

# An Assessment of the Role of Women in Nigeria's Development since the Pre-Colonial Time

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**Abstract:** *In spite of the chronic effects of colonialism on Nigeria as a whole and women in particular and the detrimental effects of their domestic roles on their achievements, Nigerian women have towered above their contemporaries in certain ramifications right from the precolonial time and even beyond. Despite this, historical delineation of their roles have been devoted an insignificant portion in books and literature. This paper, using the historical method of enquiry, attempts to present the roles of women in the development of Nigeria.*

## Introduction:

The domestic burdens placed on their shoulders as well as the historical experience of the country have both combined to undermine the proper study of the contributions of women to development in Nigeria. As a result of this, little recognition has been accorded to the role which women have played in different phases of the history of Nigeria. But such a trend should not be allowed to continue. The roles and contributions of all regardless of gender should be discussed. But most of the contributions by women had not been recognized until recently when the United Nations declared the Decade for Women (1975-1985) making it mandatory on governments to focus on the issues of women as an integral component of national development. In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Consequently conferences on women were held in Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1985. Akijide O. (1997), having stimulated the study of the contributions of women to development, it becomes imperative to examine the contributions of women to development in Nigeria. It is along this line that this paper attempt to present an assessment of the role of women to development since the precolonial period through the colonial and post colonial period.

## Contributions of Women to Development in the Precolonial Period:

The contributions of women in the precolonial period permeated the political, economic and social facet of life.

Politically, the precolonial political history of Nigeria was littered with women of substance who rivaled and even excelled men. One of these women was the queen of Daura. Daura was the last in line of queens who reigned in Daura. History recorded that Bayajida overthrew the matriarchal system through marriage to the queen. Onwubiko (1967) maintained that when Daura was threatened by the invading army led by Bayajida, she chose to diplomatically marry Bayajida to avert an imminent war. It could be deduced from the foregoing that Daura was deft in diplomacy just like men of his contemporary. Queen Amina of Zaira also contributed immensely to the political and economic prosperity of her kingdoms. Her rule paved ways for peace which is a sine-guanon for economic growth. She was also a warrior and equally a diplomat. Her dexterity in military tactics culminated in the building of the ancient city wall of Zaria which offered protection against external aggression. Elsewhere in other parts of pre colonial Nigeria, women equally played numerous palpable political role. In the defunct Oyo Empire, a woman,, Orompoto reigned as a regent around 1555, Ikime (2004). Her reign was remembered for checkmating the Nupe from making in roads into her kingdom. In the kingdom of Ife, the reign of a female Ooni is remembered for her contribution in the making of paved road with potsherd. Likewise in the Benin kingdom, the Iya Oba Idia, the mother of Oba Essigle, who was reputed to be a powerful woman led troop that fought gallantly to win the idah war of 1515 Blankson, (1997).

Economically, the contribution of women to development in the pre colonial period could be appreciated under three major sub topics. Which are production, processing and distribution. In the area of production, women have contributed in no small measure to agricultural production. At initial stage of human evolution, both men and women were known for gathering edible fruits, roots and vegetable. After attaining sedentary level, women also played a major part in agricultural production (Olaniyan 1993). They were known to be actively involved in various stages of agricultural production such as land clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting and transporting agricultural produce from farm to home. They also played major role in storage and marketing. From this, it could be said that women wee largely responsible for the sustenance of population. Women also dominated the indigenous industrial sector. The indigenous sector was characterized by a bee hive of activities hence the following could be identified: pottery, soup making.,

iron working, cloth weaving, bead making etc Olaoye, (2009) Majorly, production was on subsistence level but some areas had also attained sufficiency in production which gave rise to the development of local and inter-regional trade. Banwo, (1998). Having earlier noted that agricultural and industrial production gave rise to surplus accumulation, which in turn brought about the development of trade. This sector was equally dominated by women. At initial stage surplus goods were disposed in the local market and when the local market became saturated, inter regional trade developed. The area of food processing was almost an all woman affairs.

Socially, women contributed to the population sustenance through child bearing. They were responsible for the continuous existence of different group. Where women were incapable of their motherhood roles the group faces extinction. Where women were incapable of their motherhood roles the group face extinction. Apart from raising future generation they were also saddled with protecting, feeding and training functions. They also made valuable contributions in the intellectual sphere even though literacy was not common in the precolonial Nigeria. An example in this field is Nana Asmau, the daughter of Usman Dan Fodio who wrote books and poems. She equally translated many Arabic writing into Hausa and Fulfulde. Blankson (1997).

