

# Demographic factors influencing rural women's diversification of rural activities for sustaining rural households' livelihoods in Cameroon- Case study of Bui Division

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## Abstract

The diversification of rural activities by rural women in a bid to sustain rural households' livelihoods cannot be undermined. Although the rural woman, through the diversification of rural activities strives to sustain household's livelihood, demographic elements influence her struggle. The objective of this paper is to identify and assess such demographic aspects affecting the rural woman in Bui Division. In order to attain this set objective, a literature review in relation to the topic was carried out. This was followed by data collection from the field; it comprised of on-the-spot / participant observations, interviews and usage of questionnaires. Our respondents were 749 rural women (20 years of age and above). The results show that though, age is an important factor that influences the choice and how the diversification of rural activities is undertaken by the rural woman as evident in the field, it is apparent that 'age' as a demographic factor does not negatively influence the rural woman's diversification of rural activities aim at sustaining households' livelihoods. About 45% of rural women who only had informal education could not effectively sustain their households' livelihoods by diversifying rural activities because they could neither read, write nor understand. Rural women who are unmarried and divorced negatively influence the diversification of rural activities for sustaining households' livelihoods as compared to married women. It has also been revealed that rural women with 'large' size households effectively carry out diversification for sustaining livelihoods than those with 'small' size households.

**Keywords:** Rural women, Diversification, livelihoods, Demographic factors, rural activities, Bui Division.

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## INTRODUCTION

Many studies have shown that a variety of livelihood activities and skills put in place play an important role in augmenting household income with most people adopting a combination of livelihood activities [1]. Rural women play a crucial role in the rural economies of both developed and developing countries by diversifying rural activities [2]. In most parts of developing countries, rural women participate in crop production, livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families' livelihoods [3]. They also carry out vital reproductive functions in caring for children, older persons and the sick [4, 5]. According to the third general population and housing census in Cameroon (2010), 53.6% of Cameroon's population reside in rural areas and 51.4% are women. Women in rural areas in Cameroon as a whole, have been in charge of maintaining and reproducing domestic units by means of their labour, time and skill. Rural women are not a homogenous group; there are important differences amongst them based on class,

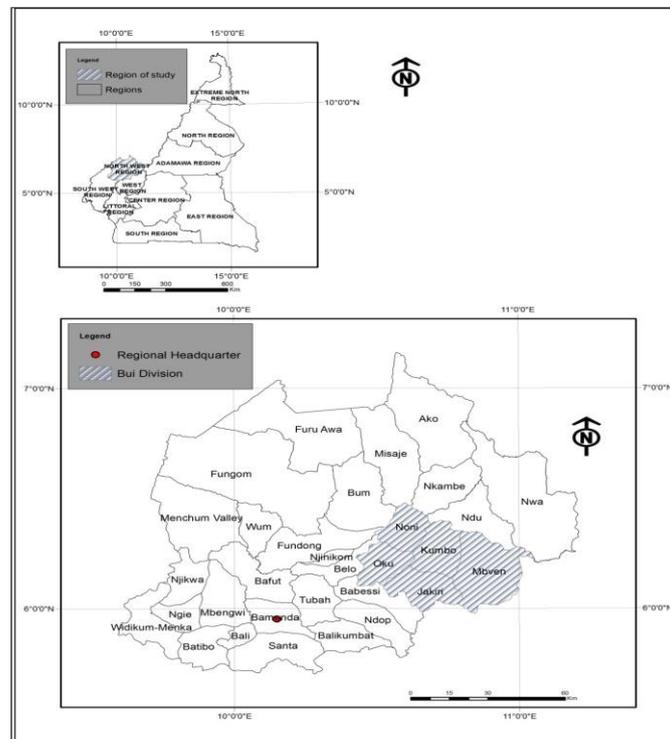
age, marital status, ethnic background, race and religion [6, 7]. Rural women, in carrying out the diversification of rural activities so as to sustain households' livelihoods are either positively or negatively affected by demographic factors. This study has been carried out in Bui Division, located in the North West Region of Cameroon (figure 1). Bui Division lies approximately between latitudes 6°00' and 6°31' north of the equator and longitudes 9°45' and 11°51' east of the Greenwich meridian.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative data have been used for this study. Secondary data was gotten from a host of published and unpublished works wherever they could be traced so as to be familiarized with our paper's theme. As for primary data used in this work, it was directly gotten from the field by way of on-the-spot observation, participant observation, interviews and through questionnaire. The data was collected over a period of three months. All the six sub divisions (Kumbo, Nkum, Jakiri, Mbven, Noni and Oku) that

