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Economic Activity Among Older Adults in Burkina Faso: Between Constrained Aging and Social Inequalities

Aristide Romaric Bado[a*], Louis Niamba[b], Siaka Lougué[a]

a. Institut de Recherche en Sciences de la Santé, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique (CNRST), 03 BP 7049 Ouagadougou 03, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
b. Institut des Sciences des Sociétés (INSS), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique (CNRST), 03 BP 7049 Ouagadougou 03, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

Abstract: Population aging is accelerating in sub-Saharan Africa within a context characterized by limited social protection, widespread informal employment, and weakening family support systems. In Burkina Faso, empirical evidence regarding the economic activity of older individuals remains scarce, despite the rapid growth of this demographic. This study analyzes the determinants of economic activity among individuals aged 60 years and older, using data from the 2019 Population and Housing Census and a biosocial and life-course perspective. The study is based on a nationally representative sample of 925,946 older individuals. Economic activity status (employed versus non-employed) serves as the dependent variable. Descriptive analyses, bivariate associations (chi-square tests), and multivariate logistic regression models were employed to examine the relationships between activity status and demographic, socioeconomic, household, and contextual characteristics. Results indicate that 31.1% of older individuals remain economically active, with a significant concentration in the agricultural sector. Economic participation declines sharply with age and is significantly lower among women than men. Higher educational attainment is positively associated with continued economic activity, while pronounced regional disparities persist. Older individuals residing in rural areas and those heading households are more likely to be economically active. Conversely, residence in urban centers other than the capital, higher household living standards, and advanced age substantially reduce the likelihood of participation. The findings underscore the persistence of cumulative inequalities over the life course, intersecting with gender norms, household roles, and regional economic structures. These results highlight the central role of informal and agricultural employment in sustaining older populations in Burkina Faso. They suggest a need for inclusive social and labor policies that recognize older individuals as economic actors while addressing vulnerability, gender disparities, and the lack of adequate social protection in aging African societies.
Keywords: Population aging; Economic activity; Older adults; Informal sector; Burkina Faso.

1. Introduction

In low-income countries, aging occurs within institutional environments characterized by limited social protection, widespread informality, and evolving family support systems. In sub-Saharan Africa, although older persons still represent a relatively small share of the population compared with high-income regions, their absolute numbers are rapidly increasing due to improved adult survival and sustained demographic growth (Antoine & Golaz, 2010). Consequently, societies must adapt to aging without the institutional frameworks that historically accompanied demographic transitions in industrialized countries.

In many African settings, older individuals remain economically active well beyond conventional retirement ages. This persistence of labor participation reflects the weakness of formal pension systems and heavy reliance on family transfers. However, traditional intergenerational support structures are undergoing transformation due to urbanization, migration, and increasing economic pressure on working-age adults (Kuate-Defo*, 2005; Mba, 2002). Therefore, continued economic activity in later life often represents a necessity rather than a voluntary extension of working life.

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Corresponding email: arbado@gmail.com (Aristide Romaric Bado)
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Empirical evidence shows that labor participation rates among older adults in sub-Saharan Africa exceed those observed in high-income countries (Antoine, 2009; Schoumaker, 2000). However, this participation is unevenly distributed across social groups. Women, rural residents, and individuals with limited education are disproportionately engaged in informal, physically demanding activities such as subsistence agriculture. Rather than reflecting successful "active aging," economic participation may therefore signal cumulative disadvantage and structural vulnerability.

Recent studies highlight that aging in low-income contexts must be interpreted through institutional constraints, including the absence of universal retirement schemes and the dominance of informal labor markets (Adebowale et al., 2022; Katey et al., 2025). Unlike high-income settings, where continued activity may enhance well-being (Rishworth et al., 2020)Work at older ages in Africa is frequently driven by economic necessity (Darkwa & Mazibuko, 2002; Kola & Owumi, 2019). Poverty in later life stems both from structural labor market conditions and the declining capacity of adult children to provide support (Kola & Owumi, 2019). Family organization also influences late-life economic participation, as older adults often maintain economic responsibilities within multigenerational households (Bikouta et al., 2015; Zimmer & Dayton, 2005). Despite growing recognition of these issues, policy responses remain limited, and evidence on effective interventions is scarce relative to the expanding elderly population (Alzua et al., 2024; Lloyd-Sherlock & Amoakoh-Coleman, 2020).

Burkina Faso exemplifies these challenges, combining rapid demographic growth, a predominantly agricultural economy, and limited social protection coverage. Nevertheless, national-level evidence on their economic participation remains scarce, with most studies relying on localized or descriptive analyses (Niamba, 2017; Schoumaker, 2000). Few studies have examined how socio-demographic characteristics, household conditions, and territorial contexts jointly shape labor participation in later life. Furthermore, existing research often treats economic activity as a simple labor-market indicator, without distinguishing whether participation reflects social integration or economic constraints. This distinction is essential for informing policies addressing aging, poverty reduction, and intergenerational equity in low-income contexts.

Using data from the 2019 General Population and Housing Census, this study analyzes economic activity among individuals aged 60 years and older in Burkina Faso. It aims to: (i) measure the extent of economic participation in later life; (ii) identify individual and contextual determinants of participation; and (iii) assess whether observed disparities reflect structural inequalities related to gender, residence, and living standards. Using nationally representative census data and a life-course perspective, this study examines economic participation among older adults in Burkina Faso and its association with structural inequalities.

2. Literature Review

In Sub-Saharan Africa, aging occurs in contexts characterized by high informality, limited social protection, and a high prevalence of informal economies. Unlike high-income countries, where old age is generally associated with labor market exit through institutionalized retirement mechanisms, most older individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to engage in economic activity well beyond the age of 60 (Antoine & Golaz, 2010; Schoumaker, 2000). Several studies have highlighted high activity rates at advanced ages, often exceeding 50%, particularly among men and in rural areas. This persistence of economic activity is driven less by a voluntary extension of working life than by the necessity to meet basic needs amid economic insecurity (Aboderin, 2005; Menken & Cohen, 2006). Consequently, remaining economically active in later life often reflects structural necessity rather than individual preference.

