

Rural youth in southern Nigeria: fractured lives and ambitious futures

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Barbara Crossouard 

Mairead Dunne

University of Sussex, UK

Carolina Szyp

Institute of Development Studies, UK

Tessy Madu

National Root Crops Research Institute, Nigeria

Béla Teekin

International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, Nigeria

Abstract

This article draws on recent research (2017–20) into the livelihoods and imagined futures of rural youth in four communities in southern Nigeria. The research involved observations, sex-segregated focus group discussions and individual interviews. Taking up insights from sociologists of education and work, our analysis shows how rural youth simultaneously navigated schooling, farming, low-paid vocational work and family obligations in ways that were highly gendered. We show the gulf between youth's daily lives and their imagined futures, and how their desires for better lives, whether through 'white-collar' work or expanded farming activities, often involved moving to more 'civilised' or 'developed' contexts. Commitment to family nevertheless ran through youth's narratives, in ways that reflected a deeply gendered, sexual economy. We conclude by highlighting the relevance of a connected sociology that embraces postcolonial and feminist scholarship to advance future studies of rural youth, gender and work in the Global South.

Keywords

education, gender, imagined futures, Nigeria, rural youth, work

Corresponding author:

Barbara Crossouard, University of Sussex, Essex House, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK.

Email: b.crossouard@sussex.ac.uk

Contemporary concerns about climate change, employment, and sustainable development have heightened interest in the future of rural communities globally. Questions about how rural youth imagine their futures are germane to these concerns, especially in the Global South, given its burgeoning youth populations. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular has populations with the highest proportions of youth of any world region (UN, 2020). This article explores rural youth's future imaginaries in Nigeria, the region's largest economy and its most populous nation (c.200 million), with just under half of the population living in rural contexts (World Bank, 2019). It draws upon a wider research project that explored the livelihoods and imagined futures of rural youth in four SSA countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda). A main research aim was to develop a nuanced, qualitative depiction of rural youth livelihoods and imagined futures. Key aspects included whether rural youth wished to remain in farming, or were intent on migrating to urban environments; how education figured in youth's livelihoods and imagined futures; and, given the chronic gender inequalities that prevail in many SSA societies, how these processes were gendered.

The following sections first address conceptual debates relating to youth, education and work, particularly in relation to SSA. We then turn to the Nigerian context, before elaborating on the research methodology and methods. The analysis that follows is structured around three themes; first, in contrast to an idealised trajectory from education to work, we show how rural youth in SSA typically juggle both, in ways that are deeply gendered. Second, we turn to rural youth's 'imagined futures'. This concept allows us to explore what youth anticipate for themselves in the future, including how their imagined future selves are gendered, and what forms of masculinity and femininity are privileged within the value systems that frame their imaginaries (Stahl et al., 2020). More broadly, this conceptualisation helps in understanding the moral and symbolic economies which structure youth's positioning in society, including with respect to education and work (Ball et al., 1999; France et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2019). The final theme explores how these imagined futures position the rural versus the urban. In our conclusions we take up postcolonial, decolonial and feminist insights to consider implications for further sociological research into youth futures in the Global South.

Rural youth, education and work in sub-Saharan Africa

The concept of youth as a distinct population subgroup has always been fraught with ambiguities. From the time that it was invoked in industrialising societies such as England, young unattached men were felt to represent a threat to law and order (France, 2007). In contemporary times, international policy construes youth ambivalently, either as a demographic dividend – where they contribute productively to innovation, creativity and democratic change – or as a demographic deficit, where youth are seen as a destructive force, prone to irrational, risky behaviours and potential radicalisation (UN, 2016). Honwana and de Boeck (2005) similarly frame African youth through the dichotomy of 'makers' or 'breakers' – where again, a dominant concern is the danger posed to society by idle young men. In policy spheres, youth are typically defined through chronological age (African Union, 2006; UN, n.d.), positioned within a staged, developmental

trajectory from childhood through education to responsible, working adulthood that is Eurocentric in origin (Farrugia, 2018).

The dominant assumption here is of a transition from school to waged employment. In post-industrial societies, however, the changing landscapes of work and education have made such ‘transitions’ more precarious and protracted. This has provoked much debate about the disembedding of the late modern self, and the waning relevance of structures such as class, gender and family (Beck, 1992). In the field of youth studies, these propositions have been resisted by those who argue for the continuing significance of structural constraints (France and Roberts, 2015; Roberts, 2010), as opposed to those who reframe youth transitions as both individual and social within a ‘social generations’ paradigm (Woodman and Wyn, 2013). Such debates further complicate long-standing schisms between structural and cultural traditions in the sociology of youth transitions (MacDonald et al., 2001). Despite attempts to find a middle ground, the field remains riven with divisions (Bessant et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2019; Johansson, 2017).

