

**WOOD FUEL TRADE AND LIVELIHOODS AMONG WOMEN IN CENTRAL
NIGERIA, 2000-2022**

By

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Abstract

As in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the fuel wood economy in Nigeria involves the urban and rural populace engaged in the production and distribution of fuel wood which has increasingly provided temporary and permanent sources of energy and employment opportunities. This study examines the role of fuel wood trade in the livelihoods of women in the Federal Capital Territory- Abuja, Jos and Makurdi, and its challenges against the backdrop of prevailing economic realities of the Nigerian state over the recent decades. Available literature on the informal economy including fuel wood activities in developing nations such as Nigeria were important secondary sources consulted for the study. Primary data on the nature and dynamics of fuel wood trade among women in the study areas were also important for reaching the conclusions in the study. Using Central Nigeria, the research draws attention to the impact of the informal economy on livelihoods and development in Nigeria, the challenges of the informal economy as well as policy options especially in line with achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly, extreme poverty and hunger reduction, promoting gender equality and women empowerment.

Key Words: Informal Economy, Poverty, Livelihoods, Fuel Wood Trade, Women

Introduction

The rising poverty level has been a major characteristic of developing nations particularly in sub-Saharan Africa over the recent decades. The informal economy has received an increase in attention from policymakers and researchers globally in recent times. The renewed interest in the informal sector is partly because the informal economy has grown consistently in new forms and various places. The informal economy has been a subject of debate. Some observers view the informal economy in positive terms and insist that it requires support, while others, particularly based on its characteristics and conduct, view it as an impediment to development. Available literature across diverse disciplines has shown an increased recognition that the informal economy is linked to the formal economy and contributes to the overall economy. There has also been increased recognition that supporting the poor of society including women working in the informal economy is significant for reducing poverty and inequality as well as gender inequality. Nigeria's population has steadily increased and the number of the poor has also increased because of the failure of the leadership to deliver on good governance despite the country's vast oil riches. For example, official figures from the National Bureau for Statistics (NBS) show that the incidence of poverty in Nigeria between 1980 and 2010 rose from 27.2 per cent to 69.0.¹ The nation's progress has been impeded by its inability to distribute oil wealth to citizens and reduce the gap between the poor and the rich specifically because of corruption and incompetence of the political class. In general terms, the development of the trade in fuel wood is connected to the increasing demand for fuel wood in rural and urban centres in Nigeria which has to do with living standards in many ways. The expansion of the trade in urban centres could be linked to increasing demand by the growing urban population and the challenges associated with the use of conventional energy sources such as cooking gas and kerosene, especially in terms of availability, accessibility and affordability. Available literature has focused on the impact of fuelwood production and distribution on rural livelihoods as well as poverty reduction, and the environmental effects of fuelwood production and consumption especially as they relate to climate change.² However, the

¹ Z. Dapel 'Three Decades of Poverty Mobility in Nigeria: The Trapped, the Free, and the Never Trapped' Working Paper 485, Washington DC: Centre for Global Development; 2018, 2.

² For instance, A. O. Onoja and A.I .Emodi, 'Economic Analysis of Fuel wood Production and Consumption: Evidence from a Nigerian state' in *British Journal of Management and Economics* 2(1), 2012. See also, S. I. Larinde and O.O Olasupo, 'Socio-Economic Importance of Fuel wood Production in Gambari Forest Reserve Area, Oyo State, Nigeria', in *Journal of Agriculture and Social Research (JARS)*, Vol. 11, No.1,2011.

detailed analysis of fuel wood consumption and trade as it affects Nigeria's urban masses against the backdrop of the challenges of urbanization and growing economic crisis requires more research attention. The present study attempts to bridge this existing gap in the literature on fuel wood production, distribution and consumption by putting the challenges of the urban populace in perspective. This study examines the role of women in the fuel wood trade in three Central Nigerian areas of Abuja, Jos and Makurdi, to determine the degree of its impact on their livelihoods and to evaluate the challenges they have encountered in the prevailing economic realities of the Nigerian state over the recent years, beginning from the recent global economic crisis. Each of the three places of focus in this study has a rich history dating to pre-colonial times, a vast, growing heterogeneous population consisting of high and low-income earners pulled from various parts of Nigeria and beyond, by occupational and related factors.

