women economically.”²⁹

Personal observation of firewood production and sells revealed that firewood is getting scarce. Unlike two or three decades ago when

firewood could be obtained a little distance from the villages, the women have to go a very long distance in search of an available place or forest where a kind of firewood could be found. This, therefore, resulted in changes in the quantity and prices of firewood. The longer the distance of sites or sources from the village, the higher the transportation cost and the higher the prices of firewood. Consequently, the deeper the women go into the forest to fetch firewood, the more they get exposed to wild animals and endanger their lives, as well as forest officials. After fetching firewood, some women encounter forest officials or lack transportation means to reach broader markets. Lack of adequate transformation system to convey firewood to markets remains a major challenge and “interventions could include creating local markets, where women can sell directly to the community. Although, some of them access cooperative transportation systems to reach more distant markets places.”³⁰

There is the problem of deforestation and attacks by the forest superintendents. They believed that no one could stop them from exploiting the God-given gift of nature in their environment. When they trespass into government reservation areas, oftentimes, they are chased out and when apprehended by

securities, they are prosecuted according to the law.³¹ In some cases, they have to lobby with the guards. It's quite unfortunate that they don't know the gravity of the problem that forest exploitation can pose to human health.³² However, a social welfare worker in Paiko talked about how some community leaders and NGOs are initiating awareness campaigns to promote a more inclusive understanding of Gbagyi women's economic roles.³³ These initiatives encourage recognizing and valuing the economic contributions of women in firewood production but encourage reforestation.

From the cultural and spiritual realm, there is a cultural belief that women also face problems of spiritual attacks when tempered with trees that are spiritually occupied. These trees are believed to be homes and places of meetings by evil spirits and attempt to destroy their domains attracts counter-attacks from the evil spirit. Oftentimes, the women had to call for the services of people who were believed to possess the powers to checkmate the spirits. This service may attract some financial implications that translate into the cost of production and the final price of the firewood to be sold to consumers. Oftentimes, it results in little or no gain for the women. Thus, interventions often involve community awareness

programs challenging stereotypes and emphasizing the economic value of women's contributions. While responding to how communities could understand and appreciate women's dual roles, a women activist noted that "we are fostering a more inclusive environment, encouraging women to actively engage in economic activities like firewood and charcoal production."³⁴

Firewood could also be fetched from an inherited land and trees could also be purchased to produce firewood.²⁰ But the inherited lands are getting smaller and more scarce as a result of growth in population, expansion and urbanisation. This explains why the firewood business today has become very lucrative. There is an ongoing shift in the demand for raw firewood to charcoal, derivable from firewood. Many firewood vendors are now converting firewood into charcoal to meet market demand and remain relevant in the cooking and heating needs of many households.

Modernization affects the economic production of firewood (Eze et al., 2021). The introduction and use of gas cookers, electronic gadgets and charcoal for cooking in various houses are affecting patronage of firewood, as many households prefer to go with the trend of modernity. The smoke from the wood also posed a threat to health. The

local method of fetching the wood is so much energy demanding and not all women can afford the services of engine operators. However, with basic business and financial literacy, Gbagyi women can make informed decisions about their economic activities. Interventions might involve workshops or training programs focused on entrepreneurship, financial management, and sustainable harvesting practices to enhance both economic and environmental outcomes. Such interventions can ensure the economic resilience of Gbagyi women and facilitate sustainable practices in emerging changes in energy preferences.³⁵

Conclusion

This study provides a multidimensional perspective to understanding cultural traditions, gender roles, sociopolitical and economic resilience of Gbagyi women within the Gbagyi community. The findings emphasize the pivotal role of Gbagyi women in the economic development of their communities through the culturally significant practice of firewood production. It highlights the evolving nature of firewood production, transitioning from a communal and cultural practice to a commercialized endeavour. This transformation is intricately linked to urbanization, market dynamics, and

changing consumer preferences. The commercialization of firewood among Gbagyi women reflects broader shifts in economic activities and livelihood strategies. It reflects the adaptability of communities to changing sociopolitical and economic contexts.

The theoretical framework, rooted in feminist economics theory, provides a lens through which to understand the intricate interplay of socioeconomic factors and gender dynamics. The study aligns with feminist economics to emphasize on recognizing and valuing women's economic contributions, often overlooked in conventional economic analyses. The framework proves instrumental in explaining the empowerment of Gbagyi women as economic agents and breadwinners, challenging traditional gender norms.

