

## WOMEN WORKING AT HAIRDRESSING: A CASE STUDY OF A RAPIDLY INCREASING BUSINESS AMONG WOMEN IN URBAN GHANA

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**ABSTRACT** For a long time, economic activities have been important for women in southern Ghana to support their children and themselves. Among women's activities in urban areas, hairdressing is the one that has flourished recently. The study examines socio-economic and other factors that have resulted in this rapid increase of hairdressing, especially from the perspective of the entrants' reason for occupational choice. Findings show that hairdressing has become attractive to women not only as a source of income but also because of its flexibility and compatibility with domestic work. Diffusion of hair relaxing has influence on the increase of salon demand. Institutionalisation of hairdressing training system also has impact on attracting young people who have begun to regard hairdressing as a skilled, fashionable and modern occupation. As a result, hairdressing apprenticeship has become one of the major recourses for women with basic education.

**Key Words:** Ghana; Women's economic activity; Hairdressing; Structural Adjustment Programme; Apprenticeship.

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. Background

Women in Ghana are well known for their high participation in economic activities. A wife as well as a husband would have an independent income and budget, and she shares with her husband the economic responsibilities of the household; and a husband is normally responsible for big expenditures, while his wife bears the day-to-day expenses of running the household (Clark, 1989; Chamlee-Wright, 1997: 122). Both women and men are expected to generate an income to support other family members and build up networks that add to their esteem and prestige within their kin groups and communities. Also, because conjugal relationships tend to be rather unstable, women cannot solely depend on men, but must build up their own resources to support themselves and their dependents.

More than 85% of Ghanaian women are said to be self-employed or unpaid family workers, and about half of them are employed in agriculture, animal husbandry or forestry, while 20% are engaged in trading (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). Meanwhile, in the Greater Accra Region, trading is the most popular economic activity among women (40.5%), followed by production (19%),

such as food processing, tailoring and others (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). On the other hand, between 1984 and 2000, the ratio of women in the service sector in the Region increased from 6.1% to 14.1% (Ghana Statistical Service, 1987; 2002). Occupations of women in the service sector include food preparation, hotel and restaurant businesses, housemaid, and hairdressing, among others.<sup>(1)</sup>

It seems that during the period 1984-2000 hairdressing thrived remarkably, and that it was one of the modern and important occupations for women in urban Ghana. However, so far, little is known about the reason for the rapid increase of hairdressing. To elucidate the reason, we have to know the socio-economic background of hairdressers, their training career, and their ingenuity in operating salons.

## II. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the reasons for the increase in hairdressing in urban Ghana. Technical aspects of hairdressing that have affected the increase of demand for salon services will be examined first. Subsequently, other factors that have led to the recent increase in hairdressers will be examined. Characteristics of hairdressers will be examined to elucidate the reasons why they have stepped into the business.

## III. Study Site and Research Period

The research area is known as Madina, a township located about 16km north-east of Accra (Fig. 1). It was founded as a planned settlement in 1959, two years after the independence of Ghana (Quarcoo *et al.* eds, 1967). Since then, it has developed rapidly both as a commercial centre and as a commuter town for those working in the Accra Metropolis. Now, about 80,500 people of different ethnic groups, religion and economic status live in this area (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). The fieldwork was conducted from August to October 2000 and from February 2001 to September 2002. Extensive surveys on location and types of operation of salon were carried out first. Subsequently, personal interviews were conducted with 53 respondents working at 22 salons, which were selected by purposive sampling.<sup>(2)</sup>

# RECENT INCREASE OF HAIR SALONS IN MADINA

## I. Increase of Hair Salons

According to respondents, there were only a few salon buildings in Madina in the early 1980s. This had increased to over 300 by 2001. Fig. 2 shows the distribution pattern of hair salons in Madina Township, with the dots indicat-