Although increasingly contended, the ideal of a linear trajectory from childhood to waged employment and adulthood remains firmly installed within international policy. However, such a pathway remains far from the experiences of youth in the Global South. A range of studies, mostly conducted in urban settings, indicates how African youth struggle with poverty and precarity as they attempt to achieve the markers of ‘respectable’ adulthood. (Banks, 2016; Langevang, 2008; Sommers, 2010). These markers are unremittingly gendered, typically intersecting with ideals of secure employment and marriage. In rural and urban contexts, education is recurrently cited as offering the promise of individual social mobility (Langevang, 2008) and ‘bright futures’ (Frye, 2012). However, such promises remain somewhat illusory, particularly given the contraction in public sector positions as a result of neoliberal reforms. The assumption that schooling and work represent two distinct life stages has also proved to be suspect. More typically in the Global South, youth (and children) routinely combine work (paid and unpaid) with schooling, often from an early age (Maconachie and Hilson, 2016; Morrow, 2013; Dunne and Ananga, 2013).

A particular concern for this article was that by privileging waged work, this idealised trajectory compounds the invisibility of women’s social reproductive work, and obscures how the very concept of work is gendered (Finlay et al., 2019; Rai et al., 2019). Women’s reproductive work has been recognised in feminist scholarship as central to capitalist economies (Butler, 1997; Mies, 2014; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that the ‘social contract’ which lies at the heart of modern societies could more accurately be depicted as a ‘sexual contract’ (Pateman, 1988). In other words, the development of capitalism depended upon harnessing women’s social and reproductive labour, ensuring female subordination within the domestic or private sphere, usually through marital relations (Mouffe, 1992). Women’s reproductive work still gains little recognition and they remain over-represented in insecure, low-paid, part-time positions (ILO, 2017; McDowell, 2014) including in rural Africa (Koolwal, 2019). International responses have been contradictory however. While Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) advocates the right to decent work in ways that seem to privilege the formal economy and its socio-legal frameworks, this sits alongside the promotion of ‘micro-entrepreneurship’ usually in the informal sector as a route out of poverty (Rai et al., 2019: 374).

Across SSA, the employment situation bears little resemblance to that in industrialised or post-industrial societies. The very terms used to characterise employment and work become of questionable relevance, particularly for women's work. As Finlay et al. (2019) point out, the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) is considered a 'gold standard' labour force survey, and yet the very order in which questions are posed constructs women's work as secondary to that of men. Others highlight how rural women's work may not be recognised as 'work' at all within such surveys (Koolwal, 2019). Both texts illuminate how understandings of 'work' can readily leave the domestic and reproductive labour of women unaccounted for, rendering it invisible, in what is effectively a sexual economy.

The conjunction of schooling and work is a further issue within international policy. Human capital theory (HCT) has provided an important rationale for the development of education. However, some of its premises are of dubious relevance in our research contexts, notably its assumptions that schooling and work are two distinct phases, and that it is possible therefore to calculate the 'rates of return' from education. This logic misrecognises how many young people in the Global South work from an early age, to support themselves, their families and their own schooling (Crossouard and Dunne, 2021; Crossouard et al., 2021; Dunne and Ananga, 2013; Okyere, 2012) and indeed are often required to do physical labour at school (Humphreys et al., 2015). The macro-economic focus of human capital theory and its uncritical framing of education as a closed 'black box' system (Resnik, 2006) cannot attend to the complex social dynamics of education, including their contributions to the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984) and patriarchal gender relations (Crossouard and Dunne, 2021; Dunne, 2008; Dunne, et al., 2006).

The final points are particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts. As others have highlighted (Ball, 1983; Nwauwa, 2020; Ogunlade, 1974), the introduction of education in colonial eras was limited to select, elite groups, who were deemed suitable to serve colonial interests. The rise in the social and material standing of this new educated class led to the strong association of education with social mobility but left postcolonial societies in Africa 'uniquely stratified into literate and illiterate classes' (Nwauwa, 2020: 18). Western education became seen as the 'hallmark of civilised training' and a pathway to respected, salaried positions, typically available in urban rather than rural environments – an imaginary that still prevails in rural youth's imagined futures (Boyden, 2013; Frye, 2012). Before turning to our analysis, we provide more specific elaborations of the Nigerian context.

