Published by

British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

Tiv Women and the Development of the Food and Hospitality Industry in Lafia, Nasarawa State, 1996–2025

Review Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 087

Accepted: 04 November 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-HLRH9CAR**

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Abstract

This study examines the economic activities and socioeconomic contributions of Tiv women in the food vending and hospitality industries in Lafia, Nasarawa State, between 1996 and 2025. It explores how the emergence of Lafia as the capital of Nasarawa State in 1996, alongside urbanisation and the expansion of commercial activities, created new economic opportunities for Tiv women. Drawing on Feminist Political Economy as its theoretical framework, the study analyses women's participation in street-food vending, restaurants, hotels, bars, catering establishments and other hospitality-related services. It argues that these occupations have provided important avenues for income generation, financial independence, household support, employment creation and entrepreneurial development. The study further examines the challenges confronting Tiv women, including inadequate access to capital, fluctuating operating costs, workplace discrimination, occupational insecurity and unfavourable social perceptions. Particular attention is given to the stereotype associating Tiv women employed in hotels, bars and other hospitality establishments with prostitution. The study challenges this generalisation by distinguishing between legitimate occupational activities and assumptions about women's sexuality and morality. It contends that the economic participation of Tiv women in Lafia represents an adaptation of longstanding traditions of female economic engagement to the opportunities and demands of an expanding urban economy. The study concludes that Tiv women's contributions to Lafia's food and hospitality economy deserve greater historical recognition, while gendered and ethnicised occupational stereotypes require critical examination.

Keywords: Tiv Women, Food Vending, Hospitality Industry, Gender, Occupational Stereotyping, Lafia, Nasarawa State

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Introduction

Women constitute the overwhelming majority of informal ready-to-eat food vendors in some Nigerian cities, demonstrating the gendered character of this sector. Lafia, the capital of Nasarawa State, provides an important setting for examining these transformations. The city has experienced considerable physical and socioeconomic expansion, accompanied by the growth of commercial activities and changing patterns of urban employment. Recent research characterises Lafia as an expanding urban centre, with urbanisation contributing to changes in its physical and socioeconomic environment. The expansion of the city has created demand for various services, including restaurants, roadside food businesses, hotels, guest houses, bars, catering establishments and other forms of hospitality. These developments have generated employment opportunities for people with different levels of formal education and occupational skills, particularly young people seeking alternatives to the increasingly competitive formal labour market.[1]

Within this changing urban economy, the participation of Tiv women in food vending and hospitality services is particularly noteworthy. In Lafia, Tiv women, especially young women, are visibly represented among street-food vendors, restaurant workers, bar attendants, receptionists, caterers and workers in other hospitality-related establishments. Their involvement reflects a wider process of occupational diversification in which migrant and minority populations adapt their livelihoods to the economic opportunities available in an urban environment. Food vending, for instance, can be entered with relatively modest capital compared with many formal businesses, while employment in restaurants, hotels and related establishments can provide young women with wages, occupational experience and opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills.[2]

The increasing visibility of Tiv women in these occupations, however, has also generated social perceptions that require closer historical and scholarly examination. In some social contexts, the presence of young women in bars, hotels and other hospitality establishments is sometimes interpreted through a sexualised lens, with Tiv women in particular being subjected to a stereotype that associates their participation in such occupations with prostitution.[3] Such an interpretation is problematic because it risks reducing diverse forms of women's economic activity to assumptions about their sexual behaviour. It also obscures the distinction between employment in the hospitality industry and commercial sex work. The mere fact that a woman works as a food vendor, waitress, bar attendant, receptionist or hotel employee does not, in itself, establish involvement in prostitution.[4]

More to that, the visible participation of young Tiv women in street-food vending, restaurants, bars, hotels, reception services and other hospitality-related occupations presents an important but under-researched phenomenon. Existing scholarship on informal food vending in Nigeria has established the importance of women in the sector and demonstrated its contribution to urban food provisioning and livelihoods. However, these studies do not adequately address the specific historical experience of Tiv women in Lafia.[5]

[1]P. Jasper I. Okwanya and I. Adofu. Street Food Vending and the Economic Well-Being of Women in Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. *Lafia Journal of Economics and Management Sciences, Special Edition.* 2026. 168-217

[2] K. P. Adeosun, P. Oosterveer and M. Greene. Informal ready-to-eat food vending governance in urban Nigeria: Formal and informal lenses guiding the practice. PLoS One. 2023 Jul 13;18(7):e0288499. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0288499. PMID: 37440492; PMCID: PMC10343139.

