

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN OIL PALM EXTRACTION IN SELECTED OIL PALM MILLS IN AKUNGBA REGION OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have examined the direct work-related hazards and women involvement in oil palm processing without adequate attention on the social dimension and family-life effects of those occupational hazards. The women oil mill workers are faced with health-related and safety challenges which they may not even be aware of given their level of social exposure and education. Eighty-two (82) participants comprising mainly women mill workers, executive members of Akungba Oli Palm Women Association and other relevant stakeholders in the region were selected using multistage sampling method. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study used relevant techniques of Focus Group Discussion, indepth key informantinterviews for a total of 16 consecutive weeks, and found that although the women suffer these work hazards, their perspective about their plights is still shrouded in traditional and primordial sentiments of as it had been so must it continue to be to the extent they are yet to evaluate their situational plights for necessary action. It also found that work-family-conflict daily takes it toll and releasing its effects on their spousal relationship and related family-care responsibilities. It behooves the women opinion leaders in and outside the region to awaken the critical consciousness of the rural women on their rights and privileges.

Key Words: Occupation, Hazards, palm oil processing mill, work-family-conflict, Akungba,

Introduction

Women are socially and politically marginalized in many societies (Agbalajobi, 2010; Bako&Syed, 2018). They are often made to play a second fiddle; hence they are put in purdah and barred from showcasing their talents. Unfortunately, that segregation sometimes possesses religious backing (ILO, 1998).In societies, they lack the right to own land and are educationally backwards compared to their male counterparts. However, in order to earn some livelihood, women have to engage in some occupations which are highly hazardous to their wellbeing and roles (Sarku, 2016). In Africa, agriculture remains the mainstay of the peoples' economy; and

there is high rate of women agriculturists (about 50%, only second to Asia where women are 70% in agriculture). Through this means women contribute considerably to family income.

Besides, reports indicate that the material conditions under which these women live and work continue to deteriorate in many countries due to economic and social decline (ILO, 2009). Women both in rural as well as urban low income areas perform almost all domestic tasks in addition to farm work and trading in their struggle for survival. In spite of this, they are exposed to insanitary environment, consumption of wrong quality of food. Studies have indicated the need for appropriate technology to boost oil palm production and move local production process away from traditionally unprofitable and ageing production systems (Doss, 2001). A segment known as processing of fresh fruit bunches into palm oil remains the most difficult and hazardous activities since the traditional oil palm processing in Nigeria. Even up till present, women still use inefficient, laborious and time-consuming methods which result in low productivity and poor working conditions (Enwelu *et al.*, 2014). Modern technology is hereby needed to improve the production processes in order to increase income of women stakeholders and improve their lives.

Previous studies have examined direct work-related hazards involved in oil palm processing without adequate attention on the social dimension and family-life effects of those occupational hazards. Such social as well as family-care deprivations that may be left unattended to at present would ultimately constitute serious negative effects on both household members and the workers themselves. In the final analysis, it will be seen that it is inadequate to have concentrated on the technological and economic dimensions of oil palm production alone but on the overall life effects on the worker especially as it pertains to family life. So, this study looks a bit away from the arena of direct production into social effects of the work itself on the women workers.

Objectives of study

1. To examine the health status of women workers in the oil palm mills.
2. To assess the appropriateness and adequacy (if any) of the safety measures put in place by the mill work owners to mitigate the effects of probable hazards on the women workers.
3. To investigate the relationship between the work in the mills and the women's wife/mother-care responsibilities.

Research questions of study

Thirteen (13) research questions are cast around these objectives to guide the analyses.

Relevant Literature

Occupational hazards refer to the potential risk to health and safety for those who work outside the home (ILO, 2008). These are hazards that people experience in their place of work or as a result of their job. These include several types such as biological hazards (biological substances that threaten the health of human beings), chemical hazards (such as exposure to chemical substances. Examples include long term exposure to smoke as in palm oil mills, engine exhausts, and tobacco smoke which have been shown to increase risk of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure (Kadandale, Marten & Smith. 2018). Physical hazards such as factors or agents that cause hazards due to physical contacts and may also be referred to as environmental hazards. Conditions such as radiation, heat and cold, stress, vibrations, and noise, such that are commonly found in environment as mining, construction and even palm oil mills are all examples of physical hazards. While long term exposure to some chemical substances could result to health impairment, generally, exposure to physical hazards are inescapably dangerous as they are part of the work setting.