The Informal Economy

The informal sector has increasingly received attention from policymakers because it provides jobs and incomes to many of Africa's poorest households. Becker has defined the informal sector as the unregulated, non-formal portion of the market economy that engages in the production of goods and services for sale or for other forms of remuneration. The term informal economy is often used to denote the informal sector which refers to all economic activities and economic units that are not covered or are not properly covered by formal arrangements.³ The informal sector is distinguished from the formal sector by some characteristics which include the fact that the informal sector is characterized by people or units who are engaged in the production of goods and services and who operate at a low level of organization with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production and on a small scale. The units are identified at two levels which are the enterprise level and the workers level. All the enterprises are not registered under national laws and the employers and employees are living below the specified level of employment or are unregistered. Labour relations at this level are based mostly on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than contractual arrangements with

³ Quoted in J. O Onyemaechi, 'Role of the Informal Sector in Development of the Nigerian Economy: Output and Employment Approach' in *Journal of Economics and Development Studies* 1(1), June, 2013, 61.

guarantees.⁴ In other words, low entry requirements especially capital and professional qualifications, small-scale operations, skills requirements outside of educational qualifications, labour-intensive methods of production and adapted technology are some of the characteristics of the informal economy.⁵ According to Nigeria's Bank of Industry, the informal sector comprises economic activities or sources of income that are not fully regulated by the government and other public authorities. They include enterprises that are not officially registered and do not maintain a complete set of accounts; and workers who are engaged on the jobs without basic social and legal protection and employment benefits. Examples of informal employment workers are street traders, subsistence farmers, small-scale manufacturers, and service providers such as hairdressers, carpenters, and taxi drivers.⁶ According to the International Labour Organisation, the informal economy has to do with petty traders, street hawkers, shoeshine boys and other underemployed groups on the streets of big towns including both male and female wage earners and self-employed people. The informal sector is defined as the urban poor including those people who live in the slums or squatter settlements found in the cities of developing countries.⁷ According to Kinyanjui, women constitute an important part of the urban population and most of them are in the informal economy. It is difficult to speak about the informal economy in Africa without thinking about women.⁸ Kinyanjui is of the view that women encounter the reality of the African city as it is presented in both theory and practice in their everyday livelihood negotiation. Cities in developing countries are characterized by vast squatter settlements, shanty towns, a poor supply of basic amenities, rapid environmental degradation, traffic jams, violence, crime and urban sprawl⁹.

Fuel for heating and cooking has been one of the basic needs of human existence. Fuel wood is defined as wood that is burned for energy which can be used for cooking, heating or

⁴ S. Hollander and F. van Kesteren, 'The Needs and Potential of the Informal Economy in the sub-Saharan Africa.' *INCLUDE Policy Brief*, 25th October, 2016, 1.

⁵ J. O Onyemaechi, 'Role of the Informal Sector in Development of the Nigerian Economy: Output and Employment Approach', 61.

⁶ Economic Development through the Nigerian Informal Sector: A Bank of the Industry Perspective, Working Paper Series: No. 2.17th May, 2018.

⁷ M.N. Kinyanjui. *Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa: From the Margins to the Centre*, London: Zed Books Ltd; 2014, 8.

⁸ M.N. Kinyanjui. *Women And The Informal Economy In Urban Africa: From The Margins To The Centre*, 1.

⁹ M.N. Kinyanjui. *Women And The Informal Economy In Urban Africa: From The Margins To The Centre*, 3.

generating power it is in various forms including firewood, charcoal, pelleted sawdust and wood chips.¹⁰ In addition to wood, agricultural residues and other forms of biomass are important sources of energy. Biomass energy is the largest source of renewable energy. However, fuel wood has remained the most important source of biomass energy since it has served as the primary energy source for many people. Firewood and charcoal have particularly served to satisfy the energy requirements of many societies of the world over time. For purposes of conceptual clarity, our analysis in this study is centred on firewood and charcoal which are the basic energy sources among the urban and rural populace of central Nigerian area.

