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THE ROLE OF NNEWI MARKET WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY SINCE THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

The role of Nnewi women in African historiography has become a topic of interest in contemporary history. Despite the quantity of writing about women and women's history, the evidence available indicates that these women are still either rarely or wrongly portrayed as leading figures in works of African history literature. The few existing works tend to capture or portray them as innately passive, inferior and subordinate, suffering under male oppression forever. Against this backdrop, the paper will showcase the relevant roles Nnewi market women have played in the development of historiography. The question is, what have Nnewi Market women contributed to developing historiography as a discipline. What were the specific roles these women played in the study of history. The paper establishes that through their economic activities, political struggles, and socio-cultural activities, Nnewi market women have challenged and, by extension, encouraged the reevaluation of traditional narratives that portray women as passive actors in the spheres, as mentioned earlier, despite the diverse challenges they experience. As a means of examining the role of Nnewi market women in shaping gender discourses in African historiography, this paper relied on primary and secondary sources such as oral interviews and scholarly works on African women's history/studies in books, journal articles, internet materials, and etcetera. It adopts the qualitative method of historical research(descriptive essay) in its

approach to data analysis and strongly argues that greater diversity and inclusivity of gender in historical reconstruction will promote justice and fairness in African society and advance the development of historiography.

Keywords: Historiography, market women, *Nnewi*, roles, development, and history

Introduction

Nnewi market women have unarguably played a significant role in the development of African historiography, both as a subject of historical inquiry and as a lens through which historians interpret and analyse the past. Role theory begins with a set of normative expectations that are presumed to define particular positions or statuses in social structure and their corresponding roles or behaviours in interaction with others.¹ The specifics regarding these expectations may vary substantially among cultures, while other characteristics may be common throughout various cultures.² In most African countries, cultural descriptions of the structures of everyday life reveal the family as an institution that enacts specific divisions of labour, as it relegates most women to the private sphere and most men to the public sphere. A study of the implication of this normativity of the public/private distinctions between men and women indicates that as long as women's natural social role consists in reproducing a private sphere of family, motherhood and marriage, their access to the public sphere of work, decision making, law making, knowledge production, culture production and politics will remain minimal.³ This has turned out to be one of the challenges to the role of Nnewi women in African historiography.

Some other problems associated with women's role in historiography were created by colonialism and have contributed to the inequality that exists on the continent today. Historical analysts and researchers like Stiftung⁴ and Mutume⁵ posit that African women have not

benefited from the international campaign to improve their visibility. The colonial period witnessed a significant decline in Nnewi market women's role in developing African history and its study. Before colonialism, the primary source of historiography was oral tradition, which these women mostly carried out through storytelling, chants, songs, hymns, etcetera. And the custodians of such traditions transmitted it from generation to generation. However, with the introduction of Western education, which emphasised historical writings or written history, the role of these women in history began to dwindle. As a result of the colonial patriarchal system, which emphasised exclusive dealings with the male population, women's efforts in historical developments were sidelined.⁶ One may point out that women's education level at the time severely limited women's involvement in history writing.

On the one hand, the colonial patriarchal system discriminated against women in educational empowerment with their excessive focus on the male folk. On the other hand, cultural barriers also played a role in limiting women's access to education. Obiageri Okeke⁷ and Paul Asenime⁸ posited that Nigerian society at the time emphasised educating male children while neglecting or undervaluing female education. This preference for male education was deeply rooted in traditional norms and beliefs. As a result, most girls faced significant obstacles in pursuing formal education. To bolster this, for instance, by 1920, the ratio of boys to girls in Nigerian secondary schools was 35:1 and by 1965, the total number of girls in Southern Nigeria who enrolled in school stood at 23,143 against 157,746 boys.⁹ The same has been established at the tertiary level of education, as the female enrollment rate remains below that of the males.¹⁰ In addition to barriers to education and economic inequality, Nnewi market women face significant challenges in the political representation of the various markets in Nnewi. Without adequate representation of women in all spheres of life, many of today's inequalities will be challenging to address in historiography. This paper explores how Nnewi market women have contributed to the development of African historiography through their economic,

social and political activities.