The ILO (2010) conceives of occupational hazards as opposite of occupational safety which are conditions that are free of known dangers. ILO (2014) also views absence of occupational hazards within the context of health and safe work Programme (see also WHO, 2001). It further describes occupational hazard or illness as a condition arising from exposure to physical, chemical or biological agent among others, in a workplace affecting normal physiological mechanisms and impairing health of the worker.

Women who work at mills are exposed to many health hazards. One of the most common work-related injuries to occur globally is the development of musculoskeletal disorders caused by heavy lifting and performance of task that require repetitive motions (CDC, 2020; CCOHS, 2019; Bamidele, 2015).



Figure 1 A woman extracting oil from the machine for final processing. (Field work, 2018)

These hazards are also responsible for most incidents of disability claims, whether temporary, long term or permanent muscular injuries due to physical stress (CDC, 2020) common in construction and agro-allied industries such as palm oil mills. This researcher confirmed that back pain is commonly reported among employees (who are mainly women) in modernized automated oil palm mills; while both back and waist pain is reported among employees in the traditional oil palm mills (the local mills where machines are not used). This situation portends grave consequences for women of childbearing age in their sexual relationship with their spouse especially after work of the day (Sarku, 2016). In a systematic review of several studies on countries comprising Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Costa Rica, Ghana and Cameroon by Myzabella *et al* (2019), it is observed that in oil palm plantation mills, workers are found to be at risk of not only of musculoskeletal conditions, but other injuries and infectious diseases such as malaria and leptospirosis.

Furthermore, a survey of occupational disease reported in the literature suggests that conductivities, chronic bronchitis, aside musculoskeletal disorder are injuries that are common workplace health problems experienced by women involved in palm oil production (Kadandale *et al.*, 2018; Wudan, 2017). In a study of two southwestern states in Nigeria on methods used in oil palm production, Taiwo *et al.*,(2000) remarked that women play a significant role in oil palm processing, often employing inefficient, laborious and time- consuming traditional methods that often result in low yield and poor product quality. This possesses risk for boredom, and general body weakness.

Other sources of occupational hazard to women in palm oil production have been documented. Congestion within the mill and lack of water and sanitation create a hazardous environment for both the women and the children they have to take with them to work since no childcare facility is available. More hazards are experienced when conveying harvested bunches used in proceeding palm oil which could involve the use of head, truckers or wheelbarrows. Furthermore, local and small scale processors use techniques which are inefficient which jeopardize the health of many female workers. This includes use of legs to peel the body of palm kernels, exposure to hot water used in leaching out the oil from the lacerated pulp. This accounts for peasantry nature of the production involved (Bamidele, 2015). However, improvement in technology such as introduction of new machineries is gradually replacing the old methods of oil palm processing in akungba region.

Generally, in Nigeria, women work under the hot and harsh rays of the sun for close to 10 hours a day often with little access to shade or water. Heat stress occurs when hot weather and muscle activity cause body heat to rise. This condition sometimes results to dehydration, electrolyte balance, neurological impairment, multi-organ failure, and deaths (Thompson, 2003). While working under the sun can be real among some women processors in some parts of the country and in Asia due to increasing scale of oil palm production and use of technology, women oil processors in Akungba region of Ondo State, Nigeria, process their palm fruits mainly under a shed, although some of the workers depending on their aspect of the process, still have to stay under the sun, intermittently. A good number of the mills with varying number of workers are located within the town or village sometimes close to their residence.



Figure 2 Women workers trying to separate oil from by-product of the extracting process. (Field work, 2018)

Health and social dimensions of occupational hazards are highlighted in the literature. Basically, raising children and keeping house can be frustrating in itself let alone working outside the house. It has been found that married women are less likely to report worse health condition especially those whose husbands are a source of stress (Frankenhauser, 1994). Artazcos (2004) remarks that women workday concerns arising from their roles as mother, spouses or careers for the elderly, adds an extra weight on the mental and physical fatigue sustained in their workplace. Working with machinery is the area of men in the mills but lifting the palm bunches from the farm interior to the machine point, washing of palm fruits during and after extraction including other processing activities are mainly handled by the women. While women are involved in that, who attends to the children that return from school between 2 and 3pm? After going through the above during the day, the woman gets home and starts another round of domestic activities – preparing food for spouse and other family members. This cycle accounts for many denials by some women when their spouse make overtures for fun-making. Several studies have shown the health effects of such herculean task conditions on female mill workers. The menstrual cycle can be disrupted by strenuous physical work indications of dysmenorrhea, disrupted ovulatory circles and reduction in fertility (Paul, 1996).