The Nigerian context

Nigeria has the largest economy of all African countries and its largest population – now estimated at well over 200 million. Over 62% of the population live in extreme poverty. Around 50% live in rural contexts and 70% work in agriculture. The age distribution of the population is young – 61% are under the age of 24. Almost a fifth of youth are classified as 'unemployed', although given the size of the informal economy, this figure is also questionable (CIA, 2021). Gender inequalities are endemic – Nigeria ranks 128th out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Analysis (World Economic

Forum, 2020). Since becoming independent from British colonial rule, Nigeria has been fraught with conflict, including ethnic and religious conflict (Dunne, Crossouard et al., 2020, Dunne, Durrani et al., 2017). This economic and social profile makes Nigeria a vitally important context in which to explore rural youth livelihoods and their imagined futures.

With respect to education, rural/urban differences and gender inequalities are both important. As already highlighted, this is largely a legacy of the ways formal education was developed in colonial times. This evolved mainly in the south of the country, in coastal towns such as Lagos, which saw rapid expansion related to burgeoning trade and commerce during the colonial era. However, such education was reserved for an elite few in ways that were highly gendered. In her analysis of the development of colonial education, Ogunlade (1974) highlights how ‘western’ education prepared girls to be wives and mothers. As in other colonised contexts (Crossouard and Dunne, 2021; Leach, 2008; Mies, 2014), women who had traditionally been active in commerce were disempowered by this form of education (Okonkwo and Ezeh, 2008).

Despite considerable expansion of Nigeria’s education system, the legacy of the under-development of education in rural contexts and the disadvantaging of girls remain visible to this day. UNESCO’s World Inequality Database for Education shows that the lower secondary completion rate for youth is only 37% in rural contexts, versus 73% in urban contexts. Gender inequalities also remain important – only 45% of females who gain access to lower secondary schooling successfully complete, as opposed to 60% of males. In addition, Nigeria’s ranking for education (145th) in the Global Gender Gap Analysis makes it one of the most unequal education systems in the world with respect to gender (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Research methodology and methods

The research reported was a predominantly qualitative study that aimed to develop in-depth understandings of rural youth perspectives of their livelihoods and imagined futures, the part education played in these, and how this was gendered. It was conducted with the support of interdisciplinary research teams in two rural locations in south-east and south-west Nigeria, two in Osun State and two in Anambra State. Because of ongoing conflict and security concerns, research in Nigeria’s northern states was not possible.

The research involved a total of 16 sex-segregated focus group discussions (FGDs) with male and female youth, and 106 individual interviews. At each of the four locations, these comprised a minimum of eight livelihood interviews predominantly with youth aged 18–22; 12 life history interviews with slightly older youth, mostly aged 22–30; and six photo-voice interviews. The interviews varied in length, from around half an hour to an hour, occasionally more. They all explored the kinds of work participants were engaged in, the importance of education in their lives, and how they imagined their futures. Gender relations were also probed, by asking for example how their lives would be different if they were a young man or woman. A further 24 interviews were conducted with community elders to explore their perspectives of issues faced by young women and men in their communities.

Each set of interviews was conducted with an approximately equal number of young women and men and included participants with different educational backgrounds. The research followed the African Youth Charter (AU, 2006) definition of ‘youth’ as those aged 15–35. The age range of those interviewed was from 18 to 30, with a mean of 23. The interviews were conducted over approximately a week to ten days in each context, led by local researchers using local languages; with few exceptions, this involved Yoruba in the sites in the south-west, and Igbo in the south-east. With participants’ consent, the interviews were recorded, translated into English and fully transcribed. The research ethics of the overall study were reviewed and approved by the University of Sussex, UK, and the ethical committees of the institutions leading the research in each Nigerian state, the International Institute of Tropical Medicine and the National Root Crops Research Institute, Nigeria.

Excerpts from the interview transcripts are used to illustrate the analysis. The majority of excerpts draw on individual interviews with youth. Where this is not the case, the regional location code (SW and SE) is followed by FGD for focus group discussion, and E for elder interview. All excerpts from youth interviews are attributed by gender and age. The data analysis was thematic, taking up existing and emergent themes, and was supported by use of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Fractured lives and ambitious futures

Our analysis is framed around three broad themes: first, how rural youth livelihoods involved them simultaneously juggling the demands of education and work, rather than following any linear trajectory from one to the other; second, how rural youth imagined their futures and the ways this was gendered; and finally, youth discourses of deficit related to urban migration.