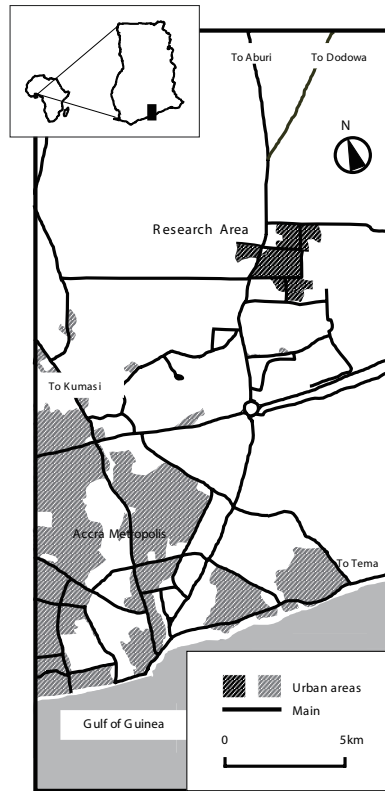


Fig. 1. Location of Research Area

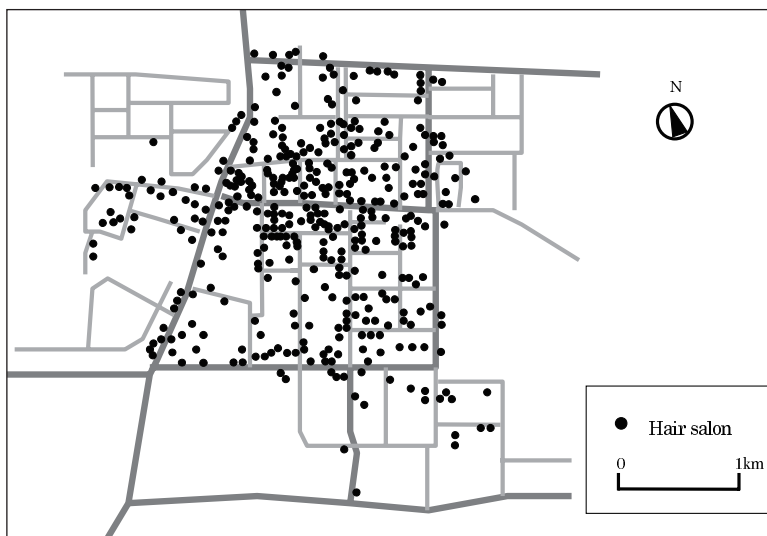


Fig. 2. Distribution of Hair Salons in Research Area, Year 2001



Fig. 3. Salon with Building (*kiosk*)

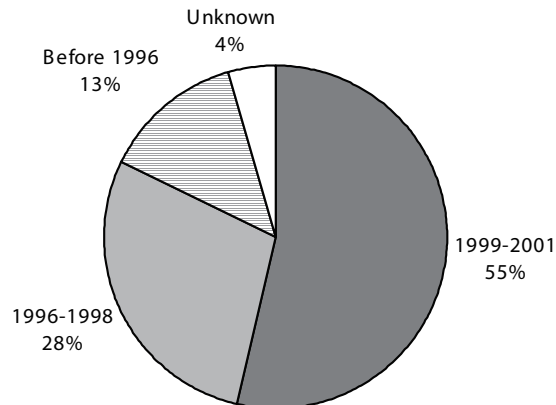


Fig. 4. Year of Salon Establishment (Salons under Operation, Year 2001: N=67)

ing the location. Some have special buildings for hairdressing which is made of concrete, metal or wood, while others use part of their own houses or operate under the shade of market stalls or staircases without buildings. In this paper, all of them are called “hair salons” or “salons”, unless otherwise specified. The most popular type of salon in Madina is the one in a wooden structure, which is called *kiosk* (Fig. 3).

Most of the salons in Madina were established in the last decade. Among 67 salons interviewed, the oldest one was opened in 1989. About 53.7% (36 salons) started operation between 1999 and 2001, and 28.4% (19 salons) started between 1996 and 1998 (Fig. 4). The interviews conducted in several parts of Madina also supported the fact that the increase of the salons had taken place just recently.