make up the study area and their population constitute the space from which the sample size has been drawn. The sample represented the characteristics of the whole population. Ten (10) villages were randomly chosen from each sub division giving a total of 60 villages out

of 124 villages. From the randomly selected 60 villages, 749 rural women (any female who is of age 20 and above; and must have lived for one year and above within the study area) were randomly selected to constitute our sample size.



**Fig-1: Bui Division in the North West Region of Cameroon**  
Source: Geospatial Informatics Services Consulting, Yaounde, 2015

Our questionnaires had both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Some of the closed-ended questions required the ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘neutral’ responses that helped us to quantify our data in percentages. Even the closed-ended questions with different variables as responses were also quantified in percentages. As for the open-ended questions, we got quality information from our respondents. Quantitative data has been transformed into tables and charts; then analyzed using descriptions, comparisons, and explanations using qualitative data gotten through open-ended questions, interviews and observations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age influences both physical and mental efficacy which in turn affects enterprise choice and labour decisions [8]. The majority of studies examining relationship between age and environmental behavior suggest that younger farmers are more likely to undertake programs and environmental enhancement

than older farmers [9-13]. However, other authors suggest that there is no difference between the age of farmers who are influenced and those who are not [14, 15]. In Bui Division, the age of a rural woman has an influence on her ability to carry out the diversification of rural activities for sustaining livelihoods within Households. The ages of respondents as noticed in the field are very important as it gives an insight on the different age brackets involved in the diversification of rural activities (Table-1). The age distribution also gives an understanding as to whether one is in the child bearing cohort or not, which has an implication on the rural woman’s participation in the diversification of rural activities. It is argued that, young rural women have limited time for erratic participation in the diversification of rural activities; that is, a rural woman, with a heavy burden of childcare and household provisioning responsibilities, usually yield insufficient individual time to guarantee her full participation in the diversification of rural activities [16].

**Table-1: Age distribution of respondents**

N°	Sub-division	N° of respondents	Age brackets					
			20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45+
1	Kumbo	161	1	5	9	19	59	68
2	Nkum	136	3	9	6	11	43	64
3	Jakiri	111	1	3	7	10	37	53
4	Noni	91	3	4	5	8	17	54
5	Oku	204	9	20	9	28	63	75
6	mbven	46	5	4	2	6	13	16
Total		749	22	45	38	82	232	330
%		100	3	6	5	11	31	44

Source: field work (2015)

As illustrated in table 1, the respondents are unevenly distributed as regard their age groups. A minority of respondents, that is, 14% are from 20 years to 34 years of age. A majority of respondents are of age 35 and above; that is, 86%. This difference is explained by the phenomenon of rural exodus where young women in the study area who are of age bracket, 20-34, have moved out of the study area to towns within the country in search of 'greener pastures'. This trend of age distribution of respondents is almost same in all the localities of Bui Division. It is realized that the more the age bracket increases, the greater the number of respondents. It is worth saying that a majority of respondents fall within the ages of 20 to 44 (56%) which is an age group where human beings are naturally strong, have a good reasoning faculty and possess a lot of potentials that can be used for their well-being.

The age bracket of 20-44 also represents an economically active population and most rural activities involve the use of 'manpower'. These bodily natural endowments of age distribution have rendered the rural woman in Bui Division to substantially carry out the diversification of rural activities for sustaining households' livelihoods. The age of the respondent is an important factor which influences the choice and how the activity is undertaken by the rural woman as evident in the field. Rural women within the 'active' age bracket (20-44) have household provisioning responsibilities, which have compelled them to combine both productive and reproductive roles. Alternatively, rural women within this age bracket are able to combine child bearing with their farm and non-farm activities due to child fostering, which allows family members especially grandmothers and young children, to take care of younger children while their mothers (rural women) carry on rural activities. On the other hand, 35% of rural women within this same age bracket who do not have persons to assist them in taking care of their younger children cannot effectively diversify their activities.

