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## **THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL OR TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Women in pre-colonial African setting, as it is today suffered discriminations. This will continue into the future if no active grand strategies to expunge the misconception that women are weaker sex. In the discussion of strategic issues, women should be considered relevant like men in the societies. To find out about gender discrimination today, it is therefore, important to trace the root for a better understanding of the present. This is why, to discuss the genesis of gender discrimination from the angle of pre-colonial African setting, the role of women in economic development at that period and how they tried to assert their freedom are significant factors in gender school of thought. These will form the bases of my discussion.

**Keywords:** *Women, economy, development traditional Africa, discrimination, freedom, trade, Politics, Norms, and craft.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is no doubt that women were significant in terms of economic development during the pre-colonial era. Yet in spite their enormous contributions in providing labour for agricultural purposes, they were discriminated against because they were seen as weaker sex. This is why my discussion will be based on the roles of women in pre-colonial economic development in relation to gender discrimination. Gender issue is a fundamental aspect of thought especially as it concerns our contemporary time. The contemporary time can best be understood from the angle of the past. Knowing the past and the present will help us to fast track solving the problem for the benefit of future generations. Women in the past have meaningful contributions towards better development of the economy and the society at large. They were not isolated when it comes to economic activities. They were only discriminated when it comes to the issues of sacred societal norms and values which tend to see women involvement in these selected areas as taboo. These were the result of myths and legend which people in relation with their gods upheld. Thus, women in certain areas were compelled not to function. Without this backdrop, women would have been potent and successful agents of socio-cultural and economic change. Even at that, they were not totally left out in the scheme of things especially when it comes to trade, cooking, children bearing and labour. These form the basis of economic development as men in isolation could hardly achieve anything. "Women in sub-Saharan Africa have a predominant role in agricultural production; a fact which has been substantiated by a number of investigators." One of the

pioneering efforts at synthesizing this information is contained in Easter Boserup's book, "Women's role in Economic Development"<sup>1</sup>

## **THE ROLE OF WOMEN TOWARDS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN PRECOLONIAL AFRICA**

Women have enormous economic impact in African societies during colonialism. Their contributions were notable in terms of labour. Family labour was well organized for economic activities. For instance, a man organizes all his unmarried children, Wife or wives and relatives living with him for agricultural production purposes. Likewise, in most pre-colonial trading system, African women tended to be more predominant because they were more into business and combining it with household chores as their male counterparts tended to be more involved in the production units such as farming, hunting, carving etc. Clothes weaving, basket making, beads making, ceramics' were prominent economic activities among the African women during the pre-colonial time. Women were not idle just like men because of the primacy placed on the dignity of labour. Infact, successful women were crown of glory to their husbands and children in a supportive tendencies. They weaved their clothes, baskets, hand rings, bracelets, leg wears etc. Instances abound in Nigeria among the Igala, Nupe, Ibirá, Hausas, the Yoruba and Ibo societies. Inferences are drawn from the archaeological findings in Nok culture areas, the Tarugga areas of the North and the Igbo-ukwu culture around the Nsukka areas. In these sense, women cannot be said to be insignificant to men as far as economic developments were concerned in that era and even in our present generation.

We can best understand the contribution of women towards economic development in pre-colonial Africa from the following parameters; Role in agriculture, trade, salt production, cotton and textile industry, politics, Gold and Jewelry making among others. Historical accounts and oral records revealed that, the Nigerian women had actively participated in the social; economic and political development of their societies as far back as the 19th century<sup>2</sup>. This is not only true about the Nigerian women but true of all African women. This is because, no where in Africa that the women were found guilty of idleness. The Nigerian women occupied a significant position in pre-colonial organization, religion, family life and in terms of economical development. As Barnes put it, the Nigerian women "possess independent source of ritual, economic and political influence and that, they could count on their fathers people for financial assistance in their trading ventures"<sup>3</sup>. clapperton also observed and admired the multitude of tasks undertaken by busy industrious women. In 1886, his observation was that, "The king of Eyeos (Oyo's) wives were found trading for him like the other women of the common class carrying large loads on their heads from town to

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<sup>1</sup> **Boserup, Easter** 1970, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, Newyork. St Martin's. **Cited from: Nici Nelson(ed), African Women in the Development process, (Frances and company Limited Britain 1981), P.30**

<sup>2</sup> **Agness Sayo Odejide:** *Women in Trade and industry*. *Cited from:* Ahmadu Sesay and Adetanwa: Dokun Publishing House Ibadan, 1998, P122

<sup>3</sup> **Barnes, Sandra** "Ritual, Power and Outside Knowledge *Journal of Religion in Africa* XX:3, 1990, PP 248 – 268 Cited from Hallet, Robin(ed) *Niger Journal of Richard and John. Lander* (London 1965)

town"<sup>4</sup> The women usually assist their husbands' in tiling, sowing, weeding harvesting, transporting farm produces and processing. According to him which is indisputable, that the women in Badagry engaged in spinning and preparing Indian corn for food. There are specific instances of women's involvement in agriculture production, processing and trade. In West African Yoruba region, there was a reason to this. The reason for the performance of women in trade is that, during the inter tribal wars, it was safer for women to move about and trade between warring factions.<sup>5</sup> Apart from trading, African women played strategic role in food production. As observed by ottanberg and ottanberg 1962, the Afrikpo women of Eastern Nigeria "take larger part in Economic production than men" and appeared "To work Harder"<sup>6</sup>. They grow all crops apart from yam ranging from the collection of palm fruits and tendering of newly introduction crops such as rice. The women processed virtually all food for home consumption and for sale<sup>7</sup>. Lewis and Reining 1962 remarked that, in Cote d'ivoire, Guru women were also involved in the sales of such food commodities as palm oil, salt, dried cassava and fish. Similarly, in Somalia, women were involved in food marketing. So were Zande women of the Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and the sudan<sup>8</sup>.

In terms of salt production, the European visitors who remarked about the Delta women of Nigeria identified their role that, salt production was done mostly by women and most part of the Nigerian region. Also, salt was the chief item of import from the Delta into the Hinter land. That salt was produced from the stalks of 'acca' (grass). In Borno however, men did most of the Job<sup>9</sup>. Among the Ohaozara Igbo, the three contiguous villages of Zuburu, Okposi and Oshi was a salt lake which the people exploited economically. Production was done mostly during the dry season. The season was usually heralded by ritual sacrifices to the salt deity known as Ezi Ngele Mmahi Uburu and Mmahi Okposi. After rituals, the lakes were cleared of weed which was usually flooded by the Asu river during raining season. In order to increase the salinity of the lakes reduced by flood, the young men were usually assigned to drain the water by Elders-in-council. It was at this point that actual production starts by individual women's affair<sup>10</sup>. In Ohaozara, Uburu, Ishiaga axis, salt production among women provided them with a lucrative source of revenue in exchange for pots. This catalysed inter-Zonal trade in southern Nigeria. Thus, promoting economic interdependence with its

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<sup>4</sup> **Hallet, Robbin**,(ed), `Niger Journals of Richard and John Lander', London 1965. Cited from Agness Sayo Odejide: *Women in Trade and Industry* as cited from Ahmadu Sesay and Adetanwa Odebisi ( **Dokun Publisher Ibadan 1998 P123.**)

<sup>5</sup> **Tomilayo O. Adekanye, Ph.D:** *African women in Agriculture* .( Published by central for Gender Governance and Development (CEGGAD), Ibadan, Nigeria 2004) P.29

<sup>6</sup> Ibid P30

<sup>7</sup> Ibid P30

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, Reining 1962: Ibid P30

<sup>9</sup> **P.E love Joy**, "The Borno salt Industry", *International Journal of African historical studies* 2,4 (1978) cited from: Onwuka N. Njoku: *Economic History of Nigeria 19th and 20th centuries*. (Magnet Business enterprise-Nsukka, Nigeria, 2001) P.54

<sup>10</sup> **O.N Njoku:** *Economic History of Nigeria* P.54

implication for Inter-Group Relations<sup>11</sup>. Same goes in Keana and Azara areas of Benue. Adefuye estimated that, about 4000 to 4500 tons of salt was raised in Benue areas. The annual production in keana stood at 59,000 tonns<sup>12</sup>. The African women were also famous' in pottery. In Ekwe Igboland, pottery is said to be the main "stay of the people economy", even to date. In Ekwe, almost every household practiced the craft as most still do today. Ishiga people, one of the leading pot producers east of the Niger, refer to the industry as "Omechara Umu Ugbuonye" meaning the redeemer of the poor and destitute<sup>13</sup>. This was because pot making must have served the purpose of sustenance to women especially the poor. When we look into the cotton and textile industry, we would see that, cotton textile was widely grown and produced in south, North, East and western Nigeria. The European account proved Yoruba land to be notable for its production in the 19th century. The notable areas were; Abeokuta, owo, Ekiti, Oyo, Ogbomosh, Iseyin, Ilorin, Ijebu and Okene. About 80% of Abeokuta indigene's were engaged in such economic activity. It was argued that, production was carried out intensively by women<sup>14</sup>.

According to Samuel Johnson "it may be safely said that, there is scarcely a single woman in the whole country and district who does not weave"<sup>15</sup>. Igbo people widely produced cotton cloths. Afigbo and Okeke indentified the areas as: Ndoki, Akwete, Anioma (Onitsha and Asaba), Nsukka-udu (Enugu) and Abakaliki<sup>16</sup>. In these clusters, as indeed Igbo land in general, textile production was the preserve of women, a profession they pursued with zeal. Equiano also noted that, "When our women are not employed with the men in tillage, "their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton which they afterwards, dye and make garments"<sup>17</sup>. In terms of politics, women in pre-colonial Africa were not left out. In Senegal for instance the women were revered due to their outstanding qualities of leadership and wealth acquired. The women were said to be ingenious as they know how to acquire wealth and how to employ it profitably and how to enjoy it well<sup>18</sup>. There were influential trading women in the SeneGamba and the upper Guinea coast in the 18th and 19th centuries. The role of African women (primarily of the Wolof and Lebal people) was a factor of great influence on the special development that arose with the coming of the Europeans. The Europeans admired their commercial enterprise. They cohabited and collaborated for mutual economic advantage<sup>19</sup>. The women made gold into jewelry. The Senegalese women still possess an unrivalled flair for displaying clothing jewelry and finery. The orde Galam (gold

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid P.55

<sup>12</sup> Adefuye A "Keana: A gift of salt", Odu 33 (1998) PP107 – 117. Cited from A.C Unomah, "The lowland salt Industry of lateau state, (London 1982) PP 151 – 178

<sup>13</sup> John N. Ekeledo, "Ishiagu Pottery", B.A Degree Project, Fine and Applied Arts Department, UNN P.5 cited from: O.N Njoku: *Economic History of Nigeria 19th and 20th centuries.* (Magnet Business Enterprise, Nsukka 2001) P.60

<sup>14</sup> G.J.A Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A geographical Analysis*, London 1960. Cited from O.N Njoku

<sup>15</sup> J. Johnson, "The Southern Nigeria British protectorates", *Niger and Yoruba note, 19904 – 1904*, PP192 – 3

<sup>16</sup> O.N Njoku: *Economic History of Nigeria* P.64

<sup>17</sup> Equiano, Narrative, P.4 cited from O.N Njoku *Economic History* P.64

<sup>18</sup> George E. Brooks JR: *The Signers of Saint Louis and Goree: Women Entrepreneurs in 18<sup>th</sup> century Senegal.* Cited from: Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (ed): *Women in Africa student in social and Economic change*, (Stanford University press, California 1976), P20

<sup>19</sup> Ibid P22

from Galam) is still the by word for quality and purity<sup>20</sup>. Claire in his work also pointed out that, the Ga women in Ghana like other women of other west African countries along the coast involved in trade. They traded in fish, Vegetables and luxury items like cloths, Knives, ground corals (beads), looking glasses pinnes and arm rings. According to him also, the Demarees women were "Very nimble about their business, and so earnest therein, that they go atleast five or six miles every day to the places where they have to do it"<sup>21</sup>. It is the delight of African women to sit in the market-places under the trees, exposing their wares for sale, or to hawk them through the streets from door and from village to village<sup>22</sup>. The contributions of women towards economic development of their fathers land during the pre-colonial period cannot be overemphasized . Their role in trade, industries and agriculture as well as in political development served the economic need of their time. They grow together with the men to feed themselves and also engaged in productive sectors though at primordial level. Yet, with their contributions, they were still discriminated against. The discriminations against women today has its root from the pre-colonial era.