Drivers, Dynamics and Economic Impact of Fuel Wood Trade in Central Nigeria, 2000-2022

According to the IMF, over 80 percent of Nigeria's population of nearly 200 million, work in the informal sector. Nigeria's informal sector has grown rapidly over the last two decades with causes including elements of the country's economic context; decreasing levels of market regulation; weak policy framework, and socio-demographic drivers such as population growth, urbanisation, rising unemployment, widening inequality between the rich and poor, low level of education, including poverty. The major driver of the informal economy on the one hand, according to Olubiyi is that such enterprises do not need to register with any relevant government authorities¹¹. According to a 2022 report of FAO of UN, titled '2022 State of the World's Forests', over 40 million Nigerians were engaged directly in fuel wood collection and charcoal production. The above report says these engagements provided an estimated 530, 000 full-time equivalent direct jobs for the citizens. The report says an additional 200,000 people -mostly also full time provided transport services for the retail and wholesale trade in the fuel wood and charcoal in the country.¹²

Not much has been systematically researched and documented on the booming trade in fuel wood especially in central Nigeria despite the growing consumption of firewood and charcoal by both rural and urban populace. Understanding some details of the fuel wood economy such as production levels, consumption, supply, annual profits from the trade and its contribution to

¹⁰ <https://www.safeopedia.com/definition/2630/fuelwood>

¹¹ T. Olubiyi, 'The Informal Sector in Nigeria' *Thisday*, Newspaper, 11th July, 2022.

¹² '2022 State of the World's Forests', FAO Report, 2022. News Agency of Nigeria, 4th May, 2022.

livelihoods is hampered by a lack of empirical documentation. As such, presenting statistics on the rates of participation, volume of trade and estimated profits throughout focus has proved difficult. Insights on the dynamics and impact of fuel wood trade on women were made on the strength of scattered and fragmented evidence from fieldwork in areas of production, distribution and consumption. Historically, fuel wood production, trade and consumption span over a very long period in many areas in Nigeria and like other forms of the informal economy in Nigeria, the fuel wood trade witnessed remarkable growth in the 1980s and 1990s up to the closing years of the 20th century. The early years of the 21st century through the economic recession of 2008 and the years that followed characterised by economic hardship were years of the continued growth of the fuel wood trade. Globally, informal employment expanded significantly during the great economic recession of 2008.¹³ The global economic crisis of 2008 affected Nigeria's economy negatively in some ways including the decline of crude oil prices and the decline in the patronage of Nigeria's energy by major buyers such as the US. These developments led to the loss of billions of dollars leading to a decline in government obligation to its citizens and infrastructural development. Other effects of the crisis were the fall in oil prices which put pressure on external reserves consequently leading to the depreciation of the naira against the US dollar and other major currencies of the world. The fall in oil prices and the decline in Nigeria's revenue resulted in cuts in the salaries of public workers in the country.¹⁴ The livelihood challenges of the vast majority of the Nigerian populace heightened with the negative implications of the economic crisis. The drivers of the fuel wood trade in central Nigeria are not different from those responsible for the growth of the informal sector in general especially population growth, urbanisation, rising unemployment, and widening gap between the rich and poor due to the sustained failure of socio-economic policy in Nigeria. Increasing fuel wood demand for domestic and commercial consumption, particularly in the urban centres which is a direct response to the persistent hikes in petroleum products, the desire of the rural populace to seek supplementary income sources and to reduce poverty has resulted in business opportunities for some urban women.

¹³ <https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/history-debates>

¹⁴ L. Ohale and A.E. Cookey, 'Global Economic Meltdown and the Nigerian Economy' in *International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR)* Vol.5, No. 1 June, 2010, 5.