Education is one of the most important contributors of more remunerative and skilled employment in rural Africa [17]. Education is a social capital which could impact positively on a household's ability to take good and well informed production and livelihood decision [18]. However, women continue to outnumber men among the World's illiterates by a ratio of 3:2 [19]. Women's education is a key factor in determining whether her children will survive past the first five years of life. A child's chances of surviving increases even further when his or her mother has secondary or higher education [20]. Not only does a woman's level of education influence her child's life, it also influences her aptitude in diversifying rural activities for livelihood. Education's ability to change attitudes and increase understanding of complex issues provides a clear rationale for its role in promoting environmental behaviour. Education is formal and informal; Formal education is an important way in which people invest for the future [21]. The level of education of rural women couple with the rural setting in which they are in, condition them to choose farming and trade as their main source of livelihood. This suggests that rural women's deficits in education have broader and long term implications for family well-being [7]. The educational status of the rural woman in the study area ranges from informal/drop-outs, primary school level, secondary/high school level and University/Higher/professional level (Table-2). Formal education affords an individual the opportunity to access formal government or white-collar jobs. It equips the individual with the skills to read, write, record, receive training and seek information. The mentioned skills are very necessary when seeking a formal job and for the success of day-to-day activities. Admission into the formal sector depends on one's skills and qualifications. On the contrary, those without formal education have to be content with employment offered by agricultural and informal sectors because formal education is not an indispensable requirement in getting involved in the diversification of rural activities in the study area.

**Table-2: Respondents' educational background**

N°	Sub-division	N° of respondents	Level of education			
			Informal/drop outs	Primary school	Secondary and High school	University, higher/ professional institutes
1	Kumbo	161	53	47	54	7
2	Nkum	136	79	42	11	4
3	Jakiri	111	24	40	41	6
4	Noni	91	33	34	23	1
5	Oku	204	122	54	25	3
6	mbven	46	26	8	11	1
Total		749	337	225	165	22
%		100	45	30	22	3

Source: Field work (2015)

All respondents have at least acquired a certain level of education which could be formal and/or informal. It is observed that 45% of respondents have only received informal education from their homes and communities and some of them have been to school but have never gotten a certificate because they dropped out of school. This high proportion is accounted for by the ancient belief in the study area that a girl would one day get married and move out to live with the husband and becomes a member of his family. So, it is deemed more worthwhile educating boys than girls. In addition, it is believed that if a girl child has to be educated, it is only to know how to at least read and/or write her name. This 'old' ideology, however, highly limits the respondents' level of education in the primary school.

It is noticed that the low level of education of respondents has rendered most of them illiterates (neither read nor write). Only 3% of respondents have attended University/Higher and/or Professional Institutions. This proportion is very small because, in the past, the few parents who sent their girls to school did not send them up to this level and because most girl children dropped-out due to precarious pregnancies and marriage. It has been revealed that about 85% of girls in

the study area who most have reached this level of education were living out the study area. It is quite clear from the above table that, the diversification of rural activities mostly employs people without recourse to their educational background. With this limited level of formal education, rural women cannot easily access external inputs and information that can enhance the diversification of their activities for improved livelihood. More educated farmers are typically assumed capable to process information and search for appropriate non-farm work opportunities. The belief is that education gives farmers the ability to perceive, interpret and respond to new information much faster than their counterparts without formal education [22, 23]. This is in line, [24] opined that women are generally discriminated against in terms of access to external inputs and information.

It is apparent that there exists a direct relationship between the ages of the respondents and their level of literacy (Figure-2). Literacy in the context of this study implies being able to read, write and understand the English and/or the French language(s) which are the official languages.