## II. Hair Relaxing and Demand for Salon Services

In the process of the research, it turned out that among various kinds of hair-dressing techniques, a kind of hair-straightening perm called 'hair relaxing' has contributed a great deal to increase demand of salons. In urban areas, women of various socio-economic groups have their hair chemically relaxed. In Ghana, hair relaxing was introduced from Europe and America. It started to be used in salons in Ghana around the 1980s, and become more popular among women in the second half of the 1990s. The hair of most African people tends to coil around when it grows and this makes combing the hair difficult. Hair relaxing has become popular among women in Ghana, as it can make their curly hair soft, and therefore easier to manage, which enables them to create more variant styles including even those of Europeans.

Manufacturers have also played an important role in the expansion and spread of hair relaxing in Ghana. Table 1 shows the development of manufacturers that produce perm creams and other hair-care products in Ghana. The Government has promoted trade liberalization since it embarked on World Bank/IMF-supported Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s. This has resulted in the establishment of many foreign companies indicated by bold letters in the table. There are several reasons for the development of these foreign companies in Ghana. One is people's adaptability to Western culture and fashion in Ghana, which has a long history of contact with Europe. What is more, the country has the reputation for a high level of security and infrastructural development. In addition to this, the enactment of a Free Zone Act in 1996 drew more attention from foreign companies. These companies launched in Ghana have started

**Table 1.** Inroads of Manufacturers into Ghana

Year	Events	Factory establishment	Hairdressing school & Hairstyle contests
1992	Civil administration (Pres. Rawlings)		
1994		○ Jebacoci Co. Ltd.	
1995		● Unilever Ghana Ltd.	
1996	Pluralism (Pres. Rawlings) Free Zone Act		
1997		● Carson Products	● Hairdressing school (by Carson)
1998		● Maxim Cosmetics ● SLID Industries Ltd.	● Hairstyle contest (by Carson)
1999			
2000		● PZ Cussons Ind. Gh. Ltd. ○ Ojay & Sons Ltd.	● Hairstyle contest (by UB)
2001			
2002			

Note: ● Foreign Companies, ○ Ghanaian Companies.

Data from interviews (Carson, Unilever, Maxim, Ojay & Sons), company leaflets/booklets (Jebacoci, Unilever, Ojay & Sons), and homepages (SLID, PZ Cussons).



**Fig. 5.** Touching Up Relaxed Hair

to promote their products through advertisements, hairstyle contests, hairdressing schools and other campaigns.

Once the hair is relaxed, it becomes too straight and stands up, which people in Ghana don't think beautiful. This is one of the reasons why the spread of hair relaxing has contributed to the increase in the demand for salon services. In order to make the hair presentable, each time after shampooing, people need to set it in rollers, dry it and treat it with different hair products. Since it is not easy to do these at home by themselves, people often end up going to salons for shampooing once a week. To add to this, people need to visit a salon to touch up their hair every 6 weeks on average (Fig. 5), because as the hair grows, the hair roots become curly and natural again. It is for these reasons, that once a woman has had her hair relaxed, she has to visit salons frequently and regularly. The charge for shampooing at a salon was about 59 cents on average (in 2002), though it varied according to the salon facilities.

## WOMEN WORKING AT HAIRDRESSING

### I. Profile of Women Working at Hairdressing

We may classify persons working in salons into three categories: *owner hairdressers*, *workers*, and *apprentices*. Among those interviewed, 57 out of 61 salons were owned by hairdressers. In some salons, which are short of hands or whose owners are not hairdressers, hairdressing *workers* are employed. And *apprentices* are those who are learning hairdressing practically.