The participants of this enterprise were mostly married women and widows between the ages of thirty and middle sixties and were largely without formal education. While a considerable number of the women depended solely on the firewood and charcoal business for livelihoods, some of the participants combined fuel wood business with some trades for which they acquired skills such as tailoring, hairdressing and petty trading, especially foodstuff. Evidence shows that the majority of those who had only fuel wood businesses operated on a large scale at designated spaces in most of the big markets in these towns. For example, large-scale firewood sales to urban populations dating to the early post-independence period, and later charcoal occurred in Wurukum, High Level, Makurdi Modern(Market), Airport-Fiidi, and North-Bank markets in Makurdi metropolis.¹⁵ Also, a large-scale firewood and charcoal business was operated at the Terminus, Bukuru and Katako markets in Jos town.¹⁶ As it were, fuel wood was sold in some market centres in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory such as Mpape, Deidei, Gwagwalada, Kubwa, Zuba and Karimo, and others.¹⁷ Whereas those women who sold wood fuel usually on a small scale and in combination with other economic activities operated at the home front, some educated low cadre serving and retired civil servants in these areas of focus also participated in the fuel wood business as an additional source of income. Available evidence shows for example, the increase in the participation of primary school teachers and staff of the local government councils in Benue state between 2007 and 2015, when their salaries were hardly paid as and when due by the state government.¹⁸ The trade steadily grew in Benue in terms of volume and number of low cadre serving and retired civil servants involved between 2015 and 2022 due to delays and outright non-payment of salaries and pensions by the government of Benue state.

At the early stage in the development of the enterprise, the urban traders purchased fuelwood directly from the producers at rural production sites for onward redistribution to urban consumers or they got their supplies from rural traders who purchased from the rural producers. Sometimes the marketing process was very short where the harvesters or producers brought bundles of firewood or sacks of charcoal directly to the urban traders at designated points. In the

¹⁵ Interview: A. Kugbe, Female, 53 Yrs, Trading, Makurdi, 22/04/2022.

¹⁶ Interview: R. Goyol, Female, 50 Yrs, Trading, Jos, 20/04/2022.

¹⁷ Interview: G. Aje, Female, 45Yrs, Trading, Abuja, 15/04/2022.

¹⁸ Interview: A. Kugbe, Female, 53Yrs, Trading, Makurdi, 22/04/2022.

course of the increasing demand for fuel wood and eventual expansion of the business especially in the early years of the 21st century, dealing directly with the producers became increasingly difficult for urban traders. The longer process which involved the trading agents became the dominant way through which fuelwood got to urban traders for onward supply to domestic and commercial consumers. Consequently, urban operators got firewood and charcoal from producers or harvesters in rural areas through trading agents working in collaboration with some workers and transporters. The trading agents consisted mostly of men and sometimes women who were either indigenes of the production localities or had some familiarity with those areas. Those trading agents whose main aim was to reap some financial gains oftentimes hampered direct transactions between the urban traders and harvesters and acted as some sort of middlemen between the producers and harvesters. The fuel wood production prices or expenditure cost, agents' stipends, cost of transportation for distances covered, and loading and unloading costs had a huge impact on the consumer price outcomes. For example, the total cost (including cost per unit price, agents' stipend, transport cost, loading and unloading) of getting a sack of charcoal into Makurdi town of Benue state in 2019 was around 1700 naira and was sold at 2000 naira, with a profit of about 300 naira.¹⁹ The payment of levies to local council authorities in some areas in the course of conveying fuel wood was without standardization and coordination and depended on the overall quantity being conveyed at a time. Also, the amount of money spent on the labour of loading and unloading at the places of production and places of redistribution varied across the places and depended on the quantities of fuel wood involved. As it were, the rates of patronage and consumption depended wholly on consumers' needs, choices and capacities. The fuel wood sizes and amounts were cut out by the traders to accommodate varied consumers' needs, choices and capacities. There have been annual fluctuations in the procurement prices of firewood and charcoal, transportation costs, and consumer prices and this is a function of the changes in annual climatic seasons. Climatic variations have had a great impact on the production, and supply of firewood and charcoal. While the procurement costs, transportation costs, and consumer prices were known to be relatively lower during the dry season between December and April, these costs were quite high during the rainy seasons (between June and November) because of the challenges of wet season production or

¹⁹ *Interview*: M. Atoo, Female, 55 Yrs, Trading, Makurdi, 22/04/2022.

harvesting, procurement and transportation due to very bad roads. The table below shows the charcoal cost and consumer prices in the Federal Capital Abuja, Makurdi and Jos between June and November 2021.

Table: Charcoal cost and consumer prices, June –November 2021

Area	Purchasing cost	Transportation /labour cost	Total costs	Consumer price
Abuja	4300	700	5000	5500
Makurdi	4000	500	4500	5000
Jos	4000	500	4500	5000

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2021.