The Relevance of Nnewi Market Women in African Historiography since the 20th Century

It is impossible to overstate Nnewi women's roles, accomplishments, and contributions in African historiography. Recent writings, such as that of R. Smith¹¹, C. E. Ezeanya,¹² O. Okonkwo¹³, on historical findings, have shown the increasing roles these women have played in the development of historiography. Although their efforts are pretty applaudable, it still leaves room for more. Women have been pivotal in shaping and enriching our understanding of African history. In retrospect, the economic, socio-cultural and political activities of Nnewi market women have challenged "traditional gender roles that relegated women to the private sphere of activities in history"¹⁴ and contributed to the emergence of a new discourse on gender relations, which highlighted their roles in African development.¹⁵ The binary of male/female and public/private spheres has been disrupted by the active participation of women in socio-economic and political activities.¹⁶ Women's historical roles have contributed to the diversification, decolonisation, and attempts toward gender balancing within African historiography. The illumination of women's efforts towards development has challenged the dominant patriarchal perspectives that view them as passive actors¹⁷ in African historiography, highlighting the significance of market women in shaping African history. Feminist and postcolonial theories have played a crucial role in this new discourse, emphasising the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and other forms of social difference in shaping women's experiences and struggles. At the same time, these market women occupy multiple positions as mothers, spouses, business/market entrepreneurs, vendors,¹⁸ and politicians. Their efforts in these spheres have led to the advancement of history writing and studying history.

Economic activities

The Nnewi market is one of the largest markets in West Africa and has

a long history of vibrant economic activities. Women play a prominent role in this market, engaging in various trades such as food vending, textile trading, and small-scale manufacturing. The market provides women income and financial independence, challenging traditional gender roles emphasising male economic dominance.¹⁹ Nnewi market women are known for their entrepreneurial skills and ability to negotiate prices and engage in competitive market practices²⁰, which have contributed to the historical study of the growth of markets and the local economy. The pictorial image below captures market women engaging in their commercial activities.



Source: <<https://www.obinwamnews.com/the-vibrant-markets-of-igbo-land-a-driving-force-in-nigerias-economy/>> Accessed on 10/09/2023



Source: <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/12/detained-nnewi-traders-regain-freedom/>> Accessed on 10/09/2023

Nnewi market women have been actively involved in long-distance trade networks within Africa and beyond.²¹ However, the extent to which they engaged in such activities remains vague. Smith²² argued that their participation in these networks challenges the notion that trade was solely male-dominated in African societies. Thus, by engaging in trade activities, Nnewi market women have contributed to the region's economic development and provided insights into contemporary economic systems, advancing historical narratives.

Nnewi market women have demonstrated remarkable entrepreneurial skills, establishing and managing businesses that have significantly impacted the local and regional economy. They

trade in all sectors of the market, such as the new motorcycle spare parts, new motor spare parts, *Nwagbara* (*mgbuka* machine parts), building materials, general section (*ImeAfia*), electrical/electronics, timber dealers (*Ogboosisi*), amongst others.²³ These women sell household goods, clothes, provisions, drugs, books, liquors, foodstuff, building materials, electronics, motor and motorcycle spare parts, etcetera. There are several motor and motorcycle spare parts dealers in Nnewi. The Nnewi Motorcycle spare parts market is trendy throughout West Africa²⁴ and women feature and excel in these sectors. For example, EMCO Foundry Works has pursued its goal of eventually becoming a vehicle parts manufacturer. A middle-aged female, Ukamaka Okoye, who owns and operates the company, brings together over half a dozen young people who obtain daily pay by working with crude tools and implements to produce car battery terminals, motorcycle hand clutch levers and other similar components.²⁵ The picture below captures Ukamaka Okoye at work.



Source: <<https://guardian.ng/business-services/nnewi-nigerias-self-made-industrial-hub/>> Accessed on 10/09/2023

Adeleye²⁶ strongly posited that women's entrepreneurial activities have challenged the stereotype of women as passive economic actors and contributed to the growth of African economies. The success stories of Nnewi market women entrepreneurs serve as sources of inspiration for future generations and provide valuable insights into African economic history.

Nnewi market women have played a vital role in financial management through thrift contributions at the individual and community levels. It is pertinent to note that through their savings and credit associations, they have developed alternative economic systems that cater to the needs of their communities. Falola²⁷ argued that these financial practices challenge the dominant narrative that portrays African economies solely dependent on external financial institutions. The financial acumen of Nnewi market women has shaped African historiography, highlighting the importance of indigenous economic systems and strategies.

The economic activities of Nnewi market women have profoundly impacted African historiography, bringing about diversity in narratives and enriching our understanding of African economic history. Their participation in trade networks, entrepreneurship, financial management, and economic empowerment has influenced the region's economic development and challenged gender stereotypes. However, while these market women play a vital role in the economy, most of them often face numerous criticisms as a result of their limited access to capital, lack of formal education and little control over resources, which often hinder their ability to expand their businesses and are left vulnerable to economic shocks. Only a handful of these women have been able to break through the barriers above. Recognising the agency and contributions of Nnewi market women in shaping African historiography is crucial for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of African economic history.