[3] . Adeosun, Oosterveer and Greene. Informal ready-to-eat food vending governance in urban Nigeria …,

[4] K. P. Adeosun, M. Greene and P. Oosterveer. Informal ready-to-eat food vending: a social practice perspective on urban food provisioning in Nigeria. Food Security 14(3). 2022. 763-780

[5] Adeosun, Greene and Oosterveer. Informal ready-to-eat food vending …, 763-780

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Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Women

The "concept of woman" refers to the understanding, perception, and representation of the female gender within various cultural, social, historical, and philosophical contexts. It encompasses both biological and sociocultural aspects of femininity.[6] The concept of woman can vary widely across different societies, eras, and belief systems, leading to diverse definitions and expectations of what it means to be a woman. The key elements that contribute to the concept of woman includes: Biological Aspects, Socio-cultural Roles. Gender Identity, Femininity, Social Constructs and Expectations.

Food Vending

Food vending refers to the preparation and sale of ready-to-eat food and beverages to consumers, frequently through small-scale or informal businesses. Such activities may take place along streets, markets, motor parks, workplaces, residential areas and other locations with substantial consumer traffic.

Hospitality Services

Hospitality services encompass a broad range of activities associated with providing accommodation, food, beverages and related services to customers. In the context of this study, the term includes hotels, guest houses, restaurants, bars, eateries, catering establishments and related businesses. Employment within these establishments may involve receptionists, waitresses, cooks, kitchen assistants, cleaners, bar attendants, cashiers, caterers and supervisors.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Political Economy

The study adopts Feminist Political Economy (FPE) as a theoretical framework. Feminist Political Economy examines how gender relations intersect with economic structures, labour markets, social institutions and systems of power. It is particularly useful for analysing women's participation in informal and low-paid employment because it draws attention to forms of labour that are frequently undervalued or excluded from conventional economic analysis.

The relevance of Feminist Political Economy to this study lies in its emphasis on the relationship between women's labour, economic survival, social structures and power. Tiv women's participation in food vending and hospitality services cannot be understood independently of the broader economic environment of Lafia. Limited formal employment opportunities, urbanisation, migration, household responsibilities, access to capital and gendered labour expectations may all influence women's occupational choices.[7]

Growth of Lafia's Food and Hospitality Economy, 1996–2025

The position of Lafia as Nasarawa State's capital in 1996 and Nasarawa State position and the link between the North and the south parts of the country created conditions for sustained expansion in the city's service economy. Government ministries and agencies, educational institutions and private businesses attracted workers and visitors, increasing demand for accommodation, meals, transportation and entertainment. The resulting urban expansion generated a growing market for restaurants, hotels, bars, eateries, roadside food businesses and catering services. Existing research identifies hospitality and administrative functions among the factors driving Lafia's urban expansion. [8]

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[6] M Elise. "Designing Women: The Definition of "Woman" in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," *Chicago Journal of International Law*: Vol. 16: No. 2. (2016)
Available at: http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol16/iss2/7. Accessed on 29/9/2023

[7] S. Cantillon, O. Mackett S. Stevano. Feminist Political Economy: A Global Perspective. Pluralist Economics Germany. 2023

[8] Jasper, Okwanya and Adofu. Street Food Vending and the Economic Well-Being of Women in Lafia …, 168-217

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The food economy expanded alongside population growth. As more people lived and worked away from their traditional rural settings, the demand for commercially prepared food increased. Civil servants working long hours, students, traders, artisans, travellers and other urban residents could rely on food vendors and restaurants for affordable meals. Informal food vending consequently became integrated into everyday urban life. The hospitality industry similarly expanded in response to the changing character of Lafia. Hotels and guest houses became necessary for government officials, businesspeople, visitors, students' families and other travellers. Restaurants and bars emerged within and around these establishments particularly around Bukan Sidi, Polytechnic, Shandam Road and Colleage Gate areas, while independent eateries and catering businesses served local residents. [9]