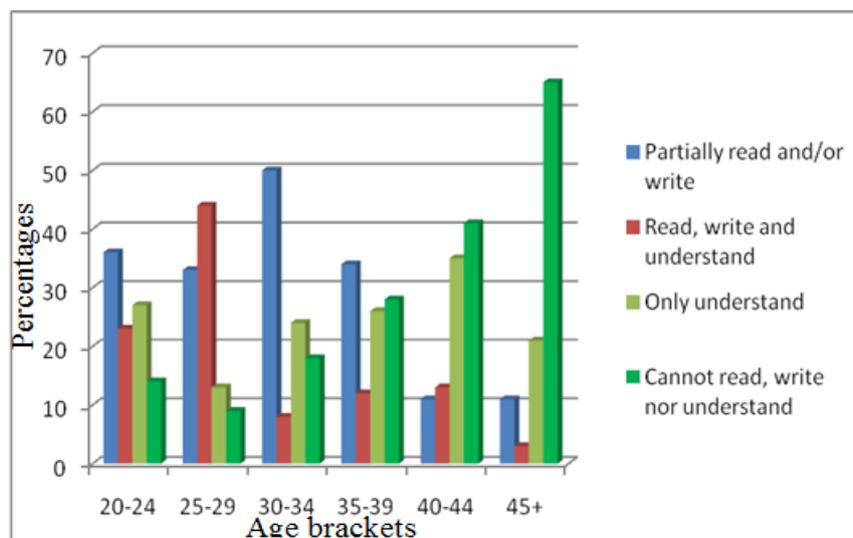


Fig-2: Literacy level of respondents vis-à-vis their age brackets

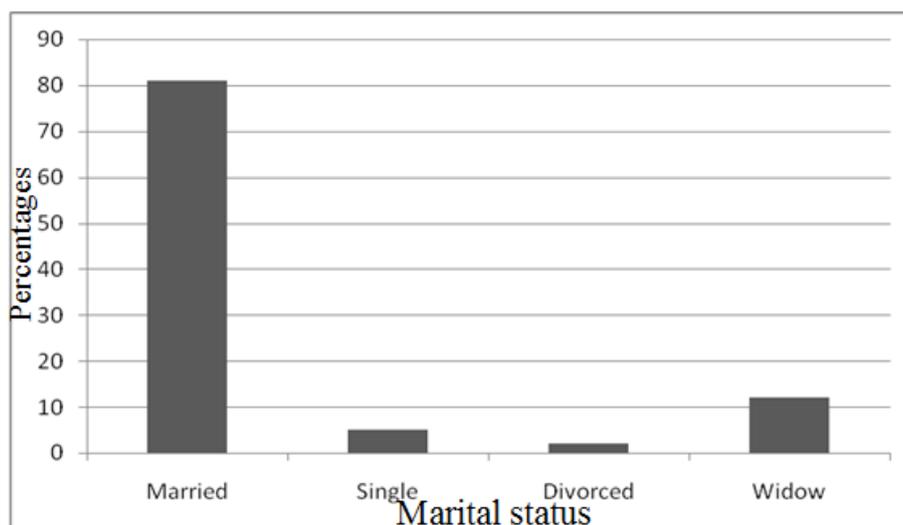
Source: Field work (2015)

As seen in Figure-2, a majority of respondents are not able to read, write or understand the English and/or the French language (s). This is obvious from the age of 40 and above. This is because respondents in this age bracket have not been given the opportunity to go to school due to the gender bias that existed in the study area at the time when they had to be enrolled in school. It is seen that from the ages of 20 -39, most of the respondents can at least partially read and write because they have at least received primary and secondary education at a time when awareness has been created on equality to education in the study area.

It is observed that 45% of rural women who only had informal education could not effectively carry out the diversification of rural activities because they could neither read, write nor understand. With this incapability and as time passes and 'new' techniques/approaches of diversification are disseminated, they have no clue of improved agricultural and agricultural related techniques of carrying out diversification. Hence, this class of rural women cannot properly sustain their households'

livelihoods by diversifying their rural activities as compared to their peers who are more educated.

Marriage is a social institution. It re-organizes society, leading to the formation of kinship ties and membership in descent groups. In other words, marriage leads to the creation of new and entrenchment of social relationships [25]. When a man and a woman are joined in marriage, their respective families automatically become affinal relatives. It is therefore an institution through which kinship ties are both established and extended [26]. Marital status of rural women in Bui Division ranges from married, single, divorced and widow (Figure-3). As observed, high economic value has been attached to children, thus necessitating women to marry and have children. Married women with children are more respected than those without children. To gain prestige in Bui Division, most women have to marry. Similarly, children's labor especially girls is more crucial both inside and outside the home in times of old age; For children usually take over responsibilities of household chores when the mother is sick or advanced in age.