The following analysis is based on interviews with 50 people working at hairdressing, namely, owner hairdressers, workers and apprentices. All of them were women, with the majority being young. Their range of age bracket were 22 to 40 years, 22 to 34 years and 16 to 30 years for owner hairdressers,

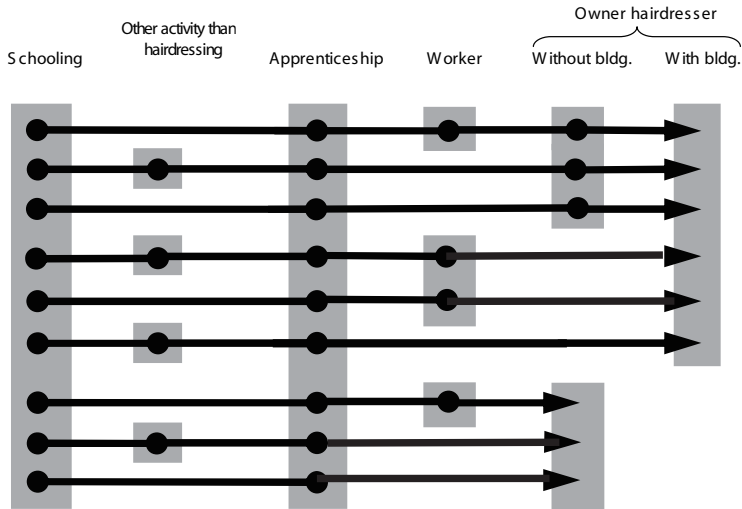


Fig. 6. Careers of Current Owner Hairdressers (Model)

workers and apprentices respectively. Owner hairdressers were generally older than workers, and workers were generally older than apprentices.

Fig. 6 shows a simplified model of the career paths of 18 owner hairdressers that I interviewed. According to them, they entered apprenticeship just after schooling or after engaging in some economic activity for a short period. After graduating from apprenticeship, they earned initial capital little by little as workers in hairdressing or as self-employed hairdressers at home. When they obtained enough capital either by themselves or with the support of mainly their husbands or fathers, they opened their salons in buildings. This is subject to some exceptions. Further scrutiny shows that not all hairdressers followed the same path; some quit hairdressing for some time and chose another occupation, and others closed their salons and became re-employed in other salons. However, it can be said that many of those who were willing to be owner-hairdressers followed similar career paths.

## II. Economic Status

The income generating process will be examined here at each stage of the hairdressers. The following analysis is based on the study of the living expenses of single women.

To become an apprentice, one has to pay a fixed amount for entrance. They are paid neither salaries nor allowances such as transport expenses or meals from the salon. Most apprentices (24 single apprentices out of 25) depended on their parents or relatives. On the other hand, most workers are paid better than the national minimum wage level, which is 91 cents per day in 2002. Half of the single workers interviewed (3 out of 6) fed themselves.

It was difficult to estimate the profit of owner hairdressers. However, they

are estimated to earn at least 1.5 to 6 times the minimum wage in a month (i.e. US\$ 27-115). Most of the single owner hairdressers who are unmarried (7 out of 8) are bearing food expenses for themselves. Some of them even support their children too.

Ghana experienced a serious economic decline around the 1970s and the 1980s. It is said that this affected husbands and natal kin in not being able to support women as before anymore (Manuh, 1993: 179). Therefore, it had become very important for women to feed and support themselves and their families by engaging in hairdressing or other occupations.

### III. Coping with Domestic and Economic Responsibility

For women, income was not the only criterion in making job-related decisions. Women are expected to fulfil their domestic chores even when they are working. For example, there was one apprentice who had finished Senior Secondary School and who wanted to proceed with her education to become a teacher. However, when she got engaged to an accountant, she decided to become a hairdresser, not a teacher. She thought that she could be a self-employed hairdresser. This would be easier for her to take care of her future family while working.

Women in southern Ghana used to get assistance from their kin and children in doing domestic chores so that they could cope with both their economic activities and married life. However, as urbanization proceeds, family members tend to live in different places. As a result, the more children go to school, the more difficult it has become to expect their help. In consequence, many women have to undertake housework, cooking and childcare alone. Therefore, owner hairdressers have an advantage over those who are engaged in other jobs like office work. Because they are self-employed, they can work rather flexibly. They can perform some domestic chores during business hours, and/or they can look after their children in salons. They can also have their staff take care of salon jobs. Because of these advantages, owner hairdressers can fulfil their dual role as housewife and businesswoman.