By the 2010s and early 2020s, food vending and hospitality had become increasingly embedded in Lafia's urban economy. An important historical continuity emerges from the preceding discussion. Tiv women's contemporary participation in Lafia's food economy did not arise from an absence of previous commercial activity. Rather, it represents a transformation of longstanding forms of female economic labour.[10] The major transformation was therefore not necessarily the entry of women into economic activity, but the movement from predominantly agricultural and local-market activities towards more diversified urban occupations. The growing importance of wage labour, service employment and small-scale entrepreneurship allowed women to participate in economic activities that were increasingly detached from household agricultural production. For Tiv women in Lafia, this transition was reinforced by migration and the expanding demand generated by the city's status as a state capital.[11]

Entry of Tiv Women into Food Vending

The entry of Tiv women into food vending in Lafia should be understood within the broader context of urbanisation, migration and changing livelihood opportunities. The expansion of Lafia following its emergence as the capital of Nasarawa State created a growing consumer population and consequently increased demand for prepared food. Food vending offered women a relatively accessible means of entering the urban economy because it generally required less initial capital than many formal businesses. Women could begin on a small scale, selling prepared meals from roadside stalls, tables, kiosks or other modest premises, and subsequently expand their activities as their customer base developed.[12]

This form of economic entry is consistent with the wider Nigerian experience. For Tiv women in Lafia, entry into food vending may occur through several pathways. Some women may establish businesses independently using personal savings or assistance from family members. Others may learn the occupation through relatives, friends or existing social networks. Young women may also enter the sector after completing secondary education or when formal employment opportunities are unavailable. Marriage, household responsibilities and the need for flexible working arrangements can likewise influence occupational choices. These factors suggest that there is no single explanation for women's participation; rather, food vending emerges from the interaction of economic necessity, opportunity, social networks and individual agency.[13] Consequently, the transition to commercial food vending did not necessarily represent a complete occupational rupture. Instead, it involved the adaptation of established knowledge of food preparation and exchange to the demands of an urban consumer market.

[9] Jasper, Okwanya and Adofu. Street Food Vending and the Economic Well-Being of Women in Lafia …, 168-217
[10] Jasper, Okwanya and Adofu. Street Food Vending and the Economic Well-Being of Women in Lafia …, 168-217
[11] Jasper, Okwanya and Adofu. Street Food Vending and the Economic Well-Being of Women in Lafia …, 168-217
[12] S. R. Lubem. Contributions of Tiv Women Entrepreneurs to the Socio-Economic Development of Tiv Land. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*. Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025. 64-79
[13] Lubem. Contributions of Tiv Women Entrepreneurs to the Socio-Economic Development …, 64-79

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Types of Food Businesses

The food businesses operated by women in Lafia are diverse and range from very small roadside operations to relatively established eateries and restaurants. They include the sale of cooked meals, snacks, convenience foods, beverages and locally prepared dishes. Existing research on Lafia specifically identifies *Kosai*, pounded Yam and *Akpu* among the convenience foods produced and consumed within the city, and found that their production and distribution constituted economically viable activities.[14]

At the street level, food vendors may specialise in a single product or combine several products according to customer demand. A vendor may, for instance, sell cooked rice and beans alongside fried foods, while another may specialise in traditional dishes, snacks or breakfast foods. The diversity of products enables women to respond to different categories of consumers and different periods of the day. Morning vendors may target workers and students, while evening vendors may serve residents, travellers and people returning from work.

The nature of the food business is also influenced by available capital. Women with limited resources may operate from movable tables or roadside stalls, while those with greater capital can establish permanent shops or restaurants. Some may gradually transition from street vending into fixed premises as their businesses become more profitable. This progression is important because it demonstrates that informal employment should not automatically be regarded as economically stagnant. Under favourable circumstances, informal activities can constitute an entry point into entrepreneurship and business expansion.[15]

Food Vending and Urban Food Provisioning

The significance of Tiv women's food businesses extends beyond the women themselves. Their activities form part of Lafia's wider urban food system. Research on informal ready-to-eat food vending in Nigeria shows that such vendors are important in providing food to urban consumers, particularly people whose working and living circumstances make regular preparation of meals at home difficult.[16]

In Lafia, food vendors serve different categories of urban consumers, including civil servants, students, traders, artisans, transport workers and other residents. Their businesses reduce the time required to prepare meals and provide relatively accessible alternatives to formal restaurants. In this sense, Tiv women participating in food vending perform a broader urban service function.

Their contribution is particularly significant for low- and middle-income consumers. The informal food economy provides different price points and product choices, enabling consumers to purchase meals according to their financial circumstances. Food vendors therefore participate in the everyday reproduction of urban life by making food available where and when consumers need it.