Political Struggles/activities:

Nnewi market women have also been involved in political struggles

for social justice and women's rights. In the 1920s and 1930s, Nnewi women participated in the anti-colonial protests against British colonialism, using their economic power and social networks to mobilise resources and support the nationalist movement. The demonstrations saw a massive mobilisation of women from all parts of eastern Nigeria assembling in Aba to protest the indirect rule system imposed by the Colonial Lords through the Warrant Chiefs. These riots engulfed the whole of Eastern Nigeria. Women at different stages protested against the fall in produce prices, the introduction of direct taxation, the great depression, which was widespread worldwide and had brought great hardship to the masses and the fall in exchange price of the Manila to the British Coins.²⁸ Alutu²⁹ buttressed that Nnewi women belong to various organisations. Through these organisations, women have contributed to the socio-political developments which brought Nnewi town to the limelight. They constitute members of the different market unions in Nnewi, which provide them with the platform to engage in various socio-political actions such as peacekeeping, mobilisation for various protests/demonstrations, and bringing about developmental changes in Nnewi. For example, in September 2018, aggrieved Nnewi market women from *Agboedo* United Market Association, led by Mrs. Martha Mbonu, numbering over one thousand, mobilised themselves and shut down Nnewi town in a peaceful protest over alleged extortion by the then chairman of the market, Christopher Osuojukwu.³⁰ Throughout recent years, these women have continued to be involved in political struggles, advocating for women's rights and gender equality in the face of patriarchal structures that limit women's participation in politics and public life. They have done this through their involvement in voting in elections, becoming members of various political parties and market unions, carrying out political campaigns, and supporting prospective leaders throughout history, etc. For example, during the litigation case that saw the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) declare Dr. Chris Ngige of the People's Democratic Party as the winner of the Anambra State Gubernatorial Elections in 2003, amidst massive rigging against Mr Peter Obi/VirgyEtiaba of the APGA party, some Nnewi market

women were seen attending court sessions, throwing their support behind the Peter Obi/VirgyEtiaba team. They carried out demonstrations to protest the massive riggings that were prevalent during the 2003 gubernatorial elections in Anambra State. That goes a long way to show they have made a mark on the political development of African history, challenging initial narratives that portrayed them as passive in effecting political change in historical events.

Nnewi Market Women have demonstrated remarkable political agency by setting up women's unions utilising their economic power to influence political decision-making within their communities. By combining their strength in numbers with strategic mobilisation, these women have successfully challenged oppressive structures and advocated for their rights. Okonkwo³¹ highlights that Nnewi Market Women's Union emerged as a powerful force, enabling its members to engage in political activities, negotiate with local authorities, and effect positive community changes.

The political activities of Nnewi Market Women extend beyond their immediate communities, influencing broader African political movements. By actively participating in national protests, advocating for better governance, and championing women's rights and activism, Nnewi Market Women have contributed significantly to African historiography. As argued by Johnson,³² these Women's struggles and activism have profoundly influenced African political history, fostering a greater understanding of the role of grassroots women's movements in bringing about social and political change.

The political activities of Nnewi Market Women have also challenged patriarchal norms within African societies. By actively engaging in political discussions, exerting influence, and occupying leadership positions, these women have disrupted traditional gender role divisions/ descriptions, reshaping historical narratives concerning women's agency in Africa. Onyekwere³³ affirmed this when he emphasised that the political struggles of Nnewi Market

Women have forced scholars to re-evaluate prevailing notions of African women as passive agents and recognise their active engagement in shaping political landscapes.

Without a doubt, the political struggles of Nnewi Market Women have significantly shaped African historiography, challenging traditional narratives and redefining the scholarly understanding of African political history. Through their political agency, these women have contributed to political movements, challenged patriarchal norms, and emphasised the crucial role of grassroots women's movements in effecting social change. Further research and scholarship on the political activities of Nnewi Market Women have enriched African historiography, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of women's contributions to African political and social history. Although these women's political activities have contributed positively to historiography, they are not without limitations. The diverse individual accounts of Nnewi market women in politics have greatly influenced the historical narrative by introducing biases and subjectivity. According to Leopold von Ranke, as historians, "we do not have to judge error and truth par excellence... It is our task to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to present them with complete objectivity".³⁴ To renowned scholars like Ranke, historiography aims to provide an unbiased and objective account of the past based on verifiable evidence and critical analysis. However, when the activities of a specific group are directly linked to broader social change, historians tend to face challenges in maintaining their impartiality. As a way of appeasing or supporting the diverse accounts of market women, some historians may be inclined to downplay or omit certain aspects of their actions, resulting in an incomplete or distorted historical account. More often than not, oral history, which relies on testimonies of these women to gather information about past events, is often subjective and prone to distortion. It was observed that some accounts of Nnewi market women's political activities were recounted differently by different individuals and, in some cases, were overemphasised. Without adequate source criticism and

analysis, this can lead to conflicting narratives, challenging the establishment of accurate historical facts. In other words, the personal biases of these market women/interviewees influence the interpretation and presentation of these oral accounts, compromising the objective nature of historiography.