However, the literature also emphasizes significant heterogeneity in aging experiences based on gender, place of residence, educational level, and prior professional trajectories. Among these determinants, gender constitutes one of the most consistently documented dimensions of inequality. Gender inequalities constitute a central focus in analyzing the economic activity of older individuals (Charmes, 2005; Kuate-Defo*, 2005). Numerous studies indicate that older women exhibit lower activity rates than men. Furthermore, older women are more likely to have experienced discontinuous, low-paid professional trajectories concentrated in the informal sector, which limits their access to economic resources in later life. This situation reinforces their dependence on family and increases their vulnerability to poverty (Mba, 2002).

Socioeconomic inequalities also play a decisive role. Older individuals from low-income or less educated households are more frequently compelled to continue working, often in physically demanding and precarious sectors such as subsistence agriculture. Conversely, those with greater economic resources or higher social capital may withdraw earlier from the labor force or remain engaged in less strenuous occupations. Beyond individual and socioeconomic characteristics, the spatial context further shapes opportunities and constraints in later-life employment.

Place of residence constitutes a major determinant of economic activity among older individuals. In rural areas, the persistence of economic activity at advanced ages is largely facilitated by access to land and the familial organization of agricultural labor. However, this economic "inclusion" should not be interpreted as an indicator of well-being, as it is frequently accompanied by significant exposure to climatic hazards, physical hardship, and a lack of social protection. In urban areas, although access to services and economic opportunities is theoretically broader, older individuals face significant barriers. The informal economy remains the primary avenue for economic integration, but it provides unstable, insufficient income, hindering sustainable economic security. These contrasting rural and urban dynamics highlight that economic participation in later life is embedded in broader structural conditions.

The concept of "active aging," promoted in international discourse, emphasizes the continued participation of older individuals in economic and social life. However, its application in African contexts remains controversial. Several authors argue that economic activity in later life in Sub-Saharan Africa is more indicative of "constrained aging" than of voluntary choice (Aboderin, 2005; Sajoux et al., 2015). In this context, economic activity can be interpreted as an indirect indicator of social vulnerability, revealing the insufficiency of redistribution mechanisms and social protection.

This debate underscores the need for an analytical framework that integrates individual agency with structural constraints. Considering this literature review, the present study adopts an integrated approach to aging, articulating demographic, socioeconomic, and contextual dimensions. At the individual level, engagement in or withdrawal from the productive sphere is closely linked to age, gender, and educational level. Marital status and kinship ties within the household also play a decisive role in shaping economic responsibilities. However, individual characteristics alone cannot fully explain employment patterns in later life. These individual characteristics interact with household resources and constraints, which constitute the immediate framework for decision-making and economic survival. Household type and size, standard of living, housing status, and the availability of family support shape the possibilities for remaining active or, conversely, withdrawing from the Labor market. Beyond the household level, broader territorial inequalities further structure these decisions.

Finally, these dynamics are situated within a broader structural and territorial context, characterized by significant disparities between urban and rural areas, across regions, and according to local economic opportunities. Access to productive resources, particularly land and socio-professional networks, strongly influences the forms of economic activity available to older individuals and their capacity to remain economically active. The conceptual framework of this study posits that older individuals' activity status in Burkina Faso results from a constrained trade-off among individual capabilities, family resources, and structural limitations. This reflects both adaptation strategies and cumulative inequalities throughout the life course.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Design and Setting

The study employs a cross-sectional quantitative analysis based on secondary data from the 5th General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) conducted in 2019 in Burkina Faso (Figure 1). The use of census data provides comprehensive coverage of the resident population and ensures robust statistical representativeness. This is essential for analyzing older individuals, a demographic often underrepresented in sample survey data. The study adopts a demographic and socioeconomic perspective to analyze the determinants of economic activity status among elderly individuals, incorporating individual characteristics, household resources, and the territorial context.

3.2 Study Area and Context

This study focuses on Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in West Africa with an economy primarily dependent on agriculture and livestock. Its landlocked status presents several obstacles to economic and social development. Demographically, the 2019 RGPH recorded a population of 20,505,155, comprising 51.7% women and 48.3% men (De La Baisse, 2023). The Burkinabé population is characterized by a high proportion of youth; individuals under 15 years of age have consistently represented 45% or more of the population across various censuses (45% in 1975; 48% in 1985 and 1996; 47% in 2006; and 45% in 2019). Conversely, the proportion of the population aged 65 years and older does not exceed 4%. In the 2019 census, individuals aged 60 years and older numbered 1,031,984, representing 5.0% of the total resident population (485,317 men and 546,667 women).