This contribution also explains why the historical development of food vending should not be treated solely as a women's employment issue. [17]

Challenges Facing Tiv Women Food Vendors

Despite its economic benefits, food vending is associated with significant challenges. The first is access to capital. Small-scale vendors often operate with limited financial resources, restricting their ability to purchase equipment, secure permanent premises or expand their businesses. Research on Lafia's

[14] Oral Interview with Mwuese John. Female. 31yrs. Food Saler. Lafia. 17/09/2026
[15] Oral Interview with Mwuese John. Female. 31yrs. Food Saler. Lafia. 17/09/2026
[16] Oral Interview with Veronica Yua. Female. 37yrs. Food Saler. Shabu. 18/09/2026
[17] Oral Interview with Mwuese John. Female. 31yrs. Food Saler. Lafia. 17/09/2026

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convenience-food sector has specifically recommended improved access to credit for producers and distributors with limited incomes.

The second challenge concerns food hygiene and regulatory requirements. A 2024 study of food vendors in Lafia examined knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning food hygiene, indicating that food safety remains an important issue within the city's vending sector. Earlier research across Nasarawa State similarly found limited formal training in food handling among vendors and identified gaps between awareness and actual hygienic practices. These findings demonstrate the need to distinguish between the economic importance of food vending and the regulatory and public-health challenges associated with it.[18]

A third challenge is fluctuating operating costs. Food vendors depend on ingredients whose prices can change rapidly. Increases in the cost of rice, beans, cooking oil, meat, vegetables, fuel and transportation can reduce profit margins and force vendors to increase prices or reduce portion sizes. Such pressures are particularly difficult for small businesses with limited financial reserves.

Women may also face challenges related to the location of their businesses. Street vendors can be vulnerable to eviction, relocation, environmental conditions and local regulatory demands. Those operating late in the evening may face additional security concerns. These challenges can influence where women choose to work and the hours during which they operate.[19]

Finally, the social dimension must not be overlooked. Women who work in food vending or hospitality-related environments may encounter gendered assumptions about their morality and status. Although this issue becomes particularly pronounced in bars and hotels, food vendors may also experience occupational stigma depending on their location and clientele. The relationship between women's work and social perception therefore forms an important bridge to the later section of this article.[20]

The evidence presented in this section suggests that food vending should be interpreted as a significant component of Tiv women's economic participation in Lafia. The occupation provides opportunities for income generation, entrepreneurship, occupational learning and household support. Its relatively accessible entry requirements allow women with limited formal employment opportunities to participate in the urban economy, while its flexibilit[21]y enables some women to combine commercial activities with domestic responsibilities.

A survey of food vending in Lafia and Nasarawa State reinforces this interpretation. Female producers dominate certain convenience-food activities in Lafia, while women also constitute the majority of street-food vendors in Nasarawa State. National research likewise demonstrates the overwhelming participation of women in informal ready-to-eat food vending.

Tiv Women and the Hospitality Industry in Lafia, 1996–2025

The expansion of Lafia as the capital of Nasarawa State in 1996 contributed to the development of a broader service economy in which hotels, restaurants, bars, guest houses, catering businesses and other hospitality establishments became increasingly important. The city's administrative, educational and commercial functions have been identified as factors driving its urban expansion, while the growth of hospitality services has accompanied this transformation. The development of this sector created employment opportunities for workers with different educational backgrounds and skill levels, including

[18] Oral Interview with Mwuese John. Female. 31yrs. Food Saler. Lafia. 17/09/2026
[19] Oral Interview with Veronica Yua. Female. 37yrs. Food Saler. Shabu. 18/09/2026
[20] Oral Interview with Veronica Yua. Female. 37yrs. Food Saler. Shabu. 18/09/2026
[21] U. M. Musa and J. M. Waziri. Lafia Food Economy and the Emergence of Multinational Corporations: A Thematic Discourse. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities Journal 2022

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women who found employment as receptionists, waitresses, cooks, cleaners, bar attendants, cashiers, caterers and other service workers.