Juggling education and work in rural Nigeria

Against the notion that young people move in a linear trajectory from school to work, youth accounts suggested that they were constantly juggling both. As described by a male youth, school and work were routinely combined from an early age with work regarded as essential for basic sustenance:

I have been following them [my parents] to farm since I was 4 years old. I started schooling at that same age. So I did the two together [. . .] God should just help us, then when we are going to school we do not eat what we like to eat, we just eat what we see and the farm work requires good food. [. . .] Before going to school in the morning, I went farming and after school as well. [. . .] A day will not pass by without going to the farm, I enjoy farming. (SW, male, 25)

The necessary combination of paid and unpaid farming work was illustrated by a female youth. Like other participants, it was the modest income – gained in this case from ‘hawking’ (petty trading) – that had made her schooling possible. Although these different forms of work had clearly structured her life, she described them as being ‘no challenge’ and ‘never disturbing school’:

regarding schooling I had to save money small by myself. All the gain I got from hawking I saved it and that is what I used to start schooling at 7 years of age. [. . .] We went to farm between 5:30–7am, then we got dressed for school by 7:30am, and in the evening after school hours around 4pm, I went for hawking. (SW, female, 25)

A male focus group participant echoed these sentiments, while also illuminating how farming at some points in the year was incompatible with attending school:

If the family of the student is not rich or from a poor home, they know that they have to hustle to get through school. [. . .] Some during the rainy season will leave school to plant crops, then go back to school. If you want to be successful in life, you must plan to do two businesses at a time. (SE, male, FGD)

The multiple activities youth described typically included both paid and unpaid labour that was opportunistic and often influenced by seasonality. Many depicted moving from job to job and a general absence of formal, salaried employment. Precarity often reverberated through youth's livelihoods, as this male youth elaborated:

While I was growing up as a young boy, I always followed my parents to farm. At the same time, I learnt electrical artisan job while growing up and starting to support myself. I assisted my father on the fishing activities and fished for myself. I did all kinds of daily jobs, like field maintenance job – it was really hard labour, I will forever remember the job in my heart. I did charcoal processing job for some months [. . .] whenever the charcoal season is gone, I always looked for another job, like maintenance in the big farms and assisting tractor operators. (SW, male, 25)

Male youth in particular were expected to be self-sufficient. Income from such work was important for their own subsistence, and to pay for their education.

This often required moving from job to job in a complex mix of farming and non-farming activities:

I established cassava farm for myself in this village when I was in junior level. I did orange-picking for business between the ages of 12 to 14 and I went to urban areas to do bricklaying to raise more money for myself. I started the health course when I got to senior class and I was living in the hospital gaining one experience or the other, while I continued my education. Around this period, I stopped doing other jobs like bricklaying and orange-picking but I continued my farming while I did my studies. I completed my secondary education in 2013. (SW, male, 25)

Although other male youth described not being able to complete their education because they could not afford the costs, they enjoyed more freedom than female youth to take up different forms of paid labour. In contrast, female youth were more constrained in the work they could do, and often their depictions of their daily lives illuminated the extent they were involved in unpaid labour. While male and female youth both helped in farming, female youth shouldered greater expectations of unpaid domestic labour. This left young women whose family could not support them with no way of continuing in education:

When I come back from school, I cooked food, washed clothes and did other home chores. Also, during the weekend I went to live with my parents in the farm settlement every Friday to help them out with farm work and then return home on Sunday. There were not many challenges. [. . .] I would have loved to continue with my education but I couldn't due to lack of money, that was why I stopped schooling. (SE, female, 30)

Both male and female youth felt that parents were more protective of their daughters, as long as they remained in their charge:

as long as a female child is not married, parents feel obliged to support her, which is not the same for male child. They do not feel comfortable to let a female child go for hustling far away from their sight. (SW-FGD, male)

The invocation of marriage signals the dominant expectations of female youth in these rural contexts. Marrying one's daughter well was described in an interview with a female elder as the 'crowning glory' of a family; educating girls was also justified by male and female elders in terms of marriage capitals. In poorer families, continuing to support girl children in the home and at school was not always possible however. Girls who moved beyond parental sight were thought to be vulnerable to sexual abuse, such that marriage was the only respectable option:

My parents insisted they can't afford to send girls to school and she can't fend for herself like boys. She [my sister] ended up in marriage when she was struggling to make ends meet to continue schooling. (SW, female, 22)

My background has prevented me from going to school; it also made me to marry early in life. [. . .] Lack of money made my parents stop supporting my education beyond secondary school level. (SE, female, 30)

It was apparent that a powerful moral and symbolic economy framed young women's work, education and imagined futures, with both the parental and marital home functioning as a sustained space for unpaid domestic labour, as elaborated further in the next section.