The research contributes significantly to existing knowledge by revealing the cultural and historical dimensions of firewood production among the Gbagyi people. It sheds light on the economic significance of this activity, not merely as a means of sustenance but as a pathway to poverty reduction, community development, and the empowerment of Gbagyi women in political decisions of communities. It bridges the gap between cultural practices, gender roles, and

socioeconomic resilience, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners. The research not only adds to the growing body of knowledge on feminist economics but also serves as a foundation for future studies exploring the economic contributions of women in diverse cultural contexts in the developing world. Ultimately, the study contributes to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of economic activities, recognizing the agency and impact of Gbagyi women in shaping the sociopolitical and economic development of Central Nigeria.

Disclosure statement: The authors of this article declared no competing interest concerning the research and publication of this paper.

Funding: This research received funding from TETFund with grant number TETF/DR&D/CE/UNI/LAPAI/IBR/2023/VOLI

¹ Interview with a community leader, Idris Adamu Zango, in Minna, Niger State, November 10, 2023

² Interview with an elderly housewife and firewood vendor in Fuka town, Niger State, October 28, 2023.

³ Interview with a social historian and community leader in Minna, Niger State, November 10, 2023

⁴ Interview with a community leader in Paiko, Niger State, November 11, 2023

⁵ Interview with a housewife and firewood vendor in Gwam, Niger State, April 22, 2023. It is observed that men have recognized women as partners in

household maintenance and women have accepted such responsibility across all households visited.

⁶ Interview with a social welfare officer and community member of Kuta, Niger State, November 25, 2023

⁷ Interview with a house wife and community elder in Fuka town, Niger State, April 22, 2023

⁸ Interview with a retired civil servant in Kuta, Niger State, April 20, 2023

⁹ Interview with a community leader in Gawu, Niger State, October 25, 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with a community leader in Kuta, Niger State, November 14, 2023.

¹¹ Interview with a traditional title holder and community leader in Chanchaga, Minna, Niger State, April 10, 2023.

¹² Interview with a housewife and firewood vendor in Ushafa Village, Federal Capital Territory, April 15, 2023.

¹³ Interview with a youth leader in Gawu, Niger State, November 12, 2023.

¹⁴ Interview with social historian and community member of Kuta in Minna, October 28, 2023

¹⁵ interview with a farmer and community member of Gwam, Niger State, October 20, 2023

¹⁶ Interview with a female civil servant and community member of Chanchaga, Minna, Niger State, November 10, 2023.

¹⁷ Interview with a social historian in Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University Lapai, Niger State, November 10, 2023

¹⁸ Interview with a housewife and firewood vendor in Kafin Koro, Niger State, April 20, 2023.

¹⁹ Interview with a business woman in Kuta, Niger State, April 25, 2023.

²⁰ Interview with an elderly business woman in Kafin Koro, Niger State, April 20, 2023.

²¹ Interview with a social historian in Minna, Niger State, October 20, 2023.

²² Interview with a social psychology expert in Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University Lapai, Niger State, October 21, 2023.

²³ Interview with a woman activist in Ushafa, FCT, Abuja, April 20, 2023.

²⁴ Interview with a firewood vendor in Lambata, Niger State, October 20, 2023.

²⁵ An interview with a firewood vendor in Lambata originally in Gbagyi Language but translated into English Language by an expert, November 10, 2023.

²⁶ Interview with a Gbagyi student in Niger State College of Education Minna, November 19, 2023.

- ²⁷ Interview with a social historian in Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University Lapai, October 20, 2023.
- ²⁸ Interview with a political economy expert in Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University Lapai, October 20, 2023.
- ²⁹ Interview with an environmental official in Paiko, Niger State, November 12, 2023.
- ³⁰ Interview with a forest management official in Paiko, Niger State, November 12, 2023

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- ³¹ Interview with a forest management official in Paiko, Niger State, November 12, 2023
- ³² Interview with a social worker in Paiko, Niger State, November 10, 2023.
- ³³ Interview with a woman activist and philanthropist in Minna, Niger State, November 20, 2023.
- ³⁴ Interview with a retired civil servant and woman leader in Chanchaga, Minna, Niger State, November 20, 2023.
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