**Fig-3: Marital status of the rural woman in Bui Division**

Source: Field work (2015)

The rural woman does not own productive resources like land; it is only men who have primary ownership of land. The rural woman only has secondary ownership of land through marriage. It is ascertained in the study area that, "it is as a mother that a woman secures claims in her marital home to her husband's assets". This implies that there are intra-household differences in resource use and control between men and women in the study area. Despite the inhibitions associated with the cultural system, the rural woman in the diversification of rural activities is capable of processing social experiences and devising coping strategies; she therefore marries to increase access to productive resources with the knowledge in mind that the process of diversification of her rural activities for sustaining her household's livelihood will be facilitated.

In other words, rural farming households' marital status could determine their livelihood since married respondents are expected to have better livelihood [27].

According to traditional and cultural norms in Bui Division, a traditional family needs to be large in order to guarantee the material well-being of all its members. These members are children, the old, and the sick. And since this requires continuity over time, everybody has the moral obligation to marry and to contribute to the social or biological reproduction of his/her kinship. This explains why 81% of respondents are married, 12% widows and only 2% divorced. It is evident that some married respondents are widows who remarried because they are still young; this further buttresses the reason for the high incidence of married

respondents in the study area. This is further attributed to respondent's ability in claiming secondary ownership to productive resources of their husbands when married.

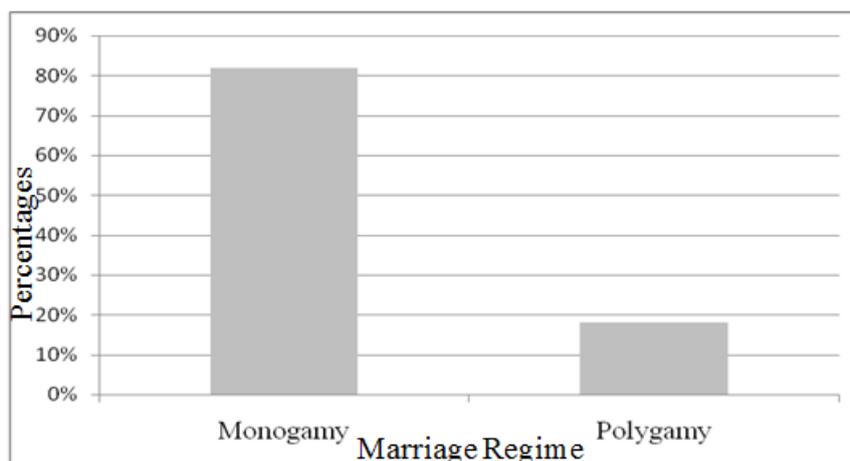
Only 2% of respondents are divorced because the act of divorce is regarded as a taboo in the study area. It is evident that most of the divorced are those from polygamous marriages and those who got married by cohabiting for years with men within or out of the study area. Figure-3 further illustrates that widows come next in terms of percentage (12%) after the married rural women who are involved in the diversification of rural activities for sustaining their households' livelihoods. This is because they rarely get support from family members, especially those without grown-up children as noticed in the field. The widows see the diversification of rural activities as a secured way of making money in order to sustain their livelihoods and those of their dependents.

Child bearing is a basic value instilled in the population of Bui Division from childhood and shirking; such a responsibility is usually a compliance ensured through social pressure. Marriage, also, according to the traditions of the study area is a social institution and highly cherished for social, economic and sociological reasons. So girls who attain to age of 20 are most often compelled to marry in order to fulfill their reproductive roles. In this 'cultural community', the unmarried are often shunned, making marriage to seem as if it is compulsory. This explains why only 5%

of respondents are not and/or have never been married (singles).

Most of the singles are young and rang from the ages of 20-34; proportions of them were still schooling and did not regard marriage as fundamental at their young ages. Amongst the married respondents, their marriage types differ; that is monogamy and polygamy (Figure-4) regimes. Monogamy involves a man married to a single woman and polygamy involves a man getting married to two or more wives. The polygamy regime as observed in the field plays a vital role in the rural woman's diversification of rural activities for sustaining households' livelihoods in Bui Division.