Rural youth's imagined futures

Youth's imagined futures overwhelmingly reflected the desire to improve their situation, both materially and in terms of their social standing. Recurring themes in youth's imaginaries of their future work involved, first, their idealisation of obtaining a secure, salaried position, either in public administration or in professional life and, second, ambitions to expand farming activities to become managers of bigger, mechanised farms. As we elaborate later, these imagined futures were clearly gendered.

A future in salaried, 'white-collar', professional, or 'government' work was recurrently invoked when youth were asked about the work they wanted to do, even though there was little evidence of such work being available in these rural communities. These were coveted positions:

I would love to use my certificate to work in company, ministry or local government. I love to make use of my brain and pen to collect salaries. (SW, female, 25)

I like the way they [civil engineers] dress and behave when they are working. They put on gloves, helmet and also have shoes they wear. They have kits. They don't joke with their work because it is a government job. (SW, male, 19)

The distinction attached to administrative or professional work was systematically associated with education, as suggested both in the reference to 'certificates' above, and this comment by a male youth:

schooling assists you to rise to a lofty height. Education makes you professional like lawyer, doctor and other enviable jobs in society. (SE, male, 22)

Education was the key for reaching 'high places' (SW, female), and was generally associated with non-manual forms of work. Several adult interviewees shared this imaginary, with one describing for example how she belonged to an 'educated family', whose pride was 'working in government agencies'. As described by Nwauwa (2020), a strong association of education with social mobility and increased social standing remained powerful in the accounts of many participants. Importantly however, greater access to education meant that a school-leaving certificate no longer guaranteed entry to such positions, which in any case are atypical of rural contexts. For those who had completed secondary education, higher education was often desired, but seemed mostly beyond their reach. Costs associated with schooling were the reason that many youth left school; as one elder put it, '[i]t is only the rich that can afford to send their children to school' (SE, E, male).

Although for some education was a pathway to different futures away from their current rural contexts, farming remained important to many. However, this was often not the same kind of farming that youth were engaged in now. Their imaginaries often involved moving into larger-scale, mechanised farming, which they would manage, rather than doing manual work. This vision of overseeing a larger farm was often cited by young men, but also some young women:

even I have the whole money in the world I cannot stop farming. I will still consider farming but this time more mechanised farming and use of fertiliser to increase yield. (SE, female, 18)

I will enter into commercial farming, by that time I will be matured financially, I will employ people to manage my farm, I will only come around to supervise the farm. (SE, male, 26)

In the same way that youth were often already involved across a wide portfolio of work activities, different work combinations characterised how many imagined their futures. For example, a male youth who wanted to move into plantation farming saw one business leading to another, noting that, '[o]nce the plantation is established, it's a cool source of income which can generate money to invest in other businesses' (SW, male, 24). Although at a different scale, many young women also spoke of combining farming with business activities such as petty trading, sewing, retailing clothes, and hairdressing.

The diverse portfolio of work activities that characterised rural youth's imagined futures was itself a response to precarity. Relying on one source of income was recognised as potentially problematic, and indeed some envisaged situations where one had no income at all. Being a farmer meant that at least one had basic sustenance:

Farming is an ancient work that can never be looked down on and if there are no farmers then there will be no food. If a farmer does not have money but has food in the field he cannot go hungry. Farming is important work that I have a passion for. *Oba ni agbe* [a farmer is a king]. (SW, female, 19)

When participants were asked what they wanted to avoid in the future, poverty, illness and death were frequently invoked. This question also illuminated the moral economy that framed rural youth livelihoods. Being 'indolent' and 'begging for food' was clearly associated with shame; being a farmer meant that at least the family did not have to beg. Farming provided basic sustenance, and so was something that many could not give up, even if this meant that farming was to some extent 'the choice of the necessary' – a phrase coined by Bourdieu (1984: 380), admittedly in a very different context, to describe how impoverished, working classes make a virtue of what is a necessity.