The hospitality sector is particularly relevant to the present study because it represents a major point at which women's economic participation becomes socially visible. Unlike some forms of home-based trading, hospitality employment requires workers to interact directly with customers, visitors and guests. This visibility can create opportunities for income generation and skill acquisition, but it can also expose women to gendered assumptions about their occupation and personal lives. Research on gender inequality in Nigeria's hospitality industry has identified employment discrimination, occupational pressures and the nature of hospitality work as important challenges affecting women. The experience of Tiv women in Lafia must therefore be understood within this broader gendered labour environment.

Employment of Tiv Women in Hotels and Guest Houses

Hotels and guest houses constitute an important component of Lafia's hospitality economy. The city currently has a substantial number of establishments offering accommodation and restaurant services, reflecting the continuing importance of hospitality to its urban economy. The sector includes establishments ranging from small guest houses and lodges to larger hotels offering accommodation, restaurants, event facilities and recreational services.

An example of this institutional development is the transformation of the former Nasarawa State Government VIP Guest House into Nasarawa Luxury Hotel. The state government entered into a management partnership in 2020 to commercialise the facility, which provides accommodation, catering, recreational and event services. Such developments illustrate the continuing commercialisation and diversification of hospitality services in Lafia.

Within these establishments, women participate in several occupational capacities. Receptionists are responsible for receiving guests, managing reservations, responding to enquiries and performing other front-office functions. Other women work as waitresses, cooks, kitchen assistants, cleaners, laundry workers, cashiers and event-service personnel. These positions demonstrate that the hospitality sector provides a range of occupations rather than a single form of employment.

For young Tiv women, hotel employment can provide an important entry point into the urban labour market. A young woman without substantial business capital may be able to obtain employment through her educational qualifications, personal contacts or previous work experience. The wage earned may subsequently be used to support parents, children or other relatives, pay personal expenses, save for future business activities or acquire vocational skills.

Hotel employment can also function as a transitional occupation. Some women may enter the sector temporarily while seeking other employment, while others may remain for several years and develop professional experience. Still others may use accumulated savings and knowledge of the hospitality business to establish restaurants, catering enterprises or other independent businesses..

For Tiv women employed in reception positions, the work requires communication skills, customer relations, basic administrative competence and familiarity with hotel procedures. Depending on the establishment, receptionists may also handle telephone enquiries, reservations, payments and records. The occupation therefore involves considerably more than simply welcoming guests.

The visibility of reception work, however, can produce an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, receptionists are clearly identifiable as employees of the establishment. On the other hand, their regular interaction with predominantly male customers may expose them to assumptions concerning their personal relationships with guests. This distinction is particularly relevant to the stereotype examined in this article.

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The occupation should therefore be interpreted according to its actual functions. A woman working at a hotel reception desk is performing a recognised occupational role within the hospitality industry. Her presence in a hotel does not constitute evidence of involvement in prostitution. The failure to distinguish between employment and sexual activity represents precisely the type of occupational stereotyping that this study seeks to interrogate.

Economic Motivations for Hospitality Employment

Economic considerations constitute a major explanation for women's participation in hospitality services. Employment provides wages or other forms of income that enable women to meet personal and household obligations. For young women, hospitality employment may provide an accessible alternative where formal-sector employment opportunities are limited.

The economic motivations may include:

- personal financial independence;
- payment of school fees;
- household support;
- assistance to parents;
- payment of rent;
- savings;
- acquisition of business capital;
- acquisition of occupational skills;
- preparation for marriage and family responsibilities;
- financing of further education; and
- transition into self-employment.

These motivations demonstrate that hospitality employment can be embedded in longer-term livelihood strategies. A woman may accept employment not because she considers it her ultimate career but because it provides income and experience necessary to pursue another objective.

This perspective is consistent with research showing that gender influences occupational roles within hospitality, with women often concentrated in particular categories of work and facing gendered expectations concerning their employment. The economic significance of these positions should therefore be assessed alongside the structural constraints that shape women's access to employment.

Gender Inequality and Workplace Challenges

Women's participation in hospitality does not mean that the sector is free from gender inequality. Research on Nigerian hotels has identified gender discrimination, employment pressures and the nature of work as significant challenges affecting female hospitality professionals. More recent scholarship likewise identifies gender stereotypes and occupational segregation as persistent features of hospitality employment, with women frequently concentrated in lower-level positions while men are more represented in senior roles.[22] These patterns are relevant to Tiv women working in Lafia. They may encounter low wages, long working hours, limited promotion opportunities, workplace harassment or unequal treatment. Young women may be particularly vulnerable because of their age, limited work experience and dependence on employers.