The table above shows that beginning from June to November 2021 when the rains were high, the prices at which fuelwood sellers obtained charcoal were as high as 4000 nairas per sack, conveyed at the cost of 500 in Jos and Makurdi and sold at 4500 naira while it was obtained at 5000 naira, conveyed at 700 naira and sold at 5500 naira in Abuja. However, as evidence further shows, from December 2021 to about April 2022, the total cost of obtaining a sack of charcoal was an average of 3000 to 3200 naira either from the trading agents or rural traders at places of production and conveying same at an average cost of 400 naira per sack and sold to consumers at 4000 naira in Jos and Makurdi towns. A sack of charcoal was obtained for 3500 to 3800 naira conveyed at 500 naira and sold at about 4300 in Abuja, from December 2021 to about April 2022. Large-scale traders purchased and hoarded large quantities of firewood and charcoal during the dry season when it was cheaper and more convenient for profit maximisation during the wet season. It is instructive to note that, most fuel wood traders operated minimally during the wet seasons because of a lack of substantial capital to purchase and store up large quantities during the dry season. Assessing credit, especially from formal credit avenues for substantial capital for sustainable and large business engagements remained an important challenge for the majority of the urban fuelwood traders. For some women, personal savings, and financial contributions from family and friends provided the capital for take-off and a few others got credit from various informal financial institutions as capital to start their businesses. Large-scale operators who successfully stored up large quantities during the dry season when it was far easier and cheaper to get fuel wood stood

better chances of staying in the business all through the year making significant profits in the wet season. The high purchasing and transportation costs during the wet season hampered the all-year participation of the majority of the traders who were small-scale operators. On the whole, it is gathered that the fuel wood trade provided sources of income and livelihoods for operators at all levels. For example, some traders sold between one hundred and three hundred and fifty sacks of charcoal making some gains annually. However, small-scale traders especially those operating at the home front made profits from selling far below two hundred sacks of charcoal annually. A significant proportion of profits made from the business went into informal saving arrangements within the market centres, at home and community levels. A good number of the women made reinvestments in food production activities in the rural areas from the proceeds of the fuel wood business. Prevailing economic situations at specific moments have also had some impact on consumer prices especially in terms of price fluctuations directly linked to rising cost of transportation during periods of petrol scarcities. Fuel scarcity which became endemic in the Nigerian economy often translated to the high cost of conveying fuel wood from production points to distribution centres and this shaped consumer price outcomes and some extent profit rates.

Fuel wood enterprise has played significant roles in the growth of some critical aspects of the urban informal economy. Apart from serving the needs of the growing individual households, urban fuelwood vendors have been partly responsible for the energy supplies of other operators of the various aspects of urban businesses such as bread bakeries, food vendors, fast food operators, roasted meat and fish businesses, rice milling, garri processing and metalwork businesses. The urban operators of the fuel wood business have stood in the supply gap between the rural producers and the growing urban consumers.

While firewood which served the energy needs of people and its commercial production provided a source of income for many rural harvesters and traders for ages, the commercial production of charcoal and its large-scale marketing is relatively new, particularly in central Nigeria. The cost of production, purchasing cost, heating, handling advantages and the growing energy needs of the increasing urban population placed charcoal above firewood and conventional energy sources. As in most informal businesses in developing nations, participating in the fuel wood trade did not require any forms of registration, procedures and skills. The firewood and

charcoal consumed in Makurdi town came mostly from the rural areas of Gwer-West, Gwer, Guma, Kwande and Gboko local government areas, among other areas within Benue state. The bulk of the firewood and charcoal supplies in Jos town came predominantly from the Toro local government area of Bauchi state, Wamba local government area of Nasarawa state, and Sanga local government area of Kaduna.²⁰ Like most other states in Nigeria, Niger state recorded growing production and consumption of fuel wood²¹. The fuelwood consumed in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory was supplied from some parts of Niger state such as Bida, Bosso, Paiko, and Suleja local council areas, among other places.²² In addition, significant quantities of fuel wood consumed in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory came from some parts of Nasarawa and Benue states. For example, fuel wood was supplied to Abuja from Jitata, Panda, and Zongo in Karu local council area, Garaku and Agwada in Kokona local council area, Toto in Nasarawa-Toto local council area, and Sabon-Gida in Keffi local council area of Nasarawa state.²³ Apart from providing incomes for the rural harvesters, the fuel wood business provided incomes for the urban-based agents, transporters and urban fuelwood sellers.