## INCREASE OF HAIRDRESSERS

### I. New Entrants and Intensifying Competition

As we have seen, many women have entered hairdressing apprenticeship because of the high demand for salon services. They dreamed of becoming qualified hairdressers who could enjoy the advantages mentioned above. As a result, the number of salons having apprentices has increased rapidly. Considering the fact that each salon in the township has about 3 apprentices on average, we can estimate that about 480 apprentices will finish their training every year



in Madina and become full-fledged hairdressers. Though some girls stop their apprenticeship halfway without completing it, this estimate implies that there would be an astonishing increase in the number of hairdressers.

It could be said to be true that hairdressing used to be a good and profitable business. However, as several hairdressers told me, it would have been difficult to make a living on salon business alone. An example is the case of one salon opened in 1991. At first, they used to get as many as 20 to 30 clients a day. But now, they have only 10 clients per day at most, and sometimes they get only one client. There are several other examples. Consequently, many hairdressers are engaged in some side-business to complement their income.<sup>(3)</sup> It therefore seems that the competition in hairdressing is becoming so keen that not everyone can make much profit from it. Nevertheless, still now, many women even pay money to enter apprenticeship. And almost all apprentices interviewed have answered that they wanted to be hairdressers or to open salons in the future. In order to understand the reason for this, we have to carefully consider the effect of the educational reform in Ghana from the employment prospects of women who have just graduated from their schools in Ghana.

## II. Educational Reform and Employment Problem of Youth

One of the distinctive changes in the features of apprentices is their educational level. More than 80% of them (22 persons out of 26) have attended Junior Secondary School (JSS), among which 20 persons have actually finished JSS. Of Ghanaian women of the same age bracket (15 to 29 years old), only 46.7% have been to JSS, 41.5% to Primary School, or no school at all, and 11.6% have attended Senior Secondary School or a higher educational institution (Ghana Statistical Service & Macro International Inc, 1999).

In 1987, Ghana launched an educational reform as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme. The reform objectives included increasing access to basic education, that is, Primary and Junior Secondary School, and making education cost-effective and financially sustainable. It was implemented with the support of some aid agencies such as USAID and the World Bank. In 1996, a package programme for free, compulsory, universal and basic education was launched.

As a result of these programmes, the intake at the basic education level has become more than 1.3 times. However, access to second cycle and tertiary institutions is still very limited. These institutions have even introduced user fees for some services and equipment. Now, less than half of Junior Secondary School graduates gain access to Senior Secondary Schools and other technical institutions, and of those who entered Senior Secondary Schools, only 10% gain access to tertiary institutions like Universities (UNESCO, 2003).

This educational reform has influenced the increase in hairdressing apprentices. Their educational level is not high enough to get a job in the government sector or multi-national companies. But they do not want to be traders, “*market mummies*,” like their mothers. Rather, they want to learn a skill so that they

can survive anywhere. In Ghana, because occupational choice differs according to gender, vocational training subjects for women are generally limited to tailoring, catering and hairdressing. Among these options, hairdressing seems to be one of the most attractive jobs for Junior Secondary School leavers.

### III. Attraction of Hairdressing for Apprentices

Occupational choice of these young women seems to reflect the change in people's views of hairdressing also. At one time, hairdressing used to be regarded as a job for school-dropouts. It was partly because their technique was very simple in those days. However, this view is now changing. As hairdressers adopted new techniques from Europe and America, their work has become more specialized. The hair relaxing technique, for example, includes the application of harsh chemicals. Hairdressers therefore must choose proper products for each client and deal with it carefully according to the instructions; otherwise they could injure the client's hair or skin.

Occupational specialization in hairdressing took place hand in hand with the institutionalisation of the way of skill acquisition. Now workers are required to have finished vocational training to get a job. Some salons give a graduation examination to their apprentices. When they pass it, they can invite people to hold a graduation ceremony. Then, a testimonial is issued from the salon. Hairdressers' associations are also trying to make the national vocational test compulsory so that no hairdresser without the certificate can open a salon. These trends are part of an attempt to put a brake on the increase of hairdressing salons. But the efforts of the associations and others have also led people to recognize hairdressing as a skilled occupation.