In the religious field, women played important roles. They functioned mostly as Priestesses of various deities. Their propitiation to the earth and fertility goddesses dispelled fears, gave assurances and a feeling of security and well being in the society. Being largely responsible for the purification and preservation of the spiritual health of the community, women contributed to the creation of psychological and spiritual equilibrium which was necessary for harmonious societal development. Blankson (1997).

### **Contribution of Women to Development in the Colonial Period.**

Colonial rule ushered in a new form of economic system based on cash crop production. As it altered the agricultural system so also it seriously undermined the prestige of the traditional occupations of Nigeria women but enhanced the economic status of British, Lebanese, Syrian and few male Nigerian merchants. Uchendu, (1993). Many of the smaller markets formerly dominated by women gradually disintegrated as a result of expatriate firms such as John Holt, UAC, Lever brothers etc. Women were denied access to medium and large scale loans which were vital in operating the bulk purchase of the colonial economy but Nigerian women's did not resign to fate. They forged ahead in spite of the enormous challenges. Many of them embraced food crop production abandoned by men in favour of cash crop cultivation. By this, they ensure continuous supply of food crops and prevented a near famine situation. No only that, since the cultivation of cash crops involves a long and energy sapping process many of them shared the burden with men folk. For instance, oil palm production was almost women job in its entirety.

In spite of the odd against them, many of them did not abandon trading activities. Local food items produced were supplied to those involved in cash crops production. Though an insignificant number of men tried to penetrate into petty trading but could not withstand their women counterparts in managing such a venture.

Politically, development in the colonial era was characterized by protests and agitations in which women participation was not lacking. They took active part in protest against colonial exploitation legislation and ordinances. There were protests against the native Revenue Ordinance in South West and the Market Ordinance in the Calabar. Bolanle, (1992), Series of colonial legislation's and policies aimed at pilling misery on women brought about the Aba riots of 1923. Ikime, (2000). Through these movements women contributed tremendously to the emergence of modern nationalism in Nigeria. Few women also participated in the formation of pressure groups and political parties In 1901, Mrs Obasa formed the Lagos Women League while Lady Abayomi established the Women's Party in 1944, Uchendu (1993). The Abeokuta Ladies' Club which was formed in 1946 by Mrs Ransome Kuti metamorphosed into Nigerian Women's Union in 1948. The roles of womens continued in 1950s when Margaret Ekpo of the NCNC won elections into the Eastern House of Assembly in 1953. She also attended the Constitutional Conferences held shortly before independence.

Socially, while the family in the precolonial days remained the first socializing agent in which women played a vital role, it continued to play this role beyond the period. Apart from this, women institutions and organizations such as the market, various women unions acted as agents of socialization. The introduction of western education opened new avenues for participation of women in national development. The education offered women was meant to equip them with skills for the efficient running of their homes at initial stage but as from 1945 the number of women receiving all forms of education had increased. By 1960, about ninety two (92) women had enrolled at university of Ibadan.

### **Contributions of women to Development in the Postcolonial Period**

Women contribution to the national development in the post- colonial period spans the economy, politics and the social realms. In the economic sector, the role played by women in the precolonial and colonial period has continued in the post colonial period. But the role has since been on the increase. The bulk of the job in agricultural sector now rests on women shoulders. Women are involved in clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, transporting and marketing. Women are principally into food crops production in the Eastern part of Nigeria. But in the Western part of the country, women are into both food crops and cash crops production. Nowadays, men dominated the areas of land clearing, planting and weeding but women have also been seen assisting men in these areas. In the area of transportation, the head potter-age system of the precolonial time has been largely replaced by modern system of transportation although the old system still subsists and compliments the modern ones. Marketing of agricultural produce is predominantly women affairs. Itinerant traders penetrate all the nooks and crannies of the country. They ensure the conveyance of produce from farms into the local markets. In some cases, the wives of farmers also ensure the availability of agricultural produce in the local markets. Apart from this, women operate even across the regions to engage in trading activities.

In trading, Nigerian women have excelled and they have contributed in no small measures to national development in this sector especially in bulking, transporting, exchange and distributing of food stuff. According to Mabogunje (1991) all over Nigeria, especially in the southern parts, periodic markets are held every fourth, fifth and eighth day where food stuff from farm is brought by rural women and sold to urban dwellers. The same unobtrusiveness characterizes women participation in imported food items. The number of women professionals/sub professional had also been on the increase. They have dominated the health sector and have equally made their mark in various professions.

Politically, in the post 1960 women organizations were given massive support to boost their status. By this period, women in the Southern part of Nigeria had started exercising their voting right whereas their Northern counterparts had franchise in 1979. By 1979/80 a few women won election into the House of Representatives. Two women were equally appointed ministers. By 1983, the Buhari administration directed that at least a female should be appointed member of the state executive council. The Babangida era marked a turning point in the history of women struggle in Nigeria when Maryam Babangida institutionalized the office of the First Lady and launched the "Better Life for rural Women programmed.