This economic, moral and symbolic economy was powerfully gendered. In depictions of the lives that female youth sought to avoid, marital status, sexual probity, education and work came together in highly moralised ways, positioning young women as subjects of worth – or in abjection – within their communities. This was particularly highlighted by a young woman (SE, female, 19), who invoked a series of 'things that can destroy a woman', repeating this phrase several times. Her account highlighted a complex set of values, where marriage and education bestowed respectability and distinction, as suggested earlier, while young women who fell outside such norms were demeaned. In the kinds of life she wanted to avoid, she highlighted the shame attached to 'having an unwanted pregnancy in my father's house' and 'becoming illiterate'. She then cited 'remaining unmarried in my father's house and getting old' as one of the things that could 'destroy a woman'. These concerns illuminate the significance of sexual propriety in young women's positioning in the rural economy, where marriage is a dominant expectation, within which social reproduction is lauded, in contrast to sexual activity outside of marriage (when still living within the 'father's house'), whose consequences brought disrepute.

In addition to social reproductive work, powerful value judgements framed other forms of women's work. Working in a bar meant 'not being respected in society', as did 'being uneducated and engaging in a life of stealing', 'selling of drugs' and 'hawking of goods'. As shown earlier, however, hawking was a way for many young women to make a little money, although clearly doing so left them at risk of being reviled.

Overall, youth's depictions of their imagined futures and the lives they wanted to avoid illuminated the precarity of their livelihoods. It also showed that the lives of young people were framed by powerful moral and symbolic judgements in what effectively could be characterised as a sexual economy. This follows Pateman's (1988) coining of the term 'sexual contract' to describe women's experiences of the modern 'social contract', and to argue that the development of capitalist economies is founded upon unpaid

female labour and their subordination within the domestic sphere, legitimised by marriage. In this ‘sexual economy’, young women who could not conform to its gendered ideals of work, education, marriage and family were relegated to the margins of society.

Rural youth migration and mobility: discourses of rural deficit and inequality

Youth’s accounts of their livelihoods often challenged the binary of the rural and the urban, as if these were two distinct spaces. The opportunistic way youth shifted between different work possibilities often involved them moving back and forward from rural to urban environments (for a fuller discussion, see Thorsen and Yeboah, 2021). However, it was also striking how youth discourses constructed the rural versus the urban, often framing the rural in a deficit way.

Mobility was associated with both better education and employment opportunities. As shown in the first excerpt, access to higher education (and sometimes to secondary school) required youth to leave their rural communities. This was also the case for many who wanted professional employment, such as architecture (see second excerpt below). Similarly, youth’s desires to expand their commercial and farming activities often implied moving to other locations where markets were larger, or where land was better suited to large-scale, mechanised agriculture:

my aspired education level is not available in this community, I have completed the education system that we have here which is secondary school level. I have to move out to study further but I have financial constraints. (SW, female, 20)

I want to practice [architecture] outside this community. Lagos or Enugu. A lot of difference! There are no contract opportunities here in this community, compared to Lagos or Enugu which are big cities with very big buildings. (SE, female, 18)

Farming is more lucrative there [Edo State] and farm produce turnover is high due to their fertile land which supports cultivation of plantain and cocoa. [. . .] Its location is not rural, it is more developed than here, with a large population. (SW, male, 20)

As indicated above, youth repeatedly invoked comparisons between their rural environments and other contexts that were deemed more ‘developed’, or in some cases ‘civilised’. The word ‘developed’ recurred again and again in depictions of rural youth’s desired locations:

I want to relocate to a major town like Ibadan or Cotonou [Benin]. There are sales and demand for commercial activities there [..] I am talking of major towns that are well developed. (SE, male, 22)

I hope to do this type of work [nursing] outside my community – it will be in Edo or Ebonyi state. Those places are developed. With this development, there are job opportunities. If you open up a maternity home, people will patronise you, the population is more. (SE, female, 19)

Strikingly however, while youth imaginaries often saw mobility and migration positively in association with ‘development’, this did not involve the disembedded, reflexive self that has been posited as typical of late modernity, where the significance of social structures such as gender and class has supposedly waned (Beck, 1992). As Farrugia (2018) has suggested, it is highly questionable how such arguments relate to youth in the Global South.