An eclectic approach combining both functionalist, Marxist as well as role theory orientations in an attempt to explain the salutary role played by the woman in oil palm production both from the general societal and individual perspectives, is offered. From the functionalist perspective, contribution by the woman towards the development of society views the society as a complex system whose parts which includes women work together to promote stability and progress. It views the society as a whole in terms of the function its constituent element have to perform for the survival of the social system. The workings of functional orientation remind us of the inevitable process of division of labour by which the social system is able to maintain itself in performance equilibrium for the good of society. However, the perspective does not often check back to evaluate its shortcomings especially in spousal relationship; The Marxist's view on the other hand, agrees with functionalism that gender inequality exists but adds that it is only meant for oppression of women within the family structure. It contends that the division of labour is lopsided and negatively skewed against womenfolk claiming that men have taken too much to themselves. Among others, like the feminist model, it asks the question: why do women after the laborious day's work, do not relax as their male counterparts?

Work- family -conflict results from the incompatibility of role demands between work and the family. Work role conflict can occur in two directions: from work to family or from family to work (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Role conflict could be time-based or strain-based. When it is time-based, conflict occurs when the time demands compete with each other (Greenhaus & Buetell, 1985). For example, overtime takes away hours a parent can spend with children (work-to-family conflict), while illness of a family member may limit working hours (family- to- work conflict). Strain-based conflict occurs when strain in one role constrains individuals' ability to perform another role. For example, a study of some workers found that exhaustion and anxiety from work can spill over to family or life domain limiting individual's role performance(Kinnman & Jones, 2008). The significance of this is that, the poor woman bears the brunt, yet, the family belongs to two parties. In the final analysis, role theory stands in support of the radical perspective that the entrenched inequality between man and woman bolstered by tradition in society subjugates the female partner within the family structure.

Methodology

Ecology of the study area

Akungba lies between longitude $5^{\circ} 45^{\circ}$ E of the Greenwich meridian and latitude $7^{\circ} 28^{\circ}$ N. The temperature throughout the year ranges between 21° C to 29° C and annual rainfall also varies between 1100mm and 2000mm. The climate is basically tropical in nature while the primary economic activity is farming. The dry season falls between October and March thereby lowering the rate of growth of palm trees which has an adverse effect on palm oil production.

Design of study

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. It involved multistage sampling procedure. Cross-sectional designs are appropriate where groups or subjects at various stages of development (different ages and cadre who have the same trait or characteristic of interest at a single time) are studied simultaneously. The only difference here is that qualitative method as opposed to quantitative method is used to gather information from the target population.

Sample

The study concentrated on the women workers in the scattered oil palm mills excluding the males. Due to increase in economic and commercial activities stirred up by relocation of AdekunleAjasin University (formerly Ondo State University) to Akungba in 1999, there has been shift in concentration on traditional processing method to the use of machinery to press the palm fruit and crush the kernel shells. The study adopted multi-stage sampling procedure; first, the cluster sampling technique was used to identify group of 18 mills, out which 6 were selected. Total mill strength was 82 women out of which 60 women were randomly selected. See the breakdown of sampling of participants in Table 1. Six(6) key informants who were executive members of Akungba Palm Oil Women Association were purposively selected. Six (6) special interviewees comprising a local Sanitary Inspector (1), an Akungba local chief (1), the chairman of Akungba Farmers Association (1), a male spouse (1), Iyaloja of Akungba (Leader of Akungba market women) (1) and a Retiree of the National Bank of Agriculture staff (1), were purposively selected.

Table 1: Breakdown of total sample of participants

Mills	Total mill strength	Number selected	Key Informants	Special Interviewees
1	12	8	1	Sanitary Inspector for Akungba (1)
2	13	10	1	Local chief (1)
3	11	7	1	Chairman, AkungbaFarmers Association (1)
4	15	12	1	Male spouse (1)
5	15	12	1	Leader, Akungba market women (Iyaloja 1)
6	16	11	1	A Retiree of National Bank of Agriculture
Total	82	60	6	6

A total of 72 participants made up the study sample. Thirteen (13) questions were used to elicit information from the groups. While Focus Group Discussion (FGD) technique was used to elicit information from the women workers in the palm oil mills, Key Informant Interview (KII) and Indebt Interview (IDI) guides were administered on the executives of the Akungba Oil Palm Women Association (AOPWA) executives and special/stakeholder interviewees, respectively.