The social environment surrounding hospitality employment can compound these workplace challenges. A woman who experiences sexual harassment, for instance, may simultaneously face the risk of being

[22] Singh, S., Mordi, C., Okafor, C. and Simpson, R. Challenges in Female Entrepreneurial Development –A Case Analysis of Nigerian Entrepreneurs, Journal of Enterprising Culture: An International Journal, (18, 4). 2021, 435 – 460.

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blamed for working in an environment where such behaviour occurs. Similarly, occupational stereotypes may make it difficult for women to explain the nature of their employment to family members or members of their communities.[23]

Challenging the Prostitution Stereotype: Gender, Ethnicity, Occupation and Social Perception

The participation of Tiv women in Lafia's food and hospitality economy raises an important question concerning the relationship between women's occupations and the social meanings attached to them. While food vending, restaurant work, hotel reception, waitressing, catering and bar attendance constitute identifiable forms of employment, the social interpretation of some of these occupations can extend beyond their economic functions. In particular, young women working in bars, hotels and other hospitality establishments may be subjected to assumptions about their sexuality and morality. Where such assumptions are applied specifically to Tiv women, the issue becomes simultaneously one of gender, ethnicity and occupational stereotyping.

The importance of this issue is reinforced by recent scholarship on Tiv gender relations. Nyajoh et al. argue that Tiv gender relations have undergone considerable transformation, with contemporary social and economic changes producing both continuing patriarchal constraints and new forms of female agency. Earlier work on Tiv gender relations similarly demonstrates that women have historically occupied significant social and economic roles, although these roles have been shaped by gendered expectations.[24] The present study extends this discussion into the urban labour environment of Lafia.

Understanding the Stereotype

A stereotype involves a generalised belief that attributes particular characteristics to members of a social group without adequately considering individual differences. Gender stereotypes become particularly problematic when they determine how women's behaviour, occupations or character are interpreted. Research on gender stereotyping in Nigeria demonstrates that such assumptions can reinforce discrimination and unequal treatment by assigning women particular social roles or characteristics.

In the context of this study, the relevant stereotype is the assumption that Tiv women who work in bars, hotels or related hospitality establishments are prostitutes. It is important to state precisely what the study is and is not arguing. The study does not claim that prostitution does not occur in Lafia or that no woman employed in a hospitality establishment has ever engaged in prostitution. Such a claim would be impossible to establish from the occupational category alone.

Rather, the study challenges the generalisation that identifies Tiv women in hospitality employment with prostitution merely because of their occupation. The distinction is fundamental. A receptionist performs reception duties; a waitress serves customers; a cook prepares food; a bar attendant serves beverages; and a caterer prepares and serves food at events. None of these occupational descriptions, by themselves, establishes participation in prostitution.

The stereotype becomes problematic when an entire ethnic and gender group is assigned a sexual identity based primarily on where its members work. Such an assumption can erase the economic motivations behind women's employment and transform legitimate labour into a question of morality.

Gender and the Sexualisation of Women's Labour

The social interpretation of women's work is often influenced by assumptions concerning femininity and sexuality. Women working in occupations that require direct interaction with men may be judged

[23] Singh, Mordi, Okafor, and Simpson. Challenges in Female Entrepreneurial Development …, 435 – 460.
[24] Singh, Mordi, Okafor, and Simpson. Challenges in Female Entrepreneurial Development …, 435 – 460.

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differently from men performing comparable duties. The hospitality industry is particularly relevant because many of its occupations involve personal interaction, customer service, evening work and physical proximity between employees and customers.

Research on gender dynamics within the Nigerian hospitality industry indicates that gender stereotypes influence workplace roles and can produce both horizontal and vertical occupational segregation, with women disproportionately represented in some lower-level service positions. Earlier research on gender inequality in Nigerian hospitality establishments similarly identified employment discrimination and the nature of hospitality work as significant sources of inequality. [25]

This gendered structure can contribute to the sexualisation of women's labour. When a woman works in an environment where she is required to smile at customers, communicate with them, serve food or beverages, or work during evening hours, observers may interpret professional customer service as personal or sexual availability. Such interpretations are not inherent in the occupation; they are produced by social expectations about gender and sexuality.