Family networks remained important to youth – these were cited often as an intergenerational source of support that they benefited from and reciprocated. The importance of family was confirmed by the significance of ruptures such as divorce, illness or death of a parent, which could force youth to leave school, so that they could fulfil their family obligations. Youth (and adults) often talked about relatives who had migrated, but who were still integral to its relational matrix of unspoken support:

I used to give to my mother what I had but she never asked nor was it mandatory that I should give her. Even at times if I helped her on the farm, she would give me things in kind and also money. Regarding my siblings, especially the elderly ones, they are expected to give food and money, except the younger sibling who is still schooling. [. . .] The firstborn of the house whenever we need anything he is there to help us. You know that it is not every time that we have money, so when we ask from our parents and they do not have, he is readily available to finance us and he is in Lagos. (SW, female, 22)

The significance of the family also implies the continuing significance of gender as a structure of inequality, as indicated in our earlier discussions of the moral and symbolic economy that framed young women’s work and education. It was also clear that social class stratifications marked the lives of these rural youth. We earlier highlighted the status attached to being educated, and how, financially, this was out of reach for many, where ‘only the rich’ could afford education. Socio-economic divisions between rich and poor were constantly invoked, sometimes in ways that associated farming with those who were poor:

One cannot compare a child that is born into a rich family with me that is born and bred in a farmer’s family. (SW, male, 25)

The descriptions of youth’s imagined futures showed how one’s house was a symbol of wealth and status, so that for example one young woman (SE, female, 19) commented ‘I don’t live in a big house like this so people tend to look down on me. People worship wealthy people a lot.’ Other commentaries about education and work illuminated the level of social stratification and the intersections of social and cultural capitals in the reproduction of privilege within these rural economies:

There are some people whose education is fast and they get jobs immediately after their education. They may be young and rich. It happens among the elite. (SW, female, 19)

We are eight villages here, the educated people are concentrated in one place [. . .]. They do not help others, is only their family members that they help. [. . .] If you go to Justice House, both the intelligent ones and unintelligent ones are employed in the judiciary where he is working. (SE, male, 22)

In general, although youth saw value in farming, discussions of mobility and migration often invoked a discourse of rural deficit, in which the urban was positioned against the rural as more ‘developed’ and ‘civilised’. Moreover, the opportunities that more urban environments seemed to offer were compromised by youth’s socio-economic, class and gender positioning, and their sense of kinship. Mobility and migration were not reducible to a question of individualised choice. Overall, this leaves us with unanswered questions about the theoretical and methodological lenses that can help us better understand and address the deep inequalities that structured youth’s lives in these rural contexts.

Conclusions

This article draws on qualitative research with rural youth in southern Nigeria to challenge the idealised, modern trajectory through which youth are typically considered. It shows how rural youth in this context were far from following a linear pathway from school to work, rather they often simultaneously navigated schooling, farming, low-paid vocational and unpaid household work. We further highlight the considerable gulf between youth’s contemporary lives and the ‘bright’ futures that they imagined (Frye, 2012), often involving coveted ‘white-collar’, professional or administrative positions. We illuminate how all of this was unremittingly gendered. Within a powerful moral and symbolic economy, ideals of family, education and work combined to limit the futures of young women, often leaving marriage as their only acceptable option. Finally, we consider how youth’s imagined futures invoked migration to urban contexts that were considered more ‘civilised’ or ‘developed’, constructions that involved a sustained discourse of rural deficit. However, this did not imply the production of a more disembedded, individualised self, as proposed within late modern sociological writing. Instead, we show how strong commitments to and reliance on family and farming ran through youth’s narratives, although again this reflected a deeply gendered (sexual) economy.

This analysis lends weight to arguments for a more ‘connected sociology’ (Bhambra, 2014) that takes account of the Eurocentric biases of classical sociology and recognises the West’s complicities in the deep inequalities that still structure postcolonial societies. Critical to undoing these biases is disrupting the assumption that concepts – such as youth, work and gender – seamlessly transfer from north to south. It is vital instead to challenge the classificatory grids such terms invoke and the worlds they produce, and to privilege local situated understandings, recognising that context produces different inflections in meaning. Such an approach is all the more important, given the ‘unacknowledged substantialist tradition’ that Bessant et al. (2020) have suggested continues to inform the field of youth studies. Attention to context also implies attending to post-colonial and decolonial perspectives which are critical of the Eurocentric hierarchies embedded in the notion of ‘development’ (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Smith, 1999), alongside insights from post-structural theorists who undo the supposed universalisms of Western metaphysics, and whose writings can help illuminate the socio-historical contingencies of what confers ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984), or is taken as ‘truth’ (Foucault, 1984).