Apart from the Better Life Programme of General Ibrahim Babangida's administration, for the first time in the history of Nigeria a female Vice Chancellor in person of Grace Alele Williams was appointed. Mrs Maryam Abacha in 1995 also initiated the Family Support Programme which sought to influence the economic conditions of families national wide. Subsequent administrations after Abacha, especially the civilian administrations afforded women the opportunity of playing active role in the administrations of the country. In the 2011 general election, a women Contested in the presidential election while the same figure featured in the 2015 general election. The Upper Legislative chamber attracted ninety (90) women contestants in the 2011 general election, while the figure rose to One hundred and nineteen in time 2015 general elections. The lower chamber on the other hand attracted two hundred and twenty (220) women contestants in the 2011 general election, the number however rose to two-hundred and fifty-six (256) in 2015(Acha, 2016). The number of women deputy governor has been on the increase while they have also have a fair share on the ministerial list.

It is thus clear from the foregoing that women participation/contribution to politics in the post colonial period have witnessed a surge since the extension of franchise to this important segment of our society.

Socially, women have continued to play the role of a custodian to social cultural values which they have helped to preserve through the process of transmission: This is in addition to population regeneration which has been part and parcel of their life since the creation. Women Have also been responsible for forming various associations since Independence. Many of them belong to all women mutual aid society, cooperative groups and market women union. These associations have enabled them to take advantage of the new political openings to assert their leadership roles. They have also been pressing for an expansion of their economic and social responsibilities and the advancement of their rights. By improving their own positions they have simultaneously strengthened the country as a whole and thus broadened development prospect.

### **Challenges Facing women in Contributing to Development**

Women are faced with numerous challenges in the course of contributing their quotas to national development in Nigeria. Some of these are discussed below:

One of the challenges facing women in contributing to development in Nigeria is access to land. Although Nigeria is blessed with large tract of cultivable land but it has always been difficult for women to have access to land and when they have, their holdings tend to be smaller compared to that of men. The cost of procuring land and the system of inheritance practiced tend to make women access to land difficult.

Another challenge facing women in their attempt at ensuring that Nigeria attains some measure of development is the domestic responsibilities and the excruciating manual labour which some of them engaged themselves in for survival reasons.

In Nigeria, women face the challenge of frequent child bearing, feeding for these children which requires some measure of financial support. In their efforts to secure the necessary financial requirements many of them engaged in manual labour that further degrades their status.

Lack of access to formal education and training is another cog in their wheels of achievement. Till today, some parents still prefer to send their male children to school. Such parents see little or no need for educating their female children. In addition to the above, factors such as adolescent pregnancy and early marriage are some of the excuses given by parents for not educating their female children. As a result of the above, few women have access to technical education that would have equip them with better skills.

Access to credit facilities is another hindrance to women's contribution to national development. It has been noted in this paper that women are very venturesome but their venturesomeness is inhibited by lack of fund. Accessing fund at any of the financial institutions by women has been made difficult by their request for collateral securities. To compound their problems, most of the cooperative societies are bedeviled by corruption.

Most women in Nigeria also face cultural challenge. For instance, the religious practice in the Northern part of Nigeria encourages men to embrace the culture of purdah. Muslim sect in some parts of the South Western part of Nigeria also engages in this act. This has been hindering women's contribution to development in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

To enhance the contribution of women to economic, social and political development in Nigeria, the followings should be done.

- Ensure major policy intervention embark upon by the government aimed are at making available social, economic and political opportunities accessible by men to women.
- All forms of discrimination against women should be wiped out.
- Credit facilities that are commensurate with their undertaking should be provided.
- Literacy should be encouraged among women
- Equal distribution of political positions should also be adopted
- Promoting peace which is a sine-qua-non to development is essential if progress is to be achieved.
- Plans for the achievement of women development should be faithfully implemented.

### **Conclusion**

Going through this paper, it is apparent that women have contributed to all aspect of life in Nigeria. Their Contributions to development did not start out of the blue, it has been complimenting that of men since the precolonial time. In fact, it is as old as the cosmos and span both the colonial and post-colonial period. In the process of discharging their responsibilities women are encumbered with numerous hindrances. These hindrance have been discussed earlier in this expose. Recommendations. were also made on ways of boosting women involvement on development. Finally since it has been recognized that women play an important role in development, therefore it would be injurious to the nation in its entirety to close our eyes while the women folk are being submerged in difficulties.

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