Figure-4 shows that 82% of married respondents in the study area are in the regime of monogamy. This is explained by the Christian religion that has been inculcated in the minds of respondents. As for the polygamous regime, only 18% of the married respondents are into it. It is evident that there exist a Muslim community in Bui Division and their culture favours polygamous marriages. The Muslim community is of a smaller proportion as compared to the Christian community; this explains why the polygamous regime is lesser than the monogamous regime. It is seen that a small proportion of respondents found in the polygamous regime are neither Christians nor Muslims; this is the pagan community who continue to practice what their forefathers did regardless of surrounding circumstances.



**Fig-4: Marriage regimes of respondents in Bui Division**

Source: Field work (2015)

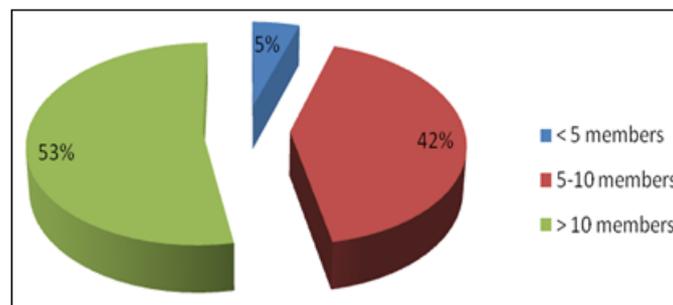
It is observed that married rural women have larger households to take care of as compared to the divorced and single women. With 81% of rural women in Bui Division married, it is obvious that they were more involved in the diversification of rural activities as a strategy of sustaining their households' livelihoods. It is worth saying that rural women who are married considerably influence the diversification of rural activities for sustaining households' livelihoods in the

study area. Nevertheless, these married rural women of the polygamous regime play a more crucial role in sustaining households' livelihoods through the diversification of rural activities than married rural women of the monogamous regime. This is because, poverty is more acute in polygamous than monogamous homes. As such, rural women in polygamous homes strive very hard to diversify rural activities for the betterment of their households' livelihoods.

A household is a unit for the analysis of domestic labor as it approximates more closely to the notion of a domestic unit, being normally defined as an individual or group of people who share living space and/or take at least some meals together. The household is usually organized around human needs which have social, cultural, historical and psychological dimensions. These socially constructed needs include food, shelter, sleep, cleanliness, clothing, sex, reproduction, companionship and recreation [10]. In this sense, a household in this study is considered as members of a family unit that stay under one or different roofs and eat from the same pot. In Bui Division in particular and in other rural milieus of developing countries, the rural woman plays a key role in running households and make major contributions in sustaining households' livelihoods through diversification of rural activities. When the rural woman is economically and socially empowered, she becomes a potential force for change [2]. Poverty therefore, is more prevalent in large households with few income earners. This means that, in households where the woman is the only bread-winner, members are more likely to remain poor. This is because; there

will always be pressure on her little resources for the up-keep of the household [1].

The rural woman's income is indispensable for family survival regardless of the presence of men, since the system of allocation and distribution within many households in Bui Division usually imposes individual responsibilities on men and women to meet their personal needs. Small household size seems to be recommended. But in some sense, this assertion may not be true base on the fact that, a large household size with many providers would be better than a small household size with one provider [3]. The household sizes of respondents in Bui Division varied from small to large (Figure-5). In a study of rural livelihood diversification among farming households in South West Nigeria, increase in family size increases the probability of being poor [28]. Also, a study on determinants of rural women's livelihood in Ibarapa hold that large household size could lead to corresponding poor livelihood [27]. On the other hand, a large family often has a large number of working members which implies that an increase in family size is likely to increase probability of participation and the expected sign for household size is positive [29].



**Fig-5: Household sizes of respondents**

Source: Field work (2015)