### **DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

The societies view the feminine genders as inferior. This view is expressed right from birth. Thus, the boy is made more important than the girl and it becomes the beginning of the unfair treatment meted out to the girl throughout her life<sup>23</sup>. This today, has its root from the onset from pre-colonial era up to the time present. The women as is seen today, were not in most cases regarded like men. They were not allowed to attend burials nor watch some certain masquerades during festive periods. Some men that were highly spiritised may not allow women to reach their closets during menstrual periods. The village woman is described as dirty and in some areas men will not shake hands with them<sup>24</sup>. The reason for discrimination against them was due to the existing structures in the societies. Customs, taboos and sexual division of labour kept women subordinate to men<sup>25</sup>. Another issue was that of ideology. In traditional societies as Boserup put it, "women are regarded as properties of their husbands; so, the power to make decisions lies with the men"<sup>26</sup>. Due to certain norms in traditional African societies, women were accorded low estate. Low status denied them the access to basic social and economic opportunities capable of enhancing their productivity<sup>27</sup>.

### **Women's Participation in the Nigerian Politics**

Nigerian is far from achieving the set target for women participation. Data from national Bureaul statistics (NBS) shows that, there is high level of gender disparity in active political participation in Nigeria. The NBS shows that the "lags ratio of men against women in the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid P25

<sup>21</sup> Claire Robertson: *Ga women and Socio-Economic change in Africa, Ghana*. Ibid P114

<sup>22</sup> Claire Robertson Ibid P114

<sup>23</sup> **Pauline Furo Baturo:** *Discrimination Against women* cited from: Grace Osakue 'et.al.' Women and Education Publication of Women in Nigeria (WIN) Edo, 1992, P121

<sup>24</sup> Ibid P122

<sup>25</sup> Ibid P59

<sup>26</sup>

<sup>27</sup>

states' House of Assembly stood at 97.8% against 2.2% in 1999, 96.5 against 3.5% in 20-03, the ratio of men to women stood at 99.1% to 0.9% in 1999, 98.1% to 1.8% in 2003<sup>28</sup>. It is only in the south-south that women were represented though below until standard but still better than the overall national record. According to NBS, the ration in the state House of Assembly seats stood at 97.5 to 2.5% in 19-99, 95.6% to 4.4% in 2003, and 90.6% to 9.47% 2007 Also in the local government council seats, the ration stood at 100% to 0% in 1999 and 96.7% to 3.3% in 2003. This was as a result of lack of interest to participate in politics as well as the existing social-economics and political obstacles in the society<sup>29</sup>. In the south-south, the %age ratio of seats held in local Govt. Council word 1999, 2003 and 2007 is as follows: in Akwa Ibom it was 97.3:2.7 in 1999, 98.5:1.5 in 2003 and 35.5: 14.5% in 2007. In Bayelsa, the ratio in 1999 and 2003 stood at 100:0 while in 1999 and 98.7:13 in 2003. Edo stood at 97:3 in 1999 and 2003 respectively while Rivers state was 91.8:8.2 in 2003. Going by this always is, the total cumulative %age of the six states in the south-south geo-political zone between 1999-2007 stood at 98.4:1.6 in 1999; 96.5:3.5 in 2003 and 88:12 in 2007. This goes a long way to dispose to us the extent of in finalization of political participation against women. Same is applicable in other geo-political zones infect the case in the south-south is even far better than other zones like the north where women are kept indoor Hence are not given the opportunity to contribute their quota to national development.

Just like in the local government seats, women are not ably represented in the state and national House of Assembly due to their natural enclave and societal imposition of retraction on women political participation process Women are just rendered impotent in the scheme of things who are seen little more than weak vessels yet in there weaknesses lies their strength to produce. Based on the data of the national Bureau of statistics between 1999-2003, the level of women representation in the south-south stood at 15% in virtually all tiers of govt. There are reasons why women should be allowed to participate in politics. One, they represent almost half of the Nigerian population with little minus or plus. Thus, deserves the right to politics. Secondly, women have different experiences in terms of cultural, economical, education, biological, social and industrial construct which can be explored for national advantage. Third, men just like women have conflicting ideologies, reasoning ability and interest and sometimes, women have better IQ than most men. Most especially, it is not advisable for men to represent women in their own affairs. Hence, should be integrated into the scheme of things. In addition, it is significant to close gender gap in the decision making process because that will provide the basis for the plurality of opinions that would make the parliament to represent the people "will" and "interest" without a whip. Instances abound in researches to show that women are patent against of change and societal development. For instance as Khan and Ara noted, "The overall development of a Country depends upon the maximum optimum utilization of its people both men and women alike. The studies

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<sup>28</sup> Ewemoje Olusegun Sunday and Ezegwu Ndubuisi Chidi, Gender and Political Participation: Implications for Sustainable Development in south-south zone (Department of Statistic and Political Science, University of Ibadan)

<sup>29</sup> Bernes, Samuel H. and Max kaase et al, political action: Mass participation in five western Democracies (Beverly Hills sage 1979)

conducted by Eagly and Johnson in 1990 as cited by Eagly and carli in 2003 shows that women have subsidization in terms of political style than men while men are sublimed to task orientation. Hence, women need empowered. Also as Wollack noted in 2010 when women are empowered as political leaders, states often experience higher standard of living with positive development in education, health basic social amenities and infrastructure. Data from 19 member state & the organization for economic cooperation and Development established this fact. Taking india as an instances as wollack observed, researchers discovered that an increase in women legislators resulted in an increase in total education expenditure. In West Bengal villages of India that had greater representation of women in local council experienced investment water facilities that doubled that of villages with low level of elected women and the roads were almost twice to be in good condition. The study also revealed that, the presence of a woman council leader reduced the gender gap in school attendance by 13%. When women are empowered, economically and otherwise, it will help to stem the tide of poverty, all forms of injustices that will lead to women social vices like cultism and prostitution. Moreover they will become active and reasonable to contribute to societal development<sup>30</sup>.

### **THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ASSERTING THEIR FREEDOM**

Women in this period of study were not pro-active but inactive to assert their freedom. This was due to the general believed that men were divinely sanctioned and imposed on women as Natural Theory of Feminism holds. Men's view and the god's views on community taboo issues were thus, seen and aired as sacrosanct. Though there was the Aba Women War even though it was centred around revolt against colonialism. Women right from the time past have tried to assert their freedom from discrimination. The events that occurred in Calabar and Owerri provinces in south eastern Nigeria in November and December 1929 and that have come to be known in west social-science literature as the "Aba Riots", are a natural focus for an investigation of the impact of colonialism on Igbo women. The development was the result of certain elements of colonial system that has weakened women's position in Igbo land and in much of the rest of Africa as well. The "Aba Riots" are the symbols of the "Invisibility" of women<sup>31</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

As the saying goes, what men can do, women can do better. Women also participated in politics. Instances abound in the 13th; 14th ; and 15th centuries in Bhuganda where women ruled as Kabaka. Sir John Gray observed that, Naku the daughter of Mukibi the founder of Lugave clan ruled the people. She got married to Kimera who was the founding father of Buganda<sup>32</sup>. Queen Naku, was adjudged to be very powerful and a defacto ruler. Queen Nawono the wife of Kimera also gained ascendancy to the throne after her husband's death and ruled for one and half years. She involved in war in which she clamed victory for

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<sup>30</sup> **Ibid**

<sup>31</sup> **Pauline Furo Baturo:** *Discrimination Against women* cited from: Grace Osakue 'et.al'. Women and Education. Publication of Women in Nigeria (WIN) Edo, 1992, P121

<sup>32</sup> **Ibid**

Buganda from the Banyoro people. This victory now brought her into prominence<sup>33</sup>. I believe women had long suffered enough due to certain discriminatory tendencies against them that makes them inferior to men. Therefore, they need to be emancipated. To be emancipated, the existing structure of societal norms, taboos and sexual division of labour should be transformed in such a way to favour women in order to contribute their quota meaningfully to economic development. Perhaps the change we expect is in their hands.

## **DISCUSSION**

I am a master Degree research student currently in the Department of History, University of Ibadan undergoing rigorous training under the tutorship of eminent academic scholars such as Professor O.A Lawal, Professor Adesina O.C, Dr. C.B.N Ogbogbo, Dr. Osaro Edo, and Dr. S.A Ajayi among others. This piece of work entitled: "The economic Roles of women in Traditional African Societies" is my seminar work under a course titled: women in Development". I have presented the paper and have done major corrections as prescribed by Dr. S.A. Ajayi the lecturer in charge. Based on this fact, I have found it worthy of publication which I do believe you will upon reading it. Just take your time to read it and you find it so fascinating for publication. The work tend to bring to lime light that women are potent agents of social, political and economic change having probed into their roles in the past where women contributed to societal development in spite primordial nature of their ingenuities. I see no reason why at this era% technological and educational advancement women should be circumscribed in terms of performing roles outside their domestic of enclave when they capacity to reason; act and build having done that in the past when there were no modern political and economic institutions and tools to enable them function well. Though many articles were published in respect to women marginalization in politics, I tend to make my contribution in a different perspectical way. Thus, establishing that, women should be empowered beyond the kitchen.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid



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