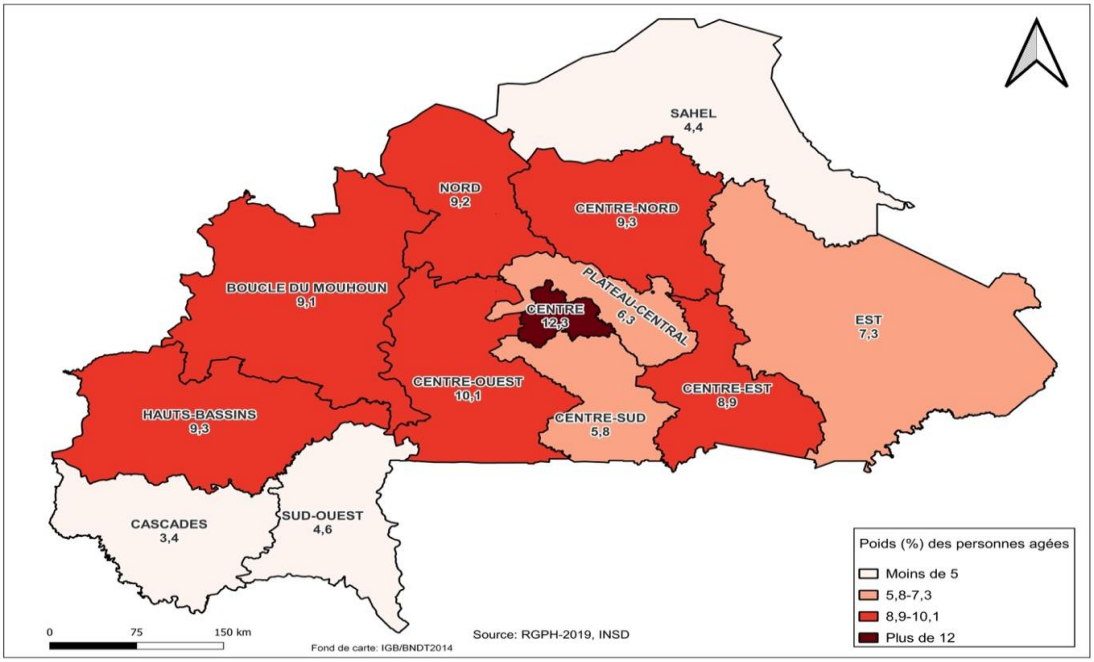

Figure 1: Proportion of elderly individuals (%) by region of residence (5th General Population and Housing Census, 2019)

The study encompasses the entire national territory of Burkina Faso. The target population consists of all individuals aged 60 years and older, consistent with the United Nations definition and national policy standards. Following data cleaning and consistency checks, the analytical sample included 925,946 elderly individuals, comprising both men and women residing in urban and rural areas. This substantial sample size facilitates detailed analyses by age, sex, region, and other sociodemographic characteristics.

3.3 Conceptual Definition and Operationalization

Elderly population

In this study, an elderly individual is defined as any person aged 60 years or older, consistent with United Nations recommendations and current national legislation. This threshold is particularly appropriate in a context where the legal retirement age applies to only a small minority of the economically active population.

Economic activity status (Dependent variable)

Economic activity status serves as the primary dependent variable. It was categorized as a binary variable as follows:

Employed: Individuals who engaged in economic activity during the seven-day reference period preceding the census, including seasonal agricultural work, in accordance with General Population and Housing Census standards.

Unemployed: Individuals who did not engage in any economic activity during the reference period.

This analytical approach aims to identify factors associated with remaining in or withdrawing from the productive sphere at an advanced age. However, this measure does not distinguish between voluntary and involuntary activity, nor does it assess employment intensity or quality.

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3.4 Explanatory Variables

Explanatory variables were selected based on a comprehensive literature review and the study's conceptual framework, which emphasizes the interplay between individual characteristics, household resources, and structural contexts in shaping economic activity among older adults. First, individual characteristics were incorporated to capture life-course trajectories and social positioning. Age was categorized into five-year intervals to reflect the progressive decline in physical capacity and evolving attachment to the labor market at advanced ages.

Gender was included to account for gendered labor participation patterns and differential exposure to economic opportunities throughout the lifespan. Educational attainment was considered an indicator of human capital and access to less physically demanding occupations. Marital status and relationships with the household head were incorporated to reflect social roles, economic responsibilities, and dependency relationships within households. Religion was included as a proxy for cultural norms and social integration mechanisms that may influence economic participation in later life.

Second, variables pertaining to household resources and constraints were included to assess the immediate economic environment in which decisions regarding continued economic activity are made. Household type (single, nuclear, extended, or complex) and household size captured the structure of intergenerational co-residence and potential support networks. The number of elderly individuals within the household reflected potential competition for or sharing of resources among older members. Household living standards served as indicators of economic capacity and the financial necessity of remaining economically active. Housing status (owner versus non-owner) was introduced as a measure of material security and accumulated wealth over the life course. Structural and territorial context variables were utilized to account for spatial inequalities in opportunities and constraints. Place of residence is distinguished between Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, other urban areas, and rural settings to capture variations in labor markets, infrastructure, and access to services. Administrative region was included to reflect regional disparities in economic development and local labor market conditions. Additionally, variables describing the primary occupation, branch, and sector of activity were employed in descriptive and bivariate analyses to characterize the types of economic activities undertaken by older individuals; however, these variables were not included as explanatory factors in the multivariate models.

3.5 Data source

Data for this analysis were derived from the 5th General Population and Housing Census conducted in Burkina Faso in 2019. Previous censuses were carried out in 1975, 1985, 1996, and 2006. The 5th Census comprised a comprehensive set of operations for collecting, evaluating, analyzing, and disseminating demographic, social, and economic data. The results of the 2019 Census indicated a total population of 20,505,155 inhabitants. This data represents the de jure (resident) population, including both present residents and absent residents from ordinary households, collective households, and embassies. The resident population comprised 10,604,308 women (51.7%) and 9,900,847 men (48.3%). The 2019 census recorded 925,946 individuals aged 60 years and older, representing 4.52% of the total population. Of these elderly individuals, women accounted for 53.2%. The analyses were conducted using data from the 2019 Population and Housing Census, which provides a comprehensive enumeration of Burkina Faso's resident population rather than a probabilistic sample. Unlike survey-based datasets, census data do not depend on sampling procedures, thereby eliminating the need to apply sampling weights to achieve representativeness. The analytical dataset comprises all enumerated individuals aged 60 years and above with valid information on the variables of interest, thereby ensuring complete national coverage of the target population.

3.6 Statistical analysis methods

In this study, data analysis was conducted in three complementary stages. A descriptive analysis was first performed to outline the sociodemographic and economic characteristics of elderly individuals and to measure the prevalence of activity status. Results are presented as frequency tables and proportions. Bivariate analyses were subsequently conducted to examine the association between activity status and each explanatory variable using Pearson's Chi-squared test. This step facilitated the identification of variables significantly associated with

activity status without assuming causal relationships. Finally, a multivariate logistic regression model was estimated to identify factors independently associated with the activity status of elderly individuals, while controlling for potential confounders. Results are expressed as odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI). The use of logistic regression is justified by the binary nature of the dependent variable. Before estimating the multivariate logistic regression models, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted to ensure that the explanatory variables were not excessively correlated. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated for all independent variables included in the comprehensive model. Attention was paid to "undefined" (ND) categories, specifically the branch and sector of activity, which accounted for a significant proportion of the elderly population. These categories were retained in descriptive analyses to reflect the statistical reality of the census but were excluded from explanatory models where their inclusion might bias the interpretation of results.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the distribution of elderly individuals by socio-economic and demographic characteristics. The study population comprised 925,946 individuals aged 60 years and older, representing approximately 4.5% of Burkina Faso's total population in 2019. The age structure reveals a high concentration in the younger elderly cohorts: individuals aged 60–64 and 65–69 years account for more than half of the total elderly population. This distribution reflects both the gradual entry into old age and relatively high mortality rates at advanced ages. Regarding sex, women constitute a slight majority (53.2%), consistent with the well-documented female survival advantage in demographic literature. The spatial distribution shows significant regional heterogeneity, with higher concentrations of elderly individuals in the central and western regions, while the Sahelian and the Cascades regions exhibit lower proportions. The elderly predominantly reside in rural areas (77.6%) and within extended households (64.9%), highlighting the continued importance of extended family structures in elderly care. However, this family configuration does not necessarily guarantee economic security, as evidenced by the substantial proportion of elderly individuals living in poor or very poor households (nearly 48%).

Table 1: Distribution of elderly individuals by socio-economic and demographic characteristics

Variables	n	%
Age groups in five-year intervals		
60-64	307,837	33.2
65-69	207,444	22.4
70-74	175,871	19.0
75-79	96,759	10.4
80-84	65,821	7.1
85 and older	72,214	7.8
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Gender		
Male	433,344	46.8
Female	492,602	53.2
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Region		
Boucle du Mouhoun	87,001	9.4
Cascades	32,874	3.6
Centre	112,539	12.2
Centre-Est	84,232	9.1
Centre-Nord	72,574	7.8
Centre-Ouest	98,791	10.7
Centre-Sud	56,988	6.2
East	62,300	6.7
Hauts-Bassins	88,347	9.5

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North	87,783	9.5
Plateau Central	61,520	6.6
Sahel	36,139	3.9
South-West	44,858	4.8
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Household type		
Alone	40,432	4.4
Nuclear	250,808	27.1
Extended	600,796	64,9
Complex	33,905	3.7
Total	**925,941**	**100**
Number of individuals in the household		
1-3 members	209,868	22.7
4-5 members	193,284	20.9
6-9 members	305,053	32.9
10+ members	217,741	23.5
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Relationship to head of household		
Head of household	512,837	55.4
Spouse	142,001	15.3
Parent	202,925	21.9
Close family	15,984	1.7
Other relationships	52,199	5.6
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Religion		
Animist	134,512	14.5
Muslim	532,262	57.5
Catholic	209,884	22.7
Protestant	43,755	4.7
Other	5,533	0.6
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Living environment		
Ouagadougou	87,410	9.4
Bobo-Dioulasso	33,577	3.6
Other cities	86,294	9.3
Rural	718,665	77.6
Total	925,946	100
Housing status		
Owner	883,171	95.4
Non-owner	42,775	4.6
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Household living standards		
Poorest	214,681	23.2
Poor	232,795	25.1

Average	200,528	21.7
Rich	155,891	16.8
Wealthiest	121,172	13.1
Not defined	870	0.1
Total	**925,937**	**100**

Analysis of employment status reveals that 31.1% of the elderly population is economically active, while 68.9% are inactive (Table 2), a substantial proportion given the population's advanced age and the limited coverage of pension systems. Among economically active elderly individuals, employment is heavily concentrated in the primary sector, particularly agriculture, livestock, and fishing, which accounts for more than a quarter of the total elderly population and nearly all active individuals. The secondary and tertiary sectors represent only a marginal fraction of this demographic.

Notably, a significant proportion of the elderly population is classified as "not defined" regarding their branch and sector of activity. This reflects the limitations of statistical measurements of informality and suggests that the economic activities of the elderly are partially invisible or inadequately captured by census categories.

Table 2: Distribution of the elderly by economic activity characteristics

Variables	**n**	**%**
Employment status		
Employed population	287,607	31.1
Unemployed population	638,339	68.9
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Main occupation		
Directors, executives, and managers	2,402	0.3
Intellectual and scientific professions	8,249	0.9
Intermediate professions	16,555	1.8
Highly skilled non-manual workers	141	0,0
Administrative-type employees	2,839	0.3
Personnel, merchants, and salespeople	19,269	2.1
Low-skilled non-manual workers	5,350	0.6
Farmers and skilled agricultural workers	221,562	23.9
Skilled trades in industry and craftsmanship	14,910	1.6
Machine operators	1,021	0.1
Manual skilled workers	2,340	0.3
Elementary professions	9,929	1.1
Military professions	1,016	0.1
Unskilled workers	2,100	0.2
No occupation	618,263	66.8
Total	**925,946**	**100**
Branch of activities of the elderly		
Agriculture, livestock, fishing	240,228	25.9
Production activities	17,557	1.9
Trade	21,777	2.4
Transport	3,295	0.4
Accommodation, Real Estate, and Information Technology Activities	8,474	0.9
Scientific Activities, Services, Administration	14,381	1.6
Not defined	620,234	67.0

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Total	**925,946**	**100**
SECTORS OF ACTIVITIES		
Primary	240,228	25.9
Secondary	17,557	1.9
Tertiary	47,927	5.2
Not defined	620,234	67.0
Total	**925,946**	**100**

4.1 Sociodemographic and employment status differentials

Table 3 presents a bivariate analysis of the associations between various explanatory variables and the employment status of older individuals. Age is a primary determinant of employment status: the proportion of employed individuals declines significantly with advancing age, falling from over 40% among those aged 60–64 to less than 16% among those aged 85 and older. This trend likely reflects diminishing physical capacity and the accumulation of morbidities in later life.

Gender disparities are particularly pronounced. Older men are twice as likely to be economically active as older women (42.4% vs. 21.1%), a gap attributable to divergent professional trajectories and the socioeconomic undervaluation of domestic labor. Educational attainment is positively associated with economic activity; individuals with primary or secondary/higher education exhibit significantly higher employment rates than those without formal schooling. This suggests that educational capital serves as a protective factor, promoting continued workforce participation in older age.

Significant regional disparities were also observed. The Southwest and Cascades regions reported the highest employment proportions, whereas the Sahel and North regions exhibited the lowest. These discrepancies reflect structural differences in economic opportunities, environmental conditions, and security-related vulnerabilities. Finally, the residential environment reveals a notable contrast: older individuals in rural areas are slightly more active than those in secondary cities, highlighting the role of land access and subsistence agriculture in sustaining employment.

Table 3: Bivariate analysis of associations between explanatory variables and employment status among older individuals

Variables	**Employment status**			
	Population Employed	**Population Unemployed**	**Total**	**P-value**
Age Groups in Five-Year Intervals				
60-64	40.1	59.9	100	0.0001
65-69	35.3	64.7	100	
70-74	26.9	73.1	100	
75-79	22.3	77.7	100	
80-84	16.1	83.9	100	
85 and older	15.6	84.4	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Gender				
Male	42.4	57.6	100	0.0001
Female	21.1	78.9	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Level of Education				
None	30.2	69.8	100	0.0001

Primary	43.6	56.4	100	
Post-Primary	37.3	62.7	100	
Secondary/Higher	41.2	58.8	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Region				
Boucle du Mouhoun	34.8	65.2	100	0.0001
Cascades	36.1	63.9	100	
Centre	31.7	68.3	100	
Central-East	29.7	70.3	100	
Central-North	28.8	71.2	100	
Central-West	34.9	65.1	100	
Central-South	33.5	66.5	100	
East	33.3	66.7	100	
Hauts-Bassins	32.9	67.1	100	
North	21.0	79.0	100	
Plateau Central	28.0	72.0	100	
Sahel	17.5	82.5	100	
Southwest	41.3	58.7	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Household type				
Alone	30.8	69.2	100	0.0001
Nuclear	39.8	60.2	100	
Extended	27.6	72.4	100	
Complex	28.4	71.6	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Number of individuals in the household				
1-3 members	30.8	69.2	100	0.0001
4-5 members	33.3	66.7	100	
6-9 members	30.8	69.2	100	
10+ members	29.6	70.4	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Relationship to head of household				
Head of household	40.2	59.8	100	0.0001
Spouse	28.3	71.7	100	
Parent	13.9	86.1	100	
Close family	22.6	77.4	100	
Other relationships	17.7	82.3	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Religion				
Animist	35.2	64.8	100	0.0001
Muslim	29.9	70.1	100	
Catholic	31.0	69.0	100	
Protestant	33.7	66.3	100	
Other	29.7	70.3	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Living environment				

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Ouagadougou	32.0	68.0	100	0.0001
Bobo-Dioulasso	26.8	73.2	100	
Other cities	23.5	76.5	100	
Rural	32.0	68.0	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Housing status				
Owner	31.0	69.0	100	0.003
Non-owner	31.7	68.3	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Household living standards				
Poorest	31.7	68.3	100	0.0001
Poor	31.6	68.4	100	
Average	31.3	68.7	100	
Rich	30.2	69.8	100	
Wealthiest	29.3	70.7	100	
Not defined	67.9	32.1	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	

4.1.1 Factors related to economic activity and employment status

Table 4 presents the results of the bivariate analysis examining the relationships between primary occupation, industry sector, and employment status. This analysis identifies several factors that strongly influence the employment status of this population.

Main occupation

The primary occupation variable shows high employment rates in specific professions. Intermediate professions and merchants/sellers demonstrated employment rates of 86.2% and 92.3%, respectively. Among farmers and skilled agricultural workers, employment proportions were exceptionally high (96.7%). By contrast, only 46.1% of those in military professions remained employed.

Industry sector

In agriculture, livestock, and fishing, the employed population accounts for 96.6%. This aligns with the high employment rate among farmers and skilled agricultural workers. Commerce and production activities accounted for 91.5% and 85.7%, respectively.

Sectors of activity

The secondary and tertiary sectors also represent considerable proportions of the workforce, at 85.7% and 81.4%, respectively.

Table 4: Bivariate analysis of associations between main occupation, branch, and sector of activity and employment status of older individuals

Variables	**Employment status**			
	Employed population	**Unemployed population**	**Total**	**P-value**
Main occupation				
Directors, executives, and managers	79.4	20.6	100	0.001
Intellectual and scientific professions	73.2	26.8	100	
Intermediate professions	86.2	13.8	100	
Highly skilled non-manual workers	64.5	35.5	100	

Administrative employees	57.6	42.4	100	
Personnel, merchants, and salespeople	92.3	7.7	100	
Low-skilled non-manual workers	78.4	21.6	100	
Farmers and skilled workers in agriculture, forestry, and fishing	96.7	3.3	100	
Skilled trades in industry and craftsmanship	89.1	10.9	100	
Machine operators	81.1	18.9	100	
Manual skilled workers	75.3	24.7	100	
Elementary professions	92.0	8.0	100	
Military professions	46.1	53.9	100	
Unskilled workers	91.4	8.6	100	
No occupation	0.0	100	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Activity branches of elderly individuals				
Agriculture, livestock, fishing	96.6	3.4	100	0.001
Production activities	85.7	14.3	100	
Trade	91.5	8.5	100	
Transport	71.6	28.4	100	
Accommodation activities, real estate, information technology	82.0	18.0	100	
Scientific activities, services, administration	68.1	31.9	100	
Not defined	0.3	99.7	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	
Sectors of activity				
Primary	96.6	3.4	100	0.001
Secondary	85.7	14.3	100	
Tertiary	81.4	18.6	100	
Not defined	0.3	99.7	100	
Total	31.1	68.9	100	

4.1.2 Factors associated with employment status among older individuals

Table 5 presents the results of a multivariate logistic regression identifying factors associated with employment status. These results confirm and refine the associations observed in the bivariate analysis by isolating the net effects of various factors. Several variables were included in the model: age group, gender, education level, region, household type and size, kinship ties, religion, residential environment, housing status, and household living standards. The effect of age remains particularly pronounced: all else being equal, the probability of economic activity decreases significantly with age. Individuals aged 85 and older have an activity probability nearly 70% lower than those aged 60–64.

Gender remains a major determinant: older women have a significantly lower probability of being active compared to men, even after adjusting for other variables. This finding highlights cumulative inequalities across the life course that persist into old age. Educational attainment exerts a positive and significant effect on economic activity, confirming the role of human capital in maintaining engagement within the productive sphere. Conversely, elderly individuals from the wealthiest households are less likely to be active, suggesting that economic activity in later life is primarily driven by economic necessity rather than voluntary choice.

Regional effects persist after adjustment, underscoring the importance of territorial context. Elderly individuals residing in the Sahelian and Northern regions are significantly less likely to be active, whereas those in the Southwestern region have the highest probability. Finally, household structure and size significantly influence employment status. Elderly individuals living in larger households or occupying a central position, such as the

head of household, are more likely to be economically active, indicating a continued central economic role within the family organization. The living environment also emerges as a factor influencing employment status among the elderly. Specifically, living outside Ouagadougou reduces the likelihood of employment. Regarding household living standards, individuals with higher living standards are slightly less likely to be employed.

Table 5: Multivariate logistic regression of factors associated with employment status among elderly individuals

Variables	Odds Ratio	p-value	95% CI
Age Groups			
60-64	1		
65-69	0.81	0.001	[0.80; 0.82]
70-74	0.57	0.001	[0.56; 0.57]
75-79	0.44	0.001	[0.43; 0.45]
80-84	0.32	0.001	[0.31; 0.32]
85 and older	0.31	0.001	[0.31; 0.32]
Gender			
Male	1		
Female	0.53	0.001	[0.52; 0.54]
Level of Education			
No Education	1		
Primary	1.26	0.001	[1.23; 1.29]
Post-Primary	1.06	0.002	[1.02; 1.10]
Secondary/Higher	1.18	0.001	[1.14; 1.23]
Region			
Boucle du Mouhoun	1		
Cascades	1.06	0.001	[1.03; 1.09]
Centre	0.81	0.001	[0.79; 0.84]
Central-East	0.87	0.001	[0.85; 0.88]
Central-North	0.72	0.001	[0.70; 0.74]
Central-West	1.14	0.001	[1.12; 1.16]
Central-South	1.05	0.001	[1.03; 1.08]
East	0.93	0.001	[0.90; 0.95]
Haut-Bassins	1.04	0.001	[1.02; 1.07]
North	0.48	0.001	[0.47; 0.49]
Plateau Central	0.76	0.001	[0.74; 0.77]
Sahel	0.32	0.001	[0.31; 0.33]
Southwest	1.37	0.001	[1.33; 1.40]
Household type			
Alone	1		
Nuclear	1.07	0.001	[1.04; 1.09]
Extended	1.03	0.022	[1.00; 1.06]
Complex	0.95	0.003	[0.91; 0.98]
Number of individuals in the household			
1-3	1		
4-5 members	1.15	0.001	[1.13; 1.17]
6-9 members	1.23	0.001	[1.21; 1.24]
10+ members	1.29	0.001	[1.27; 1.32]
Relationship to head of household			
Head of household	1		
Spouse	0.81	0.001	[0.80; 0.83]
Parent	0.39	0.001	[0.38; 0.40]
Close family	0.50	0.001	[0.48; 0.52]

Other relationships	0.48	0.001	[0.47; 0.49]
Religion			
Animism	1		
Muslim	0.97	0.001	[0.95; 0.98]
Catholic	0.98	0.063	[0.97; 1.00]
Protestant	1.14	0.001	[1.11; 1.17]
Other	0.85	0.001	[0.80; 0.91]
Living environment			
Ouagadougou	1		
Bobo-Dioulasso	0.59	0.001	[0.57; 0.62]
Other cities	0.68	0.001	[0.65; 0.70]
Rural	1.08	0.001	[1.05; 1.12]
Housing status			
Owner	1		
Non-owner	1.13	0.001	[1.11; 1.16]
Household living standards			
Very poor	1		
Poor	0.99	0.102	[0.97; 1.00]
Average	0.99	0.060	[0.97; 1.00]
Rich	0.97	0.001	[0.96; 0.99]
Wealthiest	0.91	0.001	[0.89; 0.93]
Not defined	4.61	0.001	[3.95; 5.37]
Intercept	1.10	0.001	[1.05; 1.15]

5. Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the determinants of economic activity among the elderly in Burkina Faso using data from the 2019 5th General Population and Housing Census, employing an integrated approach to aging. The results highlight that, although most elderly individuals are not engaged in economic activities, a substantial proportion remains economically active, primarily in the agricultural sector. The analysis also reveals significant inequalities based on age, gender, education level, place of residence, and region, confirming that old age represents a crystallization of inequalities accumulated throughout the life course (Economic, 2024).

These findings can be analyzed through the framework of Cumulative Disadvantage Theory, which asserts that social, economic, and gendered inequalities experienced during earlier life stages accumulate over time, ultimately exacerbating disparities in old age. From this perspective, the observed differences in economic activity are not simply the immediate consequences of aging; rather, they reflect long-term trajectories influenced by unequal access to education, formal employment, land ownership, and social protection. The pronounced age gradient evident in our results, characterized by a steep decline in participation with increasing age, captures not only the effects of biological aging but also the cumulative impact of precarious work conditions, health deterioration, and inadequate social security throughout the life course. These findings align with the life-course perspective, which posits that outcomes in later life are influenced by cumulative exposures and opportunities experienced earlier in life. From this standpoint, labor market participation among older individuals is indicative not only of biological aging but also of the long-term ramifications of occupational trajectories, educational access, and exposure to informal employment throughout adulthood. In contexts such as Burkina Faso, where substantial segments of the population engage in informal or subsistence activities throughout their working lives, the transition to retirement is seldom institutionalized. As a result, the continued economic activity of older individuals reflects the lack of established institutional pathways for exiting the labor market. The continued economic activity of approximately one-third of the elderly in Burkina Faso occurs within a context of limited pension scheme coverage and insufficient formal social protection mechanisms. This situation aligns with regional and global assessments indicating that, in many low- and middle-income countries characterized by high informality, protection for the elderly remains limited, thereby perpetuating the need to work at advanced ages (Gama, 2024).

From the perspective of the Political Economy of Aging, this phenomenon illustrates the structural organization of labor markets and welfare regimes in low-income countries. In contexts where social protection systems are

predominantly contributory and linked to formal employment, substantial segments of the population, particularly rural workers and informal laborers, enter old age without pension entitlements. Consequently, the ongoing economic activity among older individuals is situated within broader macroeconomic frameworks, fiscal constraints, and state priorities. The continued labor participation of the elderly is thus not merely an individual coping strategy but also a structural outcome of constrained redistributive capacity and fragmented welfare institutions. In contrast to high-income countries, where economic activity at advanced ages is often associated with individual choice or active aging policies, the economic activity observed in this study appears largely constrained by economic necessity. This finding resonates with research conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, which emphasizes that continuing to work at an advanced age is more a matter of survival strategy than a voluntary extension of professional life (Aboderin, 2005; Opoku et al., 2025; Schoumaker, 2000). Our empirical findings corroborate this interpretation. The reduced likelihood of economic activity among individuals residing in wealthier households indicates that continued employment in later life is predominantly influenced by economic necessity rather than voluntary engagement. In this context, labor participation among older adults mirrors broader structural inequalities in access to pensions, formal employment, and the accumulation of assets throughout the life course.

While global policy discourse advocates active aging characterized by participation, autonomy, and productive engagement, in contexts such as Burkina Faso, continued labor at advanced ages often reflects economic necessity rather than empowerment. Consequently, the concept of "constrained active aging" offers a more pertinent interpretive framework, acknowledging that economic participation may coexist with vulnerability, constrained choice, and susceptibility to physical hardship. The high concentration of economically active elderly individuals in the primary sector, particularly subsistence agriculture, reinforces this interpretation. These activities, which are often arduous and poorly compensated, expose the elderly to increased economic and health risks, especially in the context of climate variability and food insecurity (Change, 2022). Recent syntheses on Africa confirm that rural livelihoods dependent on rainfall, particularly in the Sahel, are highly vulnerable to climatic shocks; the resulting implications for food security and health may intensify the necessity to work at advanced ages (Change, 2022). Within the cumulative disadvantage framework, the prevalence of subsistence agriculture among older workers indicates earlier life trajectories characterized by limited educational attainment and constrained access to diversified employment opportunities. Recent studies focused on Burkina Faso also illustrate how the combination of climate vulnerabilities and security constraints affects agricultural households, potentially impacting the capacity of elderly individuals to withdraw from economic activity (Coly et al., 2024). Thus, rather than being an indicator of well-being, economic activity at advanced ages may be interpreted as a marker of social vulnerability. Regions characterized by climatic fragility and limited state presence create structural pressures that persist in old age, thereby reinforcing the interdependence between macro-level inequalities and individual labor outcomes.

The results highlight pronounced gender inequalities, with older women exhibiting a significantly lower likelihood of economic activity compared to men. This disparity persists after controlling for covariates, suggesting deeply entrenched structural inequalities across the life course. The cumulative disadvantage theory is particularly pertinent in elucidating these gender disparities. Women's life-course trajectories, characterized by lower educational attainment, early marriage, elevated fertility rates, unpaid domestic labor, and a concentration in informal employment, result in enduring economic disadvantages that become increasingly pronounced in later life. The diminished likelihood of economic engagement among older women may therefore be indicative of both the statistical under-recognition of unpaid labor and the accumulated barriers to formal employment and asset ownership. The enduring nature of gender disparities, even when accounting for education, household characteristics, and regional factors, indicates that structural gender inequalities, which have accumulated over the life course, remain profoundly entrenched in labor market outcomes during old age. From a life-course perspective, these patterns exemplify how gendered divisions of labor and unequal access to productive resources yield long-term economic repercussions that become especially pronounced in later life. Older women frequently experience discontinuous professional trajectories, often concentrated in informal or unpaid domestic activities, which restricts their access to economic resources in later life. In this regard, recent studies on domestic and unpaid labor confirm that the unequal distribution of household work and its limited statistical visibility contribute to underestimating women's actual economic contributions while penalizing their integration into paid employment (Charmes, 2019). These findings align with literature emphasizing the

"double invisibility" of older women's work: the statistical invisibility of domestic activities and the social invisibility of their economic contributions (Charmes, 2005; Kuate-Defo*, 2005).

These results necessitate a critical reassessment of economic indicators, which often underestimate older women's participation and obscure specific vulnerabilities. Consequently, recent methodological recommendations emphasize improving employment statistics and time-use surveys to better capture these activities. Educational attainment appears to be a protective factor, increasing the probability of remaining economically active in advanced age. This suggests that educational capital yields positive effects throughout the life course by facilitating access to less strenuous or an advanced occupation. Conversely, older individuals from the wealthiest households exhibit a lower probability of economic activity, confirming that labor participation in later life often reflects economic necessity rather than voluntary choice (Opoku et al., 2025). This socioeconomic gradient is consistent with recent literature from West Africa, which indicates that pension access, household wealth, and urban status reduce labor market participation among older populations. This inverse relationship between living standards and economic activity supports the hypothesis that continued labor engagement constitutes a response to economic insecurity rather than an indicator of "active aging" in the normative sense. More broadly, recent analyses underscore that persistent work in advanced age is frequently a structural consequence of informality rather than a choice (Co-operation & Development, 2024). The regional disparities observed in this study underscore the importance of territorial context in shaping the economic activity of older individuals. The low activity levels observed in the Sahelian and Northern regions may be interpreted through the lens of specific environmental, economic, and security constraints that limit opportunities for engagement, even within the agricultural sector. In contrast, the Western and Southwestern regions, which possess higher agricultural potential, offer more opportunities for continued activity. Recent climatic syntheses regarding West Africa and the Sahel support the premise that agricultural productivity, resource access, and livelihood diversification vary significantly by region, which is reflected in the activity profiles of older individuals (Change, 2022).

The residential environment also plays a significant role; the higher probability of activity in rural areas reflects land access and the familial organization of agricultural labor. However, this economic "inclusion" should not be interpreted as an advantage, as it is frequently accompanied by significant physical hardship and increased exposure to risks. The results indicate that household structure and size significantly influence the economic status of older adults. Older individuals occupying a central position within the household, particularly household heads, are more likely to be economically active. This finding suggests that the economic participation of older individuals is linked to persistent social and familial responsibilities, especially in extended households where intergenerational solidarity remains essential for household survival. Recent studies on the re-composition of intergenerational relationships in sub-Saharan Africa (mobility, precariousness, and familial changes) emphasize that the economic role of elders can remain central, even when solidarities are under strain (Gouttefarde et al., 2024). However, this economic centrality may also reflect a lack of generational support and increased pressure on older individuals, who are compelled to continue meeting household needs despite advancing age (Dzando et al., 2025). This study makes a significant empirical contribution to the literature on aging in sub-Saharan Africa by utilizing comprehensive national data and highlighting the multifaceted determinants of economic activity in advanced age. It confirms that old age in Burkina Faso cannot be characterized as a homogeneous phase of withdrawal from productive life, but rather as a period marked by deep inequalities and constrained choices, aligning with recent syntheses on aging trajectories in Africa (Dzando et al., 2025). However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes establishing causal relationships, and the census-based definition of economic activity does not provide information on employment quality or on whether participation is voluntary or constrained. A further limitation pertains to the significant proportion of "not defined" categories for variables characterizing branches and sectors of activity. This phenomenon primarily stems from challenges in capturing informal and irregular economic activities within standardized census classifications. In contexts where subsistence farming, seasonal labor, small-scale trading, and unpaid family work are prevalent, many economic activities do not fit formal sectoral categories.

As a result, these "not defined" responses may indicate both measurement constraints and the intricate nature of informal economic participation among older adults. Recent literature on informality in Africa and its implications for measurement and public policy supports this view, highlighting statistical "blind spots" and

the diversity of employment statuses (Alfers, 2021). To mitigate potential bias, these categories were retained solely for descriptive analyses and excluded from multivariate models. Nonetheless, their prevalence underscores the need for improved statistical tools capable of accurately capturing the diversity of informal economic activities among aging populations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The results of this study suggest that aging policies in Burkina Faso should transcend approaches that focus exclusively on family solidarity and incorporate formal social protection mechanisms adapted to the realities of the informal economy. Promoting age-appropriate economic activities, recognizing the unpaid labor of older women, and strengthening support systems in rural areas emerge as critical priorities. By integrating cumulative disadvantage theory, the political economy of aging, and the constrained active aging framework, the findings indicate that late-life economic participation in Burkina Faso is best understood as the intersection of life-course inequalities, structural labor-market informality, and limited welfare-state capacity. Rather than reflecting "successful aging" in the normative global policy sense, continued economic activity frequently represents adaptive responses to structural vulnerability. Ultimately, the economic activity of older individuals should be interpreted not only as a sign of dynamism or autonomy but also as a reflection of structural deficiencies in social protection systems and the cumulative inequalities experienced throughout the life course.

6. Conclusion

Utilizing nationally representative data from the 2019 Fifth General Population and Housing Census, this study examines the prevalence and determinants of economic activity among 925,946 individuals aged 60 years and older in Burkina Faso. The results reveal that 31.1% of older adults remain economically active, with employment predominantly concentrated in the primary sector, particularly in agriculture, livestock, and fishing. Multivariate analyses indicate that economic participation in later life is significantly associated with factors such as age, sex, educational attainment, region of residence, household structure, relationship to the household head, living environment, and household living standards. Economic activity declines markedly with advancing age, and older women are significantly less likely to be economically active compared to men. Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with a greater likelihood of participation, while higher household living standards are associated with a lower likelihood of participation.

Additionally, residing in rural areas and serving as a household head increases the likelihood of economic activity, while significant regional disparities persist, particularly in the Sahel and the Northern regions. Overall, these findings illustrate that late-life economic activity in Burkina Faso is influenced by demographic, socioeconomic, household, and territorial inequalities. The inverse relationship between household wealth and economic participation suggests that continued labor engagement in older age is closely associated with economic necessity. These results underscore the importance of expanding inclusive social protection mechanisms tailored to predominantly informal labor markets and addressing gender and regional disparities within aging-related policies.

Authors' contributions

ARB and LN conceptualized and designed the study and performed the data analyses. ARB drafted the initial manuscript. ARB, LN, and SL critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data are available upon request from the National Institute of Statistics and Demography of Burkina Faso: https://www.insd.bf/fr/resultats

Ethics approval and consent

Data from the 2019 Population and Housing Census are anonymized and accessible for scientific research. Consequently, this study did not require individual ethical approval. Nevertheless, principles of confidentiality, privacy, and responsible data use were strictly followed.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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