While unstructured question types were administered on the palm oil mills and the KII volunteers, structured interview schedule was administered on the special stakeholder interviewees. Responses were audio- taped and later transcribed from the local Yoruba language to English for each analysis.

Both thematic and content analyses were used during retrieval and transcribing sessions in order to gauge what may appear as the real point the respondent actually meant. With 4 research assistants, the field work covered a period of 12 weeks because it was difficult to agree with the respondents on the issue of time and venue. They were available only on Sundays when they were virtually off-duty. The post-field operations covered a period of 2 weeks

Data Analyses

Social characteristics of Respondents

Women between 20 and 40 years of age constituted a greater proportion (52 percent) of the respondents (71). While 23 percent were single, the married women were above average. Secondary was the highest level of education among the women. Majority (44 percent) of the women work in fruit washing section with bare legs. Majority (73 percent) confirmed that the nature of their work was a significant cause of their illness while smoke from firewood constituted their major cause of health challenge closely followed by bending/kneeling.

Results

The results (findings) are presented and arranged thematically in three main sections. The first section presents findings on the health status of women participants. The second session centered on safety measures against hazards; while the third section focuses on the family-care responsibilities.

THEME 1: Health status of participants

Q: Which of the processes of the work is found to be very difficult?

A: This question was asked in order to determine the health status of the women. Majority of the women (6 out of 8) in the FGD 1 identified processes such as slashing, picking of fruits and washing of fruits with foot as the most difficult process of their work. This life-threatening aspects of their work is not only injurious to health of the mill workers but capable of generating psychological trauma within them. Some even stress that they are still on the job because they do not an alternative (FGD Session, 2018).

A: Another response was made by a key informant, chairman of the Akungba Oil Palm Women Association (AOPWA), made the following comments:“Almost every aspect of palm oil processing is difficult due to the nature of hazards involved. Any part of the bunch can shook the leg and result to bleeding. At each time of bleeding, blood is being wasted. More so, lack of hand glove or footwear to protect both hand and leg, does not help matters” (KII, 2018).

Q: Another determining factor of health identified was the period at which the day’s work is considered done: A question on opening and closing of work hours by the interviewer:

A:“Majority in the Focus Group 2 mentioned 10 to 12 hours while some mentioned 12 hours and above. However, work period may be moderated by some events in Akungba town such as social events like the New Yam festival. Excuses on health-related grounds may be considered but for sure, the day’s pay (for those on daily rate, although they are in the majority) may be subject to renegotiation”(FGD Session, 2018).

Q:Further comment was made by another respondent, a special/stakeholder interviewee from Supare, an adjacent town to Akungba, on the same issue::

A:“The average period of work is between 8 and 10 hours of the day. But rain or any other event may alter such patterns.

Q:When asked about the health implications of such practice:

A:She replied, “Nothing happens”. According to her, “this is an age-long practice for mill workers to work sometimes between 10 and 12 hours of the day; and even at times above that, at peak periods. Our members are used to it because that is how we received it from our mothers”(KII, 2018).

Q: How do you see the effect of the bashing sun on your skin and health. And how about the noise from the continuous sound of the crushing engine in the mill.

A: Considering working under the sun or noise level due to operating machines used in the mill for some period of the day, another Focus Group (Number 3) members looked round on one another, shook their heads and said “that is a normal part of the production process because the two issues are necessary part of the physical hazards those who work in oil palm mills suffer “(FGD Session, 2018).

A:A key informant who is the secretary to AOPWA said: “what we suffer is less significant compared to noise level experienced in large industrial settings or working under the bashing sun suffered daily in quarrying sites, although the environment may be male-dominated” (KII, 2018),

Q: Still on health status of participants, the interviewer asked a question that relates to linking illness of workers to working in the mills.

A: Summing up the general views of some Focus Group 4 participants thus: "Linking of work conditions to health status may be difficult to establish because those who are out of job may sometimes fall sick. However, if such claims are corroborated with appropriate medical evidence, they may be accepted. We have had the linkage to be real especially during peak periods of our work in these mills (FGD Session, 2018).