For Tiv women in Lafia, the consequences may be particularly significant where ethnic identity is added to these gendered assumptions. A woman is therefore not perceived simply as a hospitality worker but potentially as a Tiv woman working in a hospitality environment, with ethnic stereotypes influencing the interpretation of her occupation.

Tiv Identity and Gendered Stereotyping

The relationship between Tiv identity and gender requires careful historical consideration. Tiv women have historically occupied significant economic positions within their communities. Research on Tiv society has highlighted women's participation in agriculture, food production, trade and other economic activities, while recent scholarship identifies continuing changes in women's agency and gender relations.

The contemporary stereotype therefore creates an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, Tiv women possess a historical tradition of economic participation. On the other hand, their participation in certain urban occupations may be interpreted negatively when those occupations place them in highly visible hospitality environments.[26]

This contradiction illustrates the importance of distinguishing between women's economic activity and the social interpretation of women's economic activity. The occupation itself may represent continuity with established forms of female economic participation, while the urban environment changes how that work is perceived.

It is also important not to assume that the stereotype is exclusively Tiv in origin or exclusively directed at Tiv women. Women from other ethnic groups who work in similar establishments may experience comparable forms of occupational stigma. The empirical question is therefore whether Tiv women in Lafia experience a distinctive ethnicised form of the wider gender stereotype, or whether the perception is primarily an occupational stereotype that happens to be attached to Tiv women in particular social contexts.

This distinction should be tested through interviews rather than predetermined by the researcher.

[25] Prakash J, Dhamija S, Chaudhury S, Srivastava K. Women and the workplace. Ind Psychiatry J. 2024 Jul-Dec;33(2):201-207. doi: 10.4103/ipj.ipj_365_24. Epub 2024 Dec 17. PMID: 39898098; PMCID: PMC1178469

[26] S. Silva and M. João Couto. Gender Bias in the Hospitality Sector: Female and Male Jobs. International Conference on Tourism Research. Research 6(1). 2023. 292-297

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Women's Experiences of Occupational Stigma

Occupational stigma can have material as well as psychological consequences. A woman who is repeatedly labelled negatively because of her occupation may experience strained family relationships, reduced social standing or difficulty establishing relationships within her community. Customers may also behave differently toward workers whom they perceive through sexualised stereotypes.

For young Tiv women, the effects may include:

- being suspected of prostitution because of their workplace;
- family disapproval of employment in bars or hotels;
- negative assumptions concerning their relationships with male customers;
- harassment from customers who interpret professional friendliness as sexual availability;
- discrimination when seeking accommodation;
- difficulties explaining their occupations to potential partners or relatives;
- pressure to leave certain occupations despite their economic benefits.

These issues require empirical investigation. The final article should not present all of them as established facts unless they are supported by interviews or documentary evidence. Instead, they provide categories that should guide the oral-history component of the research.

The stereotype also raises a broader question concerning the intersection of gender and ethnicity. If Tiv women are disproportionately subjected to assumptions about prostitution because of their ethnicity, then the phenomenon cannot be adequately understood as gender discrimination alone. It represents a potentially intersectional form of social categorisation. The concept of intersectionality is useful here because gender does not operate independently of ethnicity, class, age or occupational position. A young Tiv woman working in a bar may experience social judgement differently from an older non-Tiv woman working in a restaurant, even where both perform similar occupational functions.[27]

Socioeconomic Contributions and Challenges of Tiv Women in Lafia, 1996–2025

The participation of Tiv women in food vending and hospitality services has implications that extend beyond individual employment. Their activities form part of the wider informal and service economy of Lafia and contribute to household livelihoods, food distribution, employment creation and urban commercial development. The significance of these activities becomes particularly apparent when viewed against the expansion of Lafia since 1996. The city's emergence as the capital of Nasarawa State stimulated population growth, commercial activity and demand for accommodation, food and other services.[28]

Employment Creation and Income Generation

One of the most important contributions of Tiv women is the creation of employment opportunities for themselves and others. A food vendor who operates a relatively small business may require assistants to prepare food, wash utensils, serve customers, purchase ingredients and manage sales. As the business expands, additional workers may be employed. Similar employment relationships exist in restaurants, hotels, bars and catering businesses.

