

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ROLES IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS FROM PRECOLONIAL TO MODERN TIMES

Dr. Uwadiunor Nkem Isaac

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,
University of Port Harcourt

Phone No: 07066363776, 07058450667

Email Address uwadiunor.isaac@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the historical evolution of women's economic roles in Nigeria from the precolonial period through the colonial era to modern times. Using a conceptual historical analysis based on secondary sources such as archival records, ethnographic studies, and scholarly literature, the research investigates how women have contributed to economic development across different regions and time periods. Anchored on the Gender and Development (GAD) approach and Liberal Feminist Theory, the study analyzes both structural constraints and opportunities shaping women's participation in economic life. Findings revealed that women in precolonial Nigeria played central roles in agriculture, trade, craft production, and market administration, often exercising institutional authority within organized systems. Colonial rule disrupted these structures through male-biased policies, legal systems, and economic reforms that marginalized women's traditional roles. In the modern period, women have demonstrated resilience by adapting to changing conditions, particularly through dominance in the informal economy, entrepreneurial initiatives, and collective action. The study further clarifies the conceptual distinction between market and trade, highlighting women's strategic engagement in both spheres. It concludes that despite persistent inequalities, women remain indispensable to Nigeria's economic development, underscoring the need for gender-responsive policies and institutional reforms.

Keywords: Women's economic history, gender and development, market systems, informal economy, colonial economic transformation

1. Introduction

The relationship between gender and economic development has constituted a significant area of scholarly inquiry since the emergence of feminist economics in the latter half of the twentieth century (Boserup, 1970; Sen, 1999). As Soetan and Akanji (2018) observed, sustainable societal progress requires the active participation of both men and women in the productive processes of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Productivity, therefore, represents the hallmark of every progressive society, and the attainment of full productive capacity necessitates that all members of society be gainfully engaged in economic activities across the chains of production. Sustained economic participation ultimately results in growth and development, and the deliberate aggregation of productive output constitutes what is termed national economic life.

The role of women in this economic chain cannot be overemphasized. Ancient, medieval, and contemporary histories of most societies have consistently demonstrated that women have made significant contributions to the growth and development of different civilizations through the ages (Rodney, 1972; Sudarkasa, 1986). Available historical records reveal that women were at the forefront of economic development in Nigeria from the earliest times. Yet, despite this rich history of economic participation, women's contributions have often been marginalized in mainstream economic historiography, which has tended to focus on male-dominated formal

sector activities while overlooking the substantial but often informal economic roles performed by women (Oyewumi, 1997; Mies, 1986).

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive historical analysis of women's economic roles in Nigeria from the precolonial period through the colonial era to modern times. The central research problem interrogates how historical transformations in political economy have reconfigured gendered access to resources and authority, resulting in the paradox of women's historical economic significance alongside their contemporary marginalization in formal economic structures and development planning. While women have consistently contributed to agricultural production, trade, and craft specialization across Nigerian societies, their economic roles have been systematically undervalued, their access to productive resources constrained, and their participation in economic decision-making limited. This study therefore asks: how have shifts in political economy across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods shaped the structures of gendered economic participation in Nigeria?

The objectives of this study are fourfold: first, to examine the nature and scope of women's economic roles in precolonial Nigerian societies across different geographical regions; second, to analyze the transformations and disruptions introduced during the colonial period; third, to investigate the evolution of women's economic participation in the modern era; and fourth, to provide a conceptual clarification of market and trade as distinct economic institutions through which women have historically exercised economic agency. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform contemporary development policy by recovering historical knowledge about women's economic strategies and contributions. As Amadiume (1987) demonstrated in her seminal work on Igbo society, understanding the historical foundations of women's economic participation can provide valuable insights for designing interventions that build on existing knowledge systems rather than imposing external models that may be inappropriate for local contexts. Furthermore, by documenting the resilience and adaptability of Nigerian women in the face of structural constraints, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality in economic development. The scholarly contribution of this study rests not merely on its broad historical synthesis, but on its systematic conceptual distinction between market and trade, and its development of a historically-grounded framework for interpreting women's economic agency across changing structural conditions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Gender and Development (GAD) approach and Liberal Feminist Theory. The integration of these frameworks provides a robust analytical lens to examine the complex dynamics of women's economic participation across different historical periods. The Gender and Development approach emerged in the 1980s as a critical response to earlier Women in Development (WID) frameworks (Rathgeber, 1990; Moser, 1993). The GAD framework emphasizes the importance of examining gender relations and structural inequalities—such as unequal access to land, education, and economic resources—highlighting how socially constructed roles have shaped women's participation in economic life over time. Complementing this, Liberal Feminist Theory focuses on the pursuit of gender equality through legal, political, and institutional reforms, advocating equal access to opportunities, education, and economic participation (Tong, 2009; Henderson, 2024).