A: Similar question is put across to a key informant, assistant secretary of AOPWA. She asserted: "It is pretty difficult to separate falling sick from the nature of our work especially during the peak periods when we may have to work overtime. We should bear in mind that body is no stone and we cannot cheat the human nature for too long" (KII, 2018).

THEME 2: Safety Measures against Work Hazards

Q: Are you provided with things like apron, work booth, hand gloves, to enhance your safety etc.

This question was directed to FGD 5.

A: The 11 out of the 12-member group answered affirmatively thus: "No". "This is the bell we often ring to our leaders –our employers. This is necessary to reduce the possibility of hazards in order to prolong our health and safety". One of the participants in Group 5 made bold and said, "Our leaders are only interested in their own profits and not in our own welfare" (FGD Session, 2018).

A key informant, an executive member of AOPWA responding to that same question said:

A: "It is a good thing but it is very rare to see such things as protective clothings in palm oil mills. People come to work in their slippers and that is what they wear all through. There has been times that some workers inadvertently step on burning coals, and we did nothing about it". May be our new workers need to be more careful as they move about the mill because I can't see how that can be done at the moment - to look for money and get some protective wears for us. Except in a few places like Akure, the state capital. It is very difficult to find such "comfort" around us here. We will keep reminding them until our situation will be improved"(KII, 2018).

The responses above are typical of reactions in capitalist work settings especially where establishments are not yet unionized. In such work domains, defensive reactions pervade the environment even when authorities from relevant ministries visit their workplaces. Sometimes, they prefer to 'settle' the officials rather than doing the needful.

During an in-depth interview, a question was put across to the husband of one of the participants who acted as a special –stakeholder /interviewee on safety of workers, thus:

Q: How do mills ensure clean and safe work environment to ensure good health and safety of workers of oil palm mills.

A: The spouse made the following comments: “a careful examination of their work environment indicates that all is not well with our mills in this area. No aspect of the town life can be greater than the sum of its parts. So, what we see around here is a reflection of what we might see in the whole town. Although Akungba has always been taken as a neat town naturally and that only a little is needed as an additional effort. I want to emphasize here that more still need to be done” (IDI, 2018).

Another special/stakeholder interviewees, chairman of Akungba Farmers’ Association had this to say concerning safety and good sanitary state of the mills and environment in Akungba:

Q: Chair, can you say that the oil palm mills in Akungba are keeping to all safety rules and regulations in order to ensure safety not only of those who work in those mills but their products.

A:“Although it may be said that Akungba is environmentally clean due to the topography of the area, much still has be done. The state government in partnership with certain environmental NGOs has promised to supply refuse collector vehicles to strategic locations in Akungba for easy collection and processing of solid wastes in Akungba and its environs. This can be additional opportunity for mill owners in ensuring improved health and safety of workers. Similarly, the Farmers Association has taken a lot of steps in collaboration with AOPWA and other well-meaning ‘sons of the soil’ to better the lot on environment upkeep in Akungba. We have also embarked on vigorous sensitization exercise among our people in all sectors our public life including business and other social organizations, to rise up to the challenge of ensuring standard sanitary maintenance of the area. In addition to these, each mill in collaboration with the local inspectors attached to this area, tries to ensure that their business place is kept neat in order to assure the public of the safety of their products for human consumption. Fumigation of the entire mill hectare is enforced every week to increase safety of the environment and maintain health of the workers” (IDI, 2018).

Q: What are the efforts being made by all and sundry in Akungba and its environs in ensuring safe and clean environment?

A:Another special interviewee, the sanitary inspector posted to Akungba area confirmed the efforts being made to ensure safe and clean environment in order to ensure that the palm oil

being produced are certified. There is week-by-week inspection of the vicinity of the mills from here in Akunga to its environs. Our people have been instructed on how to make good use of the facilities already provided and meticulous adherence to all sanitary rules and regulations, which in all honesty, they are keeping to. I am sure what remains now is for all the good promises made by of various stakeholders come to fruition; and once that comes to reality, Akungba will be comparable to big towns not only in Ondo State but the nation at large (IDI, 2018).