Food vending is particularly significant because it has relatively low entry barriers compared with many formal occupations. Research on street-food vending in Nasarawa State found that women constitute a

[27] Cao J, Paraskevas A. "Beyond the “broken rung”: a multi-level analysis of gender bias in Male-dominated hotel management roles". *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, Vol. 17 No. 5. 2025. 642–652

[28] D. M. Igba and J. W. Zaamo. Tiv Rural Women Farmers and the Development of Primary Agriculture in Benue State,1976-2020. *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities* VOL. 19, NO. 1 and 2 2022

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substantial majority of vendors and that income generation is a major motivation for participation. Thus, the participation of Tiv women in the sector should be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of female entrepreneurship in the state. The income generated through these activities contributes to household welfare. Women may use their earnings to purchase food, pay school fees, contribute to rent and other household expenses, support relatives and accumulate savings. For unmarried women, income may provide greater financial independence, while married women may supplement household earnings. Tiv women engaged in food vending also contribute to the availability of ready-to-eat food in Lafia. Urban residents who work long hours, live away from their families or lack the time and facilities to prepare meals regularly depend upon food vendors and restaurants.[29]

Research on informal food vending in Nigeria demonstrates the importance of these businesses in supplying ready-to-eat food to urban populations. Research specifically undertaken in Lafia also found that female producers of convenience foods constituted the majority of producers examined and that products such as *okpa*, *moi moi* and meat pie were commercially viable. Tiv women's food businesses consequently perform an important social function. They make food accessible to workers, students, traders, travellers and other residents while simultaneously generating income for the vendors.

The movement from wage employment or small-scale vending into independent entrepreneurship represents another important contribution. Some women may begin by working as waitresses, cooks or food vendors and subsequently establish their own businesses. This process demonstrates that informal employment can serve as an incubator for entrepreneurship. Through their work, women acquire knowledge of purchasing, pricing, customer relations, food preparation, stock management and financial administration.[30]

The experience may subsequently be converted into independent enterprises. A woman who has worked in a restaurant for several years, for example, may possess sufficient knowledge to establish her own eatery. Similarly, a hotel worker may establish a catering service or event-management business.

Tiv women's participation in hotels, restaurants, bars and catering businesses also contributes directly to Lafia's hospitality industry. Their labour enables establishments to provide accommodation, food, beverages, reception and event services. Hospitality establishments depend heavily on service workers, and women occupy many of these positions. Existing Nigerian research identifies gendered patterns within hospitality employment and notes the concentration of women in several customer-service and lower-level occupational categories.[31]

Conclusion

The historical evidence presented in this study demonstrates that Tiv women's participation in Lafia's food and hospitality economy represents a significant form of economic adaptation. The development of Lafia after 1996 created an expanding urban market in which food vending, restaurants, hotels and other service businesses became increasingly important. The participation of Tiv women is partly connected to historical patterns of women's economic activity among the Tiv. Earlier scholarship demonstrates women's involvement in agricultural production, food processing and local marketing. Contemporary food vending can therefore be interpreted as an adaptation of established economic practices to an urban environment.

The evidence also challenges a narrow understanding of informal employment. Food vending is frequently described as an informal activity, but this classification should not obscure its economic importance. It generates income, supplies food, creates employment and provides a pathway into entrepreneurship. More

[29] Igba and Zaamo. Tiv Rural Women Farmers and the Development of Primary Agriculture …, 29 - 43
[30] Igba and Zaamo. Tiv Rural Women Farmers and the Development of Primary Agriculture …, 29 - 43
[31] Igba and Zaamo. Tiv Rural Women Farmers and the Development of Primary Agriculture …, 29 - 43

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importantly, the study highlights the difference between occupation and social perception. A woman employed as a receptionist, waitress, cook, bar attendant or caterer occupies a specific economic role. Her occupation cannot legitimately be used as automatic evidence of prostitution. This distinction is particularly important because gender stereotypes can affect women's experiences of work. Research on hospitality employment in Nigeria demonstrates that gendered expectations shape occupational roles and can contribute to discrimination.

The Tiv case therefore provides an opportunity to examine how gender and ethnicity intersect in the interpretation of women's labour. If the stereotype identified by the researcher is confirmed through oral interviews and other evidence, it would demonstrate that Tiv women encounter not merely occupational stereotyping but potentially an ethnicised form of gender stereotyping.

The historical significance of this argument lies in its attempt to shift the narrative from morality to labour. Instead of asking whether women working in particular environments conform to preconceived notions of respectable femininity, the study asks what economic functions they perform, why they enter those occupations and what their participation contributes to the urban economy.

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