Apart from these factors, it is also noticeable that many apprentices have been attracted by the fashionable appearance of the hairdressers' business. The way hairdressers operate with foreign techniques (dressed neatly in colourfully painted salons with beautiful hairstyles) seems to be attractive to many young women. Nowadays they seem to find hairdressing a skilled, fashionable and modern occupation, which is acceptable even for those who have finished basic education.

### IV. Advantages of Apprenticeship to Parents and Salon Owners

For parents, putting their daughters into hairdressing is much safer than other jobs like trading or catering. It is because hairdressers are working with other women, sit in the same place and relate with only limited kinds of people, not with anybody. Equally important for them is the fact that their entrance fees are cheaper than school fees for Senior Secondary, technical or catering schools (Table 2).

Besides, even salon owners often welcome apprentices because they bring in extra income. That is their entrance fee, which can amount to as much as the salon income for one month. After entrance, apprentices provide free labour for them also. Moreover, hairdressing itself has high labour absorbing ability

**Table 2.** Comparison of Apprenticeship/School Fees

a.Hairdressing	Entrance fees	\$ 38.12
	Tools	Rollers(2 packets), hair pins(2 packets), combs(2), towels(4)
	Others	Soft drinks(1 crate)
b.Catering	Tuition fees	\$ 63.17 (\$ 49.13 for day students)
	Practice fees	\$ 67.38
	Tools for practice	
c.Senior Secondary / technical schools and teacher's training colleges	User fees	\$ 625.72 (\$ 49.51 for day students)
	Utility charges	Determined by board of governors

Source: Center for Policy Analysis (2001) and interviews.

Notes:

- 1) a. Example of apprenticeship fees for an average *kiosk*-type salon in Madina, for 2.5 years: year 2002.
  - b. School fees for a public vocational school in Madina, for 3 years: year 2001.
  - c. Public school fees in Ghana, for 3 years: the 2000/2001 academic year.
- 2) In Ghana, the majority of the students at catering, senior secondary, technical schools and teachers' training colleges are boarders.
- 3) School fees for Senior secondary/technical schools and teachers' training colleges consist of the user fees for the following items: Admission, feeding, general stationery, examination, library, first aid, building maintenance, school uniform, sports, science resource centre, entertainment, sanitation and environment, postage, report book and cumulative records booklet.

because it can accommodate many apprentices in a salon at one time. All these factors seem to lead young women into hairdressing apprenticeship.

## SUMMARY

Hairdressing has become one of the popular economic activities in urban Ghana for several reasons. First, the diffusion or spread of hair relaxing has resulted in an increased demand for salons. Secondly, as it has become difficult to expect support from husbands or other kin, hairdressing is attractive to women because it helps them to cope with both economic and domestic responsibility. Thirdly, since hairdressing became specialized and its skill acquisition became institutionalised, people have started to view hairdressing as a skilled, fashionable and modern occupation. As a result, hairdressing apprenticeship has worked as one of the major recourses for women with basic education these days.

These are some of the factors that have affected the recent increase of hairdressers and hair salons. Hairdressing is a new occupational choice provided by a modern technique, that is the hair-straightening perm. Ghanaian women have quickly taken up this opportunity. So far, we cannot tell whether hairdressers will keep on increasing to spread nationwide, or whether it will decrease as the economic situation changes. But it is clear that the recent development of the hairdressing business has broadened the options of economic activity for women in urban Ghana.

## NOTES

- (1) Whereas ISSER “*The State of the Ghanaian Economy*” divides national economy into three categories i.e. agricultural, industrial and service sectors, here I am taking a more detailed categorization of people’s occupation as in Ghana Statistical Service (1987, 2002).
- (2) Because the salons in Madina were heterogeneous and highly fragmented, purposive sampling method was taken to assure representativeness of the samples.
- (3) Out of 18 salons with a building, 13 were engaged in side business (mainly petty trading at salon). Among the remaining 4 salons, 3 answered that they wanted to start something apart from hairdressing.

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