THEME 3: Family-care Responsibilities

As earlier reported, apart from the singles among the women, a greater proportion of the women are married. Only 6 are not ‘married’ – the widowed, the separated and the divorced. At the moment, such women may not carry much responsibility as those who are currently married. The married are currently saddled with responsibilities towards their spouse , children and other family members. In some cases, role playing may provoke certain conflict such as family-work role conflict or work-family conflict(Barnett & Hyde, 2007).

These conflicts have to be balanced in order to forestall stress, official disappointment and effective family- management lax. As a patriarchal society, the wife is torn between two streams of activities: workplace responsibilities and balanced home management. At the home front she prepares food, care for the young and offer necessary support to the husband. In the morning before going to work, children are prepared for school and in the afternoon, they return home or the mill to meet their mother. At the evening, the husband expects the woman to return home for another round of domestic activities. Except for those married who have grown-up ones, it is really problematic managing the two spheres. The family-care responsibilities take a great toll on the married mill worker. As an additional responsibility, she joins the world of work in order to secure some additional income for the family. As the principal breadwinner for the family, the husband carries most economic responsibilities; but the woman provides both economic and moral support to the husband.

According to an 11-member Focus Group 6, responding to a question as:

Q: How is the woman-miller able to respond effectively to challenges of keeping a home and engaging in the herculean task of oil palm production at the same time.

A: After ruminating on the question severally, their views were subjected to content analysis and summed up as follows:

A:“Many responsibilities rest squarely on the shoulder of the woman-miller although she may have a spouse. Even the so-called ‘not married’ among us, with the exception of the singles with fewer responsibilities, may carry care-responsibilities towards the young who might be her direct

children or those of her own children to whom she is currently a grandmother. For one reason or another, she may have decided to provide motherly support to them. It is not as if there have not disappointments here-and-there sometimes but the understanding ones among our husbands will always show maturity and bear with us. Even for those who always insists on their family supremacy, when they see our lowliness and softness with them, they sometimes stop to reason with us. ”(FGD Session, 2018).

This session is further joined by a special interviewee, in the person of Akungba Leader of market women (Iyaloja), who maintained as follows:

A: After the hustling and bustling of the day in the mill, our husbands still expect us to relate with them intimately as wives at night. Any expression of rejection on the part of the women is viewed culturally as ‘denial’ and if that counts severally for about a week, it might result to calling of a family meeting. Although culturally, it is their right to expect these roles towards them, but when we cannot meet up, they just to bear with us. No doubt, we can please every man, we just have to do our best. Sometimes, though, our husbands do not seem to realize that they cannot compare their own strength as men with that of our own as women. We sometimes suffer after the day’s work, things like back pain due to long-hours of seating down and sometimes, right under the sun in an effort to support our families. No how, no how we still have to keep our jobs especially at these period of recession in the country when it is difficult to secure a job. (IDI,2018).

A key informant, the Treasurer to AOPWA, made her own contribution thus:

A: The home responsibility of house-wives is divided into two: One, as wife and two, as mother. And attached to that is the work role in which she is expected to perform effectively as well. The role conflict between the demands of work and the home is a source of physical stress to the woman in addition to mental and physical illness. If we say we should stay at home and expect husband to bring everything, there are times our children are sent back from school to come and collect school fees even ordinary development fees of N2000, our husband may not have. When we ask them to go to their fathers, their fathers will send them back to us. Is it under this kind of situation we will say we are sitting down and not doing something to support our homes? She asked rhetorically. Only God has been helping us, otherwise, the women like commercial vehicles, should have been breaking down always. This is why our spouse needs patience and considerations in their dealing with us” (KII, 2018).

The Focus Group 6 was asked a question relating to work-family conflict as follows:

Q: Are there times when the woman working in a mill cannot discharge her work responsibilities due to family-work conflict.

A:“Yes, of course”, the group participants chorused. Then the wife of the local chief, who is a participant among the 11-member group then continues as follows: She asked rhetorically: “If a child is sick persistently and has to be taken to the hospital for medical attention by the mother who works in the mill. How would she be able to continue her work? In this case, we are talking about a child and not a pet dog! Would you say you are working when the child’s father is not available to step in and take care of the child? We still have to leave the work in the mill either for that day alone or more, because we are talking about a human being! In all these cases, we really need the support of our spouse. For example, I don’t know when last my husband sit with me at home and we chat about our family affairs? The situation becomes if I return home after the day’s work with an injury, he treats me like a leper as if he is not happy I am rendering my little for the family. At evenings, some of us still keep a little shop in front of the house to make some little money. Upon all these, our spouse sometimes complain about our efforts almost each time we return home late in the evening. Our situation may be different if we all had more understanding spouse who would be there for us at such critical times. We know we are not perfect but we are trying our best (FGD Session, 2018).