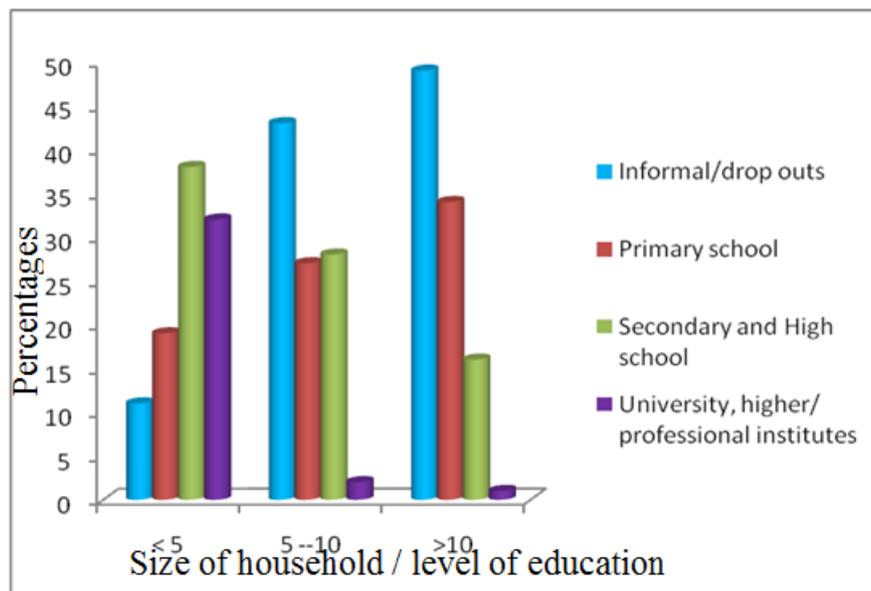
Household sizes range from less than 5 members, 5-10 members and from 10 members and above. Household members are not necessarily the husbands and biological children of the respondents. There are some households where more than 15 members have been registered. It is seen that 53% of respondents have households of more than ten members. These large households are as a result of high birth rates, grand children, combined with the extended family system that makes it incumbent on both the man and the woman to help in catering for children of deceased and/or extended relations. Only 5% of respondents have households with sizes of less than five persons. Such families are families where children are grown-ups and have gotten married or have become independent. In such cases, the respondents live with their husbands and some grandchildren and/or relatives who give them assistance in the house. Since rural women are mostly the sole providers of family livelihood, there is always pressure on their little resources. The pressure compels the respondents to

embark on the diversification of rural activities in a bid to sustain livelihood within their households.

Most importantly, respondents' level of education has a significant impact on the size of her household. Most households with a size of 10 members and above are owned by respondents who have acquired a low level of education. That is, those respondents who received informal education, drop-outs and primary school leavers (figure 6). About 85% of large households live in poverty as observed in the field. This is because many mouths need to be fed by the mother of the house with food stuff gotten from her farm and meager income gotten from her other activities. The large households that do not experience poverty as seen in the field are those, where some family members carry out income generating activities and use part of the income in supplementing family livelihood. Respondents who could read, write and understand have smaller family sizes due to the

knowledge they had acquired on birth control while in

school, training workshops and media.



**Fig-6: Respondents' household sizes vis-à-vis their level of education**

Source: Field work (2015)

As seen in figure 6, respondents with household sizes of 5-10 members and above are those who have acquired informal education and/or drop outs. Their family sizes are large because they do not know about birth control methods. It is also evident that some of the respondents with a large household size are literate and aware of birth control; the reason why some of them have large household sizes is because relatives and/or people who are not their biological children live under the same roof with them and are under their care.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to identify and assess the demographic factors influencing the rural woman's diversification of rural activities for sustaining rural households' livelihoods in Bui Division. It is identified that the rural woman's age, level of education, marital status and household size influence her process of diversifying rural activities. 'Age', as a demographic factor does not significantly influence the rural woman's diversification of rural activities aim at sustaining households' livelihoods. Rural women within the 'active' age bracket (20-44) have household provisioning responsibilities, which have compelled them to combine both productive and reproductive roles. Though married rural women have a positive influence on the diversification of rural activities for sustaining households' livelihoods in the study area, those of the polygamous regime play a crucial role than those of the monogamous regime. Having noticed that formal education is not an indispensable requirement for getting involved in the diversification of rural activities in the study area, the rural woman who has acquired only informal education could not effectively carry out the diversification of rural activities because

she could neither read nor write. This made it impossible for her to understand any disseminated information that could enhance the diversification of rural activities thereby negatively influencing her ability to sustain households' livelihoods. It is recommended that capacity building workshops and seminars should be carried out using the native dialect so to empower the rural woman to bypass the demographic factors that negatively affect her diversification of rural activities. In so doing, the rural woman will be able to effectively diversify rural activities so as to sustain households' livelihoods which is one of the pathways to poverty alleviation.

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