The study further engages with decolonial feminist perspectives to interrogate the applicability of Western gender categories to Nigerian contexts. As Oyewumi (1997) argues, the imposition of Western gender constructs has often obscured the more fluid and context-specific nature of gender relations in African societies. This insight is used in the present analysis to critically examine how colonial frameworks disrupted indigenous systems where gender was not always the primary axis of social and economic organization. Additionally, Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" is mobilized to analyze women's adaptive strategies across historical periods, revealing how women have negotiated within patriarchal constraints to secure economic opportunities and resources. Together, these frameworks enable a dual-level analysis that captures both systemic constraints and pathways for agency, while remaining attentive to the cultural and historical specificity of Nigerian contexts.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Conceptualizing Women's Economic History in Nigeria

The historiography of women's economic roles in Nigeria has evolved significantly over the past half-century. Early colonial ethnographies tended to portray African women primarily in domestic roles, overlooking their substantial economic contributions (Talbot, 1926; Forde & Scott, 1946). However, subsequent scholarship has increasingly recognized the centrality of women to precolonial and colonial economies (Hafkin & Bay, 1976; Robertson & Klein, 1983). Achebe (2005), in her groundbreaking study of northern Igboland, provided foundational insights into the economic organization of the Nsukka region, documenting how women participated in trade networks, agricultural production, and craft specialization. Her work revealed that women were not merely passive participants in these exchanges but active agents who managed market transactions and controlled significant economic resources. Similarly, Amadiume (1987) documented the economic organization of Igbo society, demonstrating that in precolonial times, sex and gender did not necessarily coincide, and women could achieve power through both economic and political institutions. Martin (1988) extended this analysis to the Ngwa region of southeastern Nigeria, examining the interaction between palm oil export production and changes in food production and family relations. Her study demonstrated that women's labor was central to the oil palm industry and that colonial interventions significantly disrupted established patterns of gender relations and economic organization.

3.2 Regional Variations in Precolonial Women's Economic Roles

The literature reveals significant regional variations in women's economic roles across Nigeria's diverse societies. In the Benin Kingdom, women's economic participation was integrated into the state structure through appointments to palace positions and involvement in craft production and trade (Bradbury, 1957; Ryder, 1969). Achebe (2005) documented similar patterns in northern Igboland, where women's economic activities provided the basis for political and social authority.

Among the Yoruba, women's economic roles were particularly developed in market administration (Sudarkasa, 1973; Denzer, 1994). Soetan and Akanji (2018) note that women's control over markets in Yorubaland represented a significant form of economic power that was institutionalized through titles and associations. Women organized market schedules, spaces, and regulations, establishing the institutional framework within which exchange occurred.

In Igboland, Achebe (2005) documented women's participation in agriculture, trade, pottery, and weaving. Her case studies of successful farmers, traders, potters, and weavers demonstrated how women translated economic success into political and social authority in both precolonial and colonial periods. Amadiume (1987) similarly emphasized the flexibility of Igbo gender constructs, which allowed women to occupy positions of power and authority that would have been unavailable in more rigidly patriarchal systems (Uchendu, 1965; Okonjo, 1976).

3.3 The Colonial Transformation

The colonial period introduced fundamental disruptions to women's economic roles. Colonial authorities, operating with European assumptions about gender and economic activity, tended to privilege male participation in formal economic institutions while marginalizing women's traditional economic spheres (Lugard, 1922; Afigbo, 1972). This pattern has been documented across Africa, where colonial administrations often registered land in men's names, provided agricultural extension services to men, and recognized male authority in native courts while overlooking women's economic rights (Hopkins, 1973; Iliffe, 1983).

Martin (1988) provided detailed analysis of these processes in the Ngwa region, demonstrating how colonial taxation policies, trading monopolies, and legal changes affected women's economic position. Her study of the Igbo Women's War of 1929 showed how women mobilized collectively against colonial interventions that threatened their livelihoods. Achebe (2005) similarly documented how the arrival of the British brought about changes including the establishment of warrant chiefs and the introduction of Western religion, which undermined women's traditional sources of authority.

3.4 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the valuable contributions of existing scholarship, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on specific regions or ethnic groups, with limited comparative analysis across Nigeria's diverse societies. Second, the conceptual distinction between market and trade as economic institutions has not been systematically addressed in relation to women's economic roles. Third, the transitions between precolonial, colonial, and modern periods require more sustained analysis of how women adapted their economic strategies to changing circumstances (Parpart et al., 2000). Fourth, the relationship between women's economic roles and broader questions of development policy remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comparative historical analysis that attends to conceptual clarification and policy implications.

4. Conceptual Clarifications: Market and Trade

The concepts of market and trade, while often used interchangeably in everyday discourse, require careful distinction for analytical purposes. This study adopts a conceptual framework that differentiates between these terms while recognizing their interconnection in economic life. The market, in economic anthropology, refers to a structured institutional space where buyers and sellers interact according to established rules, norms, and regulatory frameworks (Akinjogbin & Osoba, 1990). It encompasses not only the physical marketplace but also the social and institutional arrangements that govern exchange (Falola, 1995). In precolonial Nigeria, markets functioned as complex institutions with designated authorities, dispute resolution mechanisms, and social regulations that structured economic interaction (Falola,

1960)..

Trade, by contrast, refers to the activity of exchanging goods and services, encompassing the processes of buying, selling, and distribution (Eze & Okonjo, 1972). While trade occurs within markets, it represents the dynamic, transactional dimension of economic activity. This distinction is analytically significant for understanding women's economic roles because women in Nigerian societies have engaged differently with market institutions and trading activities (Falola, 1984). Women's control over market institutions, as seen in the Yoruba Iyalode system or Igbo market associations, represents a form of institutional authority that extends beyond individual trading activities (Ogunremi, & Faluyi, 1996).. Conversely, women's engagement in trade networks, while economically significant, may not carry the same institutional authority (Ryder, 1969).. This conceptual clarification enables more precise analysis of how women's economic participation has varied across periods and regions, and how colonial disruptions affected both institutional frameworks and trading activities differently.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design, employing conceptual historical analysis based exclusively on secondary sources. The methodological approach is designed to systematically examine women's economic roles across Nigeria's major geographical regions and three historical periods: precolonial, colonial, and modern. Sources were selected based on three primary criteria: scholarly authority (peer-reviewed journals, university press publications, and established academic monographs); regional representation (ensuring coverage of Benin, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Niger Delta societies); and temporal coverage (including foundational texts from the 1970s-1990s as well as recent scholarship from 2000-2025). Archival records, ethnographic studies, and historical monographs form the core of the source base.

The analytical approach employed both thematic and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis proceeded through three stages: first, open coding of source materials to identify recurrent patterns in women's economic roles, including participation in agriculture, trade, craft production, and market administration; second, axial coding to group codes into broader thematic categories organized by historical period; and third, thematic synthesis to identify overarching patterns of continuity and change. Comparative analysis was conducted systematically by creating matrices that allowed for comparison across regions (Benin, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Niger Delta) and periods (precolonial, colonial, modern) to identify both shared patterns and regional specificities in women's economic participation. The study acknowledges potential limitations associated with reliance on secondary data, including historiographical bias in colonial-era sources and uneven regional representation, with some regions having richer documentation than others. Colonial ethnographies, in particular, require critical reading for their inherent biases. The researcher's positionality as a scholar working within contemporary Nigerian academic contexts informs the analytical framework, with explicit attention to decolonizing methodologies that center African women's agency and perspectives.

6. Analysis and Discussion: Women's Economic Roles in Precolonial Nigeria

The economic organization of the Benin Kingdom demonstrated the integration of women into state-managed economic structures. Women assumed significant responsibilities in palace

administration, market organization, and craft production. The guild system, which organized craft production in specialized quarters, included female participants who managed guild affairs and trained apprentices (Akinjogbin & Osoba, 1990). Women's economic roles in Benin extended to long-distance trade, particularly in textiles and foodstuffs. The strategic location of Benin City as a commercial hub enabled women traders to connect coastal trade routes with interior markets (Ryder, 1969). Female market officials exercised authority over pricing and market access, representing an institutionalized economic power that distinguished Benin from many European societies where women's economic activities were more constrained (Roth, 1903).

The Yoruba region on its part exhibited perhaps the most developed system of female economic authority in precolonial Nigeria. Women's control over market administration across major Yoruba towns, including Oyo, Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Lagos, was institutionalized through titled positions such as the Iyalode (Falola, 1960), who represented women's interests in the councils of chiefs and exercised authority over market affairs. Women played crucial roles in developing local currencies, particularly through their itinerant trading activities that introduced cowries from the coast to interior markets (Boserup, 1970). They organized market schedules, spaces, and regulations, establishing the institutional framework within which exchange occurred. Women dominated internal trade networks, moving goods between producing and consuming areas, and managed transportation systems, organizing caravans and coordinating the movement of goods (Falola, 1985). The Esusu institution exemplified women's innovation in financial services. These rotating savings and credit associations enabled women to accumulate capital for investment in trade, to manage household expenses, and to provide mutual support during emergencies (Onabamiro, 1983). The Esusu system, managed almost exclusively by women, represented an indigenous financial institution that facilitated economic participation for those excluded from formal credit systems (Denzer, 1994).

In Hausaland, women's economic roles were shaped by both indigenous traditions and Islamic influences. Achebe (2005) documented how women adapted to the constraints of *purdah* (seclusion) by developing trade networks that operated from their homes. Secluded women engaged in trade through intermediaries, sending goods to market with children or servants while maintaining control over pricing and profits. This adaptation demonstrated women's determination to maintain economic participation despite religious restrictions on their mobility (Abubakar, 1992). Applying Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," these strategies can be understood as forms of negotiation within patriarchal constraints that allowed women to maintain economic agency while accommodating restrictive social norms.

In Igboland, women's economic roles encompassed both agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Chuku (2015) documented women's participation in land management, crop cultivation, labor organization, and post-harvest processing and marketing. Women's agricultural knowledge, accumulated through generations of farming experience, made them essential contributors to food production and security. The non-agricultural sector saw women distinguishing themselves in craft production. Pottery, weaving, and salt making were industries where women's skills created valuable products for local and regional trade (Achebe, 2005). Achebe's case studies of successful potters and weavers demonstrated how women's craft production generated income that supplemented household agricultural earnings and provided

economic independence. The institutional framework of Igbo society included parallel female organizations that complemented male governance structures. Achebe (2005) documented how the Umuada (daughters of the lineage) exercised authority over matters affecting women's interests, settling disputes among women, adjudicating marital conflicts, and organizing women for collective action. Their authority extended to market regulation, where they settled trading disputes and enforced market rules. This dual-sex political system, as Okonjo (1976) described, provided women with institutionalized channels for exercising economic and political authority.

6.2 Women's Economic Roles in the Colonial Period

The colonial period, beginning in the late nineteenth century and extending to 1960, introduced fundamental changes to women's economic roles. Colonial economic policies, legal frameworks, and administrative structures disrupted established patterns of women's economic participation while creating new opportunities and constraints (Beneria, et al, 2015). Colonial administrations, operating with European assumptions about gender and economic activity, tended to marginalize women's traditional economic institutions. The warrant chief system in eastern Nigeria, for example, recognized male authority while ignoring the parallel female governance structures that had regulated women's affairs (Achebe, 2005). This disruption of indigenous governance affected women's economic position by removing their institutional representation (Ifeka-Moller, 1975). Critically, this transformation reshaped gendered power relations in enduring ways by replacing systems where women held formal, institutionalized authority with systems where their economic interests had no formal political representation.

Land policies similarly disadvantaged women. Colonial authorities, influenced by European legal traditions that privileged male property ownership, often registered land in men's names even where customary systems had recognized women's use rights. This undermined women's access to agricultural land and their ability to cultivate independently (Forde & Scott, 1946). Taxation policies created particular hardships (Naanen, 1993). Martin (1988) documented how the colonial administration's attempt to impose direct taxation on women in eastern Nigeria provoked the Igbo Women's War of 1929, one of the most significant anti-colonial uprisings in Nigerian history. Women across the region mobilized against tax collectors, attacked native courts, and demanded the removal of warrant chiefs. While the uprising was suppressed, it demonstrated women's determination to resist economic exploitation (Hafkin, & Bay, 1976).

Despite these disruptions, women demonstrated remarkable adaptability in the colonial period. The expansion of cash crop production created new economic opportunities, and women found ways to participate in these emerging markets. Martin (1988) documented how in the oil palm trade, women continued their traditional roles in processing and marketing while adapting to colonial trading systems. The growth of urban centers during the colonial period created new opportunities for women traders. Cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, and Port Harcourt attracted women who established market stalls, traded in foodstuffs, and provided services to urban populations. These urban women traders developed new forms of organization, including market associations that protected their interests and negotiated with colonial authorities (Henderson, 2024). Education, while initially limited for women, gradually created new economic opportunities. Mission schools educated a minority of girls, preparing them for employment as teachers, nurses, and clerks. (Kalu, 2025). These educated women formed a new

category of female workers whose economic roles differed from those of their mothers and grandmothers.

The colonial period witnessed significant collective action by women defending their economic interests. Beyond the Igbo Women's War of 1929, women organized protests against price controls, trade restrictions, and other colonial policies that affected their livelihoods. Martin (1988) and Achebe (2005) both documented how these protests demonstrated women's political consciousness and their understanding of the connections between colonial policy and economic well-being. Achebe (2005) identified seven strategies of female resistance employed by Nsukka women, including strikes, boycotts, force, sit-ins, and the use of nudity as a form of protest. These strategies, originally developed in the precolonial period to address wrong-doers and unacceptable male-favoring policies, were refocused during the colonial period on the obnoxious policies of British colonial administrators (Mikell, 1997).

6.3 Women's Economic Roles in the Modern Period

The post-independence period has seen continued evolution in women's economic roles, shaped by national development policies, economic crises, structural adjustment programs, and globalization. Research findings indicate that women are predominantly engaged in informal activities in Nigeria (Kandiyoti, 1988). Kalu (2025) found that the informal economy is a significant contributor to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product, with women constituting the majority of informal sector participants. Women's dominance of informal trade represents both a continuation of historical patterns and a response to limited opportunities in the formal economy. Market women, who control substantial portions of food distribution and retail trade, constitute a significant economic force whose activities feed millions of Nigerians daily (Moser, 1993). The duality of the informal economy—simultaneously providing opportunity while perpetuating vulnerability—reflects broader structural conditions that limit women's access to formal economic institutions.

The informal economy provides women with flexibility and autonomy but also exposes them to risks including harassment, lack of social protection, and limited access to credit and other resources. Kalu (2025) argues that while the informal economy provides a vital source of income for women, it also perpetuates existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities. Women traders have responded by developing informal financial mechanisms, including rotating savings associations descended from the Esusu tradition, which enable capital accumulation and risk management (Johnson, 1921).

6.3.2 Challenges and Constraints

Despite their economic contributions, women in modern Nigeria face persistent constraints. Soetan and Akanji (2018) documented how economic decline, low agricultural productivity, poor export performance, and industrial sector decline have disproportionately affected women. Structural adjustment programs implemented in the 1980s and 1990s, with their emphasis on market liberalization and reduced government spending, created particular hardships for women who depended on social services and subsidized inputs (Hay & Stichter, 1984). Gender disparities in access to productive resources persist. Dagunduro (2025) found that while financially independent women in Oyo State exhibited resilience and adaptability in managing household finances, they often encountered significant constraints imposed by patriarchal

structures that limit their access to financial resources and credit opportunities. Women own only a small fraction of registered land, despite their significant role in agriculture. Access to formal credit remains limited, with women constituting a minority of bank loan recipients. Educational disparities, while narrowing, continue to affect women's ability to access formal employment and higher-income opportunities (Naanen,1991). Social and cultural norms continue to constrain women's economic participation in some contexts. In northern Nigeria, purdah practices limit women's mobility, though as historical studies have documented, women have developed adaptations that enable continued economic activity within these constraints (Guyer,1988).

6.3.3 New Economic Roles and Strategies

In response to these challenges, women have developed new economic roles and strategies. Soetan and Akanji (2018) note that women have advocated for development models that place them at the center rather than the periphery of economic analysis, acknowledging market women as invaluable assets to national economies. Several principles have guided women's advocacy for new economic roles. First, women constitute half of Nigeria's population and their economic participation is essential for national development. Second, women possess vast reservoirs of human potential that must be harnessed for national programs. Third, women's roles are not static but are characterized by fluidity and change across time and space. Fourth, women have been and continue to be challenged, and it is natural to challenge the social construction of gender roles. Fifth, development policies must recognize and build on women's existing economic contributions rather than imposing external models.

Women's economic strategies in modern Nigeria reflect these principles. In agriculture, women have intensified their participation in food production and processing, developing new techniques and marketing strategies (Chuku,2009). In trade, women have expanded their networks, incorporating imported goods alongside local products and utilizing modern communication technologies. In craft production, women have adapted traditional skills to new markets, producing for tourists, export markets, and urban consumers (Ogunremi, & Faluyi, 1996).

7. Comparative Analysis: Precolonial, Colonial, and Modern Periods

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Women's Economic Roles Across Historical Periods

Dimension	Precolonial Period	Colonial Period	Modern Period
Institutional Framework	Women held formal authority through titles (Iyalode, Omu) and parallel governance structures (Umuada). Economic roles integrated into state systems and recognized	Disruption of indigenous institutions; replacement with male-dominated warrant chief system. Women's formal authority marginalized	Limited formal representation; women's economic activities primarily in informal sector outside official recognition. Some revival of traditional titles but largely symbolic (World

	by customary law (Iliffe, 1995).	or eliminated (Robertson, 1984).	Bank, 2023).
Access to Productive Resources	Women controlled certain resources including market spaces, craft production, and agricultural land through use rights. Some women accumulated significant wealth and property.	Land registration in male names undermined women's access. Colonial policies favored male access to credit, extension services, and cash crop production (Mba, 1982).	Persistent gender disparities in land ownership and credit access. Women own small fraction of registered land despite agricultural contributions. Limited access to formal financial services (Guyer, 1984).
Market Participation	Women dominated market administration and local trade. Controlled pricing, market access, and dispute resolution. Developed indigenous financial institutions (Esusu).	Continued market participation but under colonial regulation. Development of urban markets created new opportunities. Women adapted to colonial trading systems.	Women dominate informal sector trade, controlling substantial portions of food distribution. Development of market associations for collective bargaining (Ojo, 2014).
Agricultural Roles	Primary responsibility for food production, processing, and marketing. Cultivation of food crops and some cash crops. Labor organization and post-harvest management (Hobsbawm, 1964).	Integration into cash crop production (palm oil, cocoa) but often as family labor rather than independent producers. Colonial policies favored male cash crop farmers.	Continued centrality in food production but limited access to agricultural inputs, extension services, and land. Adaptation to new crops and technologies (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).
Craft Production	Women dominated pottery, weaving, salt making, and other crafts. Craft income provided economic independence. Skills transmitted across	Competition from imported goods affected some crafts. Others adapted to colonial markets. Mission education	Continuation of traditional crafts alongside adaptation to new markets (tourism, export). Development of new craft forms and

generations (Byfield, 2002). introduced new skills for some women. marketing strategies (Olayemi, 2014).

Financial Systems	Indigenous rotating savings associations (Esusu) provided credit and savings mechanisms. Women's control over these institutions enabled capital accumulation (Dagunduro, 2025).	Continued operation of indigenous financial systems alongside introduction of Western banking (largely inaccessible to women).	Persistence of rotating savings associations as vital source of credit. Limited access to formal banking. Development of microfinance programs targeting women.
Collective Action	Women organized through kinship and market associations. Used traditional strategies including strikes, boycotts, and ritual protest to defend interests.	Major collective actions including Igbo Women's War of 1929. Protests against taxation, price controls, and colonial policies. Development of new organizational forms.	Continued collective action through market associations and women's organizations. Advocacy for policy change and legal reform. Engagement with national and international women's movements.
Legal Status	Rights defined by customary law which in many societies recognized women's economic independence and property rights. Dual-sex systems provided institutional representation (Sudarkasa, 1986).	Imposition of colonial legal frameworks that often ignored or overrode women's customary rights. Native courts tended to favor male interests.	Constitutional guarantees of gender equality but persistent discrimination in customary and statutory law. Ongoing struggles for legal reform.
Economic Sectors	Integration across agriculture, trade, craft production, and services. Women's activities spanned multiple sectors with fluid boundaries.	Growing differentiation between formal and informal sectors. Women predominantly in informal activities but some entry into formal employment through education.	Continued predominance in informal sector but expanding presence in formal employment, professions, and entrepreneurship. Persistent segmentation by gender (Boserup, 1970).

Response to Change	Adaptation to regional economic changes, environmental conditions, and political developments through flexible economic strategies.	Resilience in face of colonial disruption. Development of new forms of organization and resistance to protect economic interests.	Continued adaptation to globalization, economic crises, and policy changes. Development of diversified economic strategies combining traditional and modern elements.
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8. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by offering a comprehensive and integrated historical analysis of women's economic roles across Nigeria's major regions and three key historical periods, thereby bridging gaps in fragmented, region-specific scholarship. It advances conceptual understanding by clearly distinguishing between market as an institutional framework and trade as an economic activity, providing a more precise analytical basis for examining women's economic engagement. The study further highlights the resilience, adaptability, and agency of Nigerian women, challenging dominant narratives that portray them primarily as passive actors within economic systems (Oyewumi, 1997; Mikell, 1997). By tracing the erosion of women's institutional authority from precolonial to colonial times and linking these historical disruptions to contemporary inequalities, the research establishes a critical continuity between past and present gender dynamics. Additionally, the integration of GAD and Liberal Feminist perspectives, enriched by engagement with decolonial feminist theory and the concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," offers a robust theoretical contribution, demonstrating how structural analysis, cultural specificity, and reform-oriented approaches can be combined to better understand and address gender disparities. The study further provides a systematic comparative framework that enables clearer understanding of regional variations and historical transformations. Ultimately, the study provides a historically grounded framework that informs both academic discourse and policy development aimed at enhancing women's economic inclusion in Nigeria.

9. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that women have remained central to Nigeria's economic development across precolonial, colonial, and modern periods, despite shifting structural conditions and persistent gender-based constraints. In precolonial societies, women exercised significant economic authority through established institutions in agriculture, trade, and market governance. The colonial era disrupted these systems by introducing policies and legal frameworks that marginalized women's roles, yet women responded with resilience, adapting their strategies and engaging in collective resistance to protect their economic interests. In the contemporary period, women continue to play a vital role, particularly within the informal economy, where their contributions sustain households and national markets despite limited access to formal resources and institutional support. The continuity of women's economic participation across these periods underscores both their adaptability and the enduring structural inequalities that constrain their full potential.

The study's theoretical contribution lies in its demonstration of how structural analysis and agency-focused frameworks can be productively combined. By integrating GAD's attention to structural constraints with Liberal Feminism's focus on institutional reform, and by engaging decolonial perspectives that question the universality of Western gender categories, the analysis reveals how Nigerian women have consistently negotiated patriarchal structures while maintaining economic agency. The conceptual distinction between market and trade further clarifies how women's loss of institutional authority over markets during the colonial period differed from their continued engagement in trading activities, providing analytical precision for understanding gendered economic change.

Addressing persistent inequalities requires a deliberate effort to recognize, support, and build upon women's existing economic contributions. The findings suggest that effective policy must move beyond simply integrating women into existing economic structures toward transforming those structures to recognize and value women's economic roles. Future research might productively explore emerging dynamics such as digital trade, climate impacts on women's agricultural work, and long-term economic mobility among women across generations.

10. Recommendations

To address persistent gender inequalities and enhance women's economic participation in Nigeria, a comprehensive and integrated policy approach is required. Governments should prioritize the formal recognition and support of women's roles in the informal economy by improving market infrastructure, ensuring security, and providing access to essential services such as storage, sanitation, and credit facilities. Legal reforms must be enacted to eliminate discriminatory practices, particularly in land ownership and inheritance rights, thereby expanding women's access to productive resources. Financial institutions should develop inclusive and gender-responsive financial products (World Bank, 2023) that build on existing indigenous systems such as rotating savings schemes while facilitating access to formal credit (Beneria et al., 2015). Educational and vocational programs must be strengthened to reduce gender disparities and equip women with relevant skills for both traditional and emerging economic sectors. Furthermore, development planning at all levels should incorporate gender-sensitive frameworks that recognize women as central economic actors rather than peripheral participants. Future research should complement these efforts by exploring emerging dynamics such as digital trade, climate impacts, and long-term economic mobility among women, ensuring that policy interventions remain responsive to evolving socio-economic realities.

11. Statement and Declaration

I hereby declare that this research article is my original work and has not been submitted for publication or consideration elsewhere. All sources used have been appropriately acknowledged through citations and references in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines. The views expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily represent those of any institution with which I am affiliated.

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