Another special interviewee, a Senior Retiree of National Bank for Agriculture who was holidaying at Akungba during the field work added his opinion on this issue:

A:“Though family and work relationships are separate from each other but we know they are connected. The quality of work affects family life. The nature of work in the oil palm mill makes them sometimes, to spend more time at work than they sometimes spend with their families. During raining season which begins around March each year and ends around July, the demand of work usually doubles and they affect their home responsibilities. This is an example of family-to-work conflict which could crop up any moment. These situations generally call for balancing work demands and family responsibilities at such times. If we say husbands would help at such critical moments, tradition will not help as it is believed that the woman is the family workaholic who must never complain! Whatever the husband will do at such times will, however, depend on his levels of education, understanding and exposure. In this Akungba, we have seen husbands taking children to school by themselves in the morning. They also take them to the hospital while their mothers are away for work or their market. There is nothing impossible if there is cooperation from our men. No doubt, in all, our family-care responsibilities oftentimes suffer due to inability of our men and women to strike an effective balance between work (or trade) and family (IDI, 2018).

Summary and Conclusion

The study has examined the challenges inherent in oil palm production and the attendant hazards for those who offer their labour for life sustenance. The women who engage in oil palm produce

are exposed to certain health hazards that sometimes threaten their life. While some hazards take time to manifest, some do manifest almost immediately because they are integral parts of the work setting, as common with all physical hazards. That in most parts of the world, the womenfolk play a critical role in agriculture of which oil palm processing is significant, reflects to some extent the deep poverty and the marginalization of that segment of human population in world affairs. The women have to do this in order to earn a living for the support of their family. The challenges faced by women, both employer and workers, in oil palm mills are not limited to only to physical hazards but the stress and other related problems that weigh on the mind of the woman as she tries to achieve a balance between the source of the meager income and her family-care responsibilities.

The field study beamed a searchlight on the perception of the rural folk about what constitute health profile. The study revealed that their work is taken more seriously than their health. For example, the issue of safety is secondary in their thinking. They still see some hazards or suffering as minor and as a tradition handed down from forbears. They belittle minor cuts or bruises in the leg so long as they can continue to maintain the job. No thanks to various poverty alleviation programmes of the government announced to focus those areas. The work relation is still much rooted in the typical primordial sentiments of respect for elders beyond normal courtesy expected between people. Even though they sometimes express the need for more labour-friendly work setting, such agitations hardly go beyond the complaints between an apprentice and work master. Apart from complaints taken to the king's palace which bother on work pays or some other minor issues, potential cases that bother on health hazards, safety and need for equity in the sharing of outcomes of work in the oil palm mills, are never addressed to the traditional ruler's awareness.

In addition, though the issue of remuneration was not specifically factored into the study, observations indicate that the take-home of the workers is barely a living wage in that such may not bring much relief except the worker also becomes the employer. What is offered as pay for spending most part of day could be likened to peanuts. If the income is commensurate with the effort expended coupled with rising cost of goods periodically, with time, majority could be moved above the poverty line as they are able to judiciously invest their income on petty trading activities that could enhance their material well-being. If poor material conditions of rural women and women in general are to be of any concern to policy makers, then more attention should be directed towards its eradication or meaningful reduction to liberate them from shackles of poverty and disease. First and foremost, more efforts should be geared towards gender equity in access to education and employment. Women should have a voice in matters that directly affect them in society.

There is no denying the fact that women are suffering generally in the world and that their effort alone is not sufficient to offer a bail-out. More human-centered approaches are required to assist in this direction. More private development agencies on humanitarian ground should spring up for help. The wake-up call should also be extended to our NGOs (which are mainly located around the urban areas without local offices) in the area of advocacy in order to sensitize oil mill owners for more tight-loosening decisions on whatever comes in as proceeds from productivity so more women could safely pass on to "freedom". Other relevant international bodies and well meaning personalities are equally urged to fashion sustainable efforts towards ameliorating the plights of women globally.

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