The point has been made that some of the women operated fuel wood businesses on the home front. It must be added that the fuel wood business was carried out in almost all settlements holding the middle and low-income earners, particularly within the slums in these towns. As evidence suggests, some of the fuel wood consumed in Logo One, Logo Two, Akpehe, Achusa, Idye, Wadata, and some parts of High-Level, North-Bank and Wurukum were purchased from home sellers within these areas.²⁴ Some of the fuel wood consumed in Anglo-Jos, Bukuru, Gyel, Nasarawa, Zarmaganda, Apata, Tafawa-Balewa, and Tudun-Wada in Jos town was obtained from home sellers.¹ Apart from accessing fuel wood in market centres mentioned previously, some of

²⁰ Interview: N. Ali. Female, 45Yrs, Trading, Jos, 20/04/2022.

²¹ M. Kudu, and A. Ahman, 'Assessment of Domestic Wood fuel Utilization and its Effects in Niger State, Nigeria' in *American Journal of Environmental and Resource Economics*, Vol.5, No.2, 2020.

²² Interview: P. Musa, Female, 60Yrs, Trading, Abuja, 15/04/2022.

²³ Interview: G. Agbo, Female, 45Yrs, Trading, Abuja, 15/04/2022.

²⁴ Interview: S. Dakor, Female, 45Yrs, Trading, Makurdi, 22/04/2022.

¹ Interview: B. Tok. Female, 50Yrs, Trading, Jos, 20/04/2022.

the middle and low-income earners patronised home sellers for fuel wood supplies, particularly for domestic consumption in some places in Abuja.

In addition to the challenges discussed previously, other challenges confronted women in their operation of the fuel wood business. Owing to their significant contributions to household livelihoods, some of the women consequently put household livelihood concerns almost above general health, maternity health and work-family balance considerations. Some pregnant women rarely take their health and that of their unborn babies into consideration in the conduct of business and this has resulted in ill health and maternity-related deaths. Also, participation in the fuel wood business in some cases conflicted with family responsibilities resulting in instability and a myriad of social consequences.

Conclusion and policy direction

The study shows that women played significant roles in the fuel wood trade which witnessed remarkable growth like other aspects of informal employment in the early years of the 21st century through the economic recession of 2008 and subsequent years characterised by economic hardship. The increasing women participation and consequent growth of the fuel wood trade were not unconnected to population growth, urbanization and its challenges, rising unemployment, widening gap between the rich and poor due to the sustained failure of socio-economic policies in Nigeria. The participation of the urban women in the fuel wood business was borne out of the desire to create livelihood sources or supplementary incomes in the business opportunity created by the rural populace responding to similar challenges by supplying fuel wood increasingly demanded for domestic and commercial consumption in the urban centres. The evidence shows that, while some women operated only fuel wood business on a large scale in urban markets, small-scale operators combined it with other economic activities in the residential areas. All categories of traders obtained fuel wood directly from the producers up to the end of the 20th century but subsequently through trading agents and rural traders over time. As it were, consumer price outcomes were fundamentally determined by procurement costs, including agents' stipends, transportation, and labour costs. But most significantly, these costs were shaped by climatic and prevailing economic situations. For small-scale traders who were the majority operating with little capital base, doing business during the wet season or during periods of petrol scarcity when demand for fuel wood increased, was quite challenging due to rising costs of

procurement, labour, transportation and poor rural road infrastructure. In addition, participation in the fuel wood business created a maternity health crisis and instability for some families.

The fuel wood trade has had a large presence in the economy of Nigeria, and it has increased over time to meet growing demand and is likely to continue. On one hand, policies for tackling the challenges of the informal sector such as poor economic infrastructure, low technology, and limited access to finance, among other challenges are important for sustained productivity and incomes for those involved in informal economic engagements. On the other hand, policy interventions for the promotion of critical areas of production such as mining, agriculture and manufacturing for job creation to tackle the growing rates of unemployment and poverty; promoting gender equality and women empowerment in Nigeria are imperative, especially against the need to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs).