

# THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF NIGERIAN WOMEN IN THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

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## **Abstract**

*The issue of women has become an important and integral part of on-going discourse on development worldwide. Nigeria is not an exception. Although, it is generally recognized that women have continued to play pivotal role in the country's developmental process, it is also true that their roles in promoting economic and social change continues to be inadequately recognized and grossly undervalued. Therefore, this paper attempts to overcome this problem by examining the roles played by women in the economy of Nigeria in the pre-colonial period.*

That women constitute at least half of the total population of Nigeria is no longer in dispute. There are also other well-known facts that are no longer contestable. Women account for 68.8 percent of the agricultural labour force and 80 percent of the national food output. They are processors of food, marketers and transporters of surplus farm produce.

In spite of the fact that women have continued to play pivotal roles in the nation's developmental processes, their roles in promoting economic change in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods has continued to be given inadequate attention and indeed, undervalued. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to examine the economic roles of Nigeria women in the pre-colonial period. We begin by looking at their role in the area of trade during the period.

## **Women and Trade**

In the pre-colonial period, a lot of trading activities took place between different groups and states in the area that later became known as Nigeria. For instance, there was an extensive trade between the Tiv and the Cross River areas. The main items of trade were guinea corn, palm oil, salt, cam wood, etc. In the central and Northern parts

of the country, there was also, an extensive trade between Abuja and Zaria, Kachia, Baro, Bida, Keffi, Minna and Lokoja. The people of the Delta also, engaged in trade with their hinterland neighbours. The products of the Delta such as fish, crayfish, slat and earthen ware were exchanged for the agricultural products of the hinterland peoples. There was also a great deal of trade across the Delta. captain Adams noted this fact towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when he wrote that “much trade is carried on here (Warri) with the natives of Bonny and New Calabar, who came in their canoes for the purpose” (Adams, 1823:35)

In the pre-colonial period, women in Nigeria played important role in trading activities. This can be seen from the observations of travelers and missionaries during the period. For example, in 1886, Clapperton observed that:

The king of Eyo’s (Oyo) wives are to be found trading for him and like other women of the common class carrying large loads on their heads from town to town (Quoted by Hallet, 1965)

Similarly, in 1890, the Lander brothers also observed that in Egga which was a loading trader centre, women were the chief, if not the traders (Sesay and Odebiyi, 1998:132)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the early missionaries made reference to ubiquitous market women who were trading in town markets and sold cooked food in their communities along well-travelled roads and traversing Yoruba land in long distance caravans.

Johnson (1966) who wrote extensively on the role which women played in economy in the pre-colonial period observed that the activities of women was dominated by trading in the urban areas. Also that the training of women in trading activities usually began early. The little girls hawked various commodities under the tutelage of their mothers, relatives or guardians. In addition, husbands gave starting capital to new brides to engage in independent trading. According to Johnson (Ibid), the trading activities of women varied from selling small quantities of food items outside the compound or in the local market to long-distance trading in a very large-scale. He also reported seeing female traders traversed Yoruba land and even beyond in large caravans which sometimes numbered hundreds of people trading in cloth, palm oil, kola nuts, food stuffs and so on.

It should be pointed out that for many parts of Nigeria, whereas men dominated the inter-regional long distance trading activity, women were active in the intra-regional retail trade. Thus, women played important roles in the daily or periodic markets, had food stalls, embarked on road side trading and moved from house to house selling their goods.

In western Nigeria, the *Iyaloja* or mother of the market played an important role in the administration of the market. For instance, she not only ensured the maintenance of the market, but, also reported to the chief in charge of the market. Similarly, it was

reported that the *Onidanke* traders in the old Oyo kingdom traded mainly in food crops and played active role in the long distance trade as distributors (Falola, 1984). Also, in Ibadan, it was observed that senior wives played more active role in trading activities than junior ones. The latter concentrated on production.

### **Women and Agriculture**

Generally, in the pre-colonial period, men in Nigeria dominated agricultural activities such as clearing of land, hand-tilling and sowing. On the other hand, women played important roles in the weeding and harvesting of plants, portorage of produce, threshing and storage of crops.

For instance, in the Igbo speaking area, women performed the task of fetching of water, crop cultivation, harvesting of crops and transportation of farm produce. The *Gbagi* women of the middle belt were mainly responsible for the transportation of farm produce. In the Jukun, Tiv and Idoma areas, women were involved in weeding and harvesting of crops. Among the *Katab* people of Southern Zaria, women played important roles in land clearing, seed sowing, harvesting of crops and threshing (Greene and Ryan, 1975 and Bonat 1981).

Women played an important part in the social relations of production in agriculture. For instance, among the Nupe and other communities, the fundamental unit of agricultural production was the family group (Iyela, 1997 and Nadel, 1961). This was made up of the father, mother, children and the wives including close relations. Labour to work the family land was provided by the members. Women played important role in augmenting the labour on the family farms. As pointed out earlier, they contributed to the sowing, weeding and harvesting of crops.

However, as pointed out elsewhere, when the labour to work on the household (family) farms became insufficient, there was a resort to the cooperative working groups variously known as *gayya* in Hausaland, *Owe* and *aaro* in Western Nigeria and *egbe* in Nupeland. It should be pointed out that on certain occasions, the assistance of the cooperative work groups may not be available. Consequently, the labour of children, wives or even slaves was used.

Apart from agriculture, fishing, hunting and livestock production were the other economic activities of all the groups in Nigeria although they were dominated by men in many areas. However, in the Middle belt of Nigeria, women reared goats, sheep, cows and therefore played important role in livestock production. Similarly, in Eastern Nigeria, women in Ake-eze monopolized fishing in the Ake-Eze River located in Afikpo. Again, in the Benue and Katsina-Ala areas, both men and women participated in fishing activities. (Hamman, 1983; Gbande, 1982).

We cannot round-up this section without making some observations. Generally, in most parts of Nigeria, women were not allowed to own land. Women's rights to land were basically usufructuary.

For instance, Meek (nd) pointed out that women in Igboland could not own land. The same was true of the Gwari (Aya, 1964) and also of the Nupe (Jacobs and Kolo, 1964). It should be pointed out that not only could women not own land in the pre-colonial period, there were also restrictions in terms of the economic trees which they could own. For instance, among the Gbagyi, women could not own the oil-palm, sheanut and locust bean trees as these were considered to be the property of the men. Similarly, in Igboland, women could only hire palm trees, but, did not own them.

### **Women and Manufacturing Sector**

Women in Nigeria, played a very important role in the manufacturing sector. This was more so in areas such as beer brewing, pottery, processing of vegetable oils, pot-dyeing, cotton spinning and so on.

For instance, although the men dominated in the area of mining of metals, women played important role in salt mining especially in the lower Benue salt mines. The industry in the middle Benue region was salt making especially among the Jukun. The leading salt mines were at Akwana, Awe, Jebjeb and Bomanda (Freemantle, 1922:53). The salt industry was solely in the hands of women, the role of men being limited to performing religious rites without which it was believed, the women would have little or no salt (Abubakar, 1980:180).

Women in Nigeria also played dominant role in textile manufacture. For instance, among the Hausa of Kano, Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and Idoma of the Benue, women wove and spun. For instance, the Lander brothers observed that "the women of Jenna employ themselves generally either in spinning or preparing Indian corn for food" (Quoted by Hallet, 1965). Cloth dyeing was also practiced in the country and women played important part. For instance, it was reported that Clapperton visited three dye houses in Badagry. Again, Hinderer (1872) wrote a memoirs which was an account of her "seventeen years in the Yoruba country." In her account of the occupations of the people of Ibadan, she discovered that many industries were dominated by women. Among these, were dyeing cloth, processing palm and nuts and so on. Generally speaking, cloth were dyed either in pits or in pots. Whereas the men dominated in pit-dyeing, it was the women who generally, dyed in pots. Historically, pit dyeing was common in the northern part of the country especially in Sokoto and Kano. Pot dyeing was also widespread in western Nigeria.

In many areas in the country, women were the main potters. For example, pottery was done mainly by professional women potters known as Ba-zimi in Wukari

(Hamman, 1983). Similarly, women were the main potters in the Gwari speaking area (Hassan and Naibi, 1952), in the plateau area, Kano and in Ojaba in Western Nigeria (Falola, 1984). Pots were made for cooking, storage of grains and water, etc.

Finally, women were responsible for soap making and the processing of vegetable oils. Beer brewing was also done in many parts of the country by women especially in Eastern Nigeria, the Tiv and Abuja areas. However, women were also engaged in wood carving especially in the Gbagyi speaking area (Shenkwo, 1986).

### **Conclusion**

We examined the economic roles of Nigerian women in the pre-colonial period. It was pointed out that in the pre-colonial period, women played important roles in the economic development of the country. Like their male counterparts, they participated actively in exchange, agriculture, manufactures and so on.

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