This should also be a historical sociology that is critical, in these rural contexts, of the ways colonial rule penetrated local social relations, introducing new classificatory systems that intensified social stratification, as for example in the differentiation between

the 'literate' and the 'illiterate', 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'. Gender is itself an axis of differentiation that exemplifies this, a patriarchal structure of inequality that is part of the legacy of colonialism (Oyèwùmí, 1997) and its introduction of 'western' education (Leach, 2008). As Mies (2014) has highlighted, these eras also brought new understandings of work, that attached prestige to 'professional' forms of (male) waged labour and contributed to a devaluing of women's domestic and social reproductive labour. Although largely unrecognised in surveys of work, women's unpaid labour continues to sustain the rural economies in focus in this study.

Aligned with this, there is an important need for further research in rural contexts of the Global South (including SSA) that focuses on intersections of education, work and family, and the gendered norms that together these intersections sustain. Here insights from feminist scholars (Finlay et al., 2019; Lugones, 2007; McDowell, 2014) are valuable for challenging the dominant framing of work and employment in terms of the waged economy, including how this makes women's work invisible. Ongoing critique of international policy aligned with the concept of 'development' is also vital to challenge the web of inequalities that are sustained by global capitalism (de Sousa Santos, 2014). As Rai et al. (2019) highlight, although Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for recognition of the value of unpaid care and domestic work, Goal 8 (focused on the right to decent work) continues to privilege the formal economy. Finally, education is a key institution through which classificatory systems are imposed and social hierarchies are legitimated. More research is needed into the gendered social dynamics of schooling, including the imaginaries of life and work that the curriculum sustains in these rural contexts.

Overall, much more sociological research is needed that attends in a nuanced way to the gender relations that frame education and work in rural contexts of SSA and the Global South more generally. Much contemporary interest in youth in the Global South has been focused on urban youth, and on male youth in particular. There is a need for further research into the education and livelihoods of rural youth in SSA and, more specifically, into the sexual economy and the gender relations within which many young women constantly struggle against systematic subordination.

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ORCID iD

Barbara Crossouard  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6839-4611>

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Author biographies

Barbara Crossouard is a Reader in Education at the Centre for International Education at the University of Sussex, UK. Her recent research draws upon feminist, post-structural and postcolonial theorists to consider youth livelihoods, education, gender and citizenship in different contexts of the Global South. Her interest in the production of youth identities reflects a concern for the intersecting structures of difference (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality) that can lead to the marginalisation or exclusion of particular groups, as well as the part that education and work play in such processes.

Máiréad Dunne is a Professor of the Sociology of Education and former Director of the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cie/>. Her research has attended to social and educational inequalities and stratification. In particular, she has focused on identities and difference; gender and sexuality; youth and citizenship in contexts of poverty, inequality and conflict. She has drawn on feminist, post-structural and postcolonial theories to explore the experiences, perspectives and livelihoods of young people within different local and national contexts. Her research includes multiple international collaborations in contextually located, multi-dimensional explorations of policy, institutions and practices.

Carolina Szyp is a Research Officer at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), at the University of Sussex, UK. Her research experience and interests include children and youth's livelihoods, decent work, education and social protection. Since joining the IDS, she has worked on a number of projects which included looking at how young people engage with the rural economy, the impact of social protection interventions on youth employment outcomes, and the lived experiences of marginalised people navigating access to social assistance in crises.

Tessy Madu is a Director and a social scientist /gender specialist in charge of Gender Studies at the National Root Crops Research Institute, Umudike in Nigeria. In her current role as director, she undertakes research and training into farming systems of south-east agricultural zones of Nigeria with a view to improving them, and conducts the training of women farmers in the processing, utilization and marketing of root and tuber crops, with a strong emphasis on value addition and the training of extension workers. Her research has a strong focus on gender and development and has included management of collaborative projects.

Béla Teeken is an associate social and gender scientist at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and is based in Ibadan Nigeria. His interdisciplinary PhD research combined anthropological research with crop science tools and methods. He has a major interest in how ecology, local institutions, culture and gender shape and determine local innovations and agricultural practices. He is now working with biophysical scientists to study gender and other social dynamics in relation to crop production and food processing systems to make them more demand led, socially inclusive and gender responsive.