Socio-Cultural activities:

Nnewi Market Women have also impacted African historiography by actively participating in social and cultural activities. By delving into their roles in community building and cultural preservation, the study sheds light on their underrepresented contribution to the construction and understanding of African history. Historical records attest that women have played significant roles in preserving African cultural heritage, especially in safeguarding and transmitting historical knowledge, challenging oppressive narratives, and reshaping historical narratives to include diverse perspectives. The domination of male voices in the study of African history has often resulted in an incomplete and biased understanding of the continent's rich cultural heritage. However, women have made invaluable contributions to African historiography through their dedication to preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

Stiftung³⁵ and Mutume³⁶ argued that African Women are often seen as guardians of Africa's cultural heritage. Historical accounts show that these women have traditionally been entrusted with the responsibility of preserving the cultural heritage of Africa. Thus, through oral traditions, storytelling, and the passing down of traditions from generation to generation, Nnewi market women have played a crucial role in safeguarding historical knowledge. Other writers like Mlama³⁷ collaborated with Stiftung and Mutume's stance, maintaining that women's oral narratives have served as essential repositories of historical memory, providing insights into African societies' social, political, and cultural aspects. That goes a long way in recognising the contributions of women in preserving cultural heritage. Women also reshaped African historiography by introducing new methodologies and perspectives. However, their accounts often

introduce biases influenced by preconceived notions or stereotypes, leading to subjective interpretations distorting historical records.

Militating Factors against Women's Roles in African Historiography

Although Nnewi market women have played tremendous roles and achieved much towards developing historiography, various challenges still attempt to eclipse these efforts. They include the poor educational background, lack of sources, Eurocentric views, dominance of male perspectives, and erasure of women's experiences in historical events, amongst others.

Poor educational background: Available data from oral accounts opined that most Nnewi market women have poor educational backgrounds, affecting their role in historiography immensely. The poor educational background of most Nnewi Market women has resulted in their exclusion from the dominant historical narratives.³⁸ Scholars and historians tend to focus on written records and official documents, primarily produced by men with access to formal education. Without the ability to read or write, Nnewi Market women could not document their experiences or contribute their voices to the historical discourse.³⁹ Consequently, their contributions to African history have been marginalised, overlooked, or forgotten.

Furthermore, the poor education of Nnewi Market women has perpetuated gender inequality within African historiography. Moreover, poor education has restricted the opportunities for Nnewi Market women to engage in historical research and scholarship. Without the necessary skills and knowledge, they cannot actively participate in the production of historical knowledge or challenge the prevailing narratives. As a result, their stories and perspectives remain marginalised, hindering the development of a holistic and inclusive African historiography. To address this challenge, these women need massive sensitisation and education to improve their literacy level, emphasising the need for them to document their experiences and struggles.

Lack of sources: Lack of sources from the female folk remains a significant challenge to the role of Nnewi market women in African historiography. Suffice it to state that many historical sources, such as official records, were produced mainly by men and have focused on the activities of men. As a result, sources that document women's experiences and perspectives are scarce. That has made it difficult for historical researchers to fully understand the role of Nnewi Market women in shaping African history.⁴⁰ In addition, many historical sources have been lost or destroyed over time, further exacerbating the problem of scarcity. To address this challenge, researchers must explore alternative sources from oral accounts, community organisations, women's associations, and local newspapers to capture these women's experiences and perspectives, which may have been excluded from dominant narratives.

Eurocentric views

Research has shown that Western perspectives have traditionally dominated historiography, which has often ignored or marginalised the experiences and perspectives of non-Western peoples. This has resulted in a distorted understanding of African history and Nnewi market women's history. That has further perpetuated stereotypes and myths about African societies. Scholars like M. K. Asante⁴¹ have challenged these biases by engaging critically with Eurocentric theories and frameworks. This has brought to light the Afrocentric approach to African historiography. By adopting an Afrocentric approach, historians centre African women's agency and emphasise their role in shaping African history. Decolonising historiography often requires a total reevaluation of the frameworks, theories, and methods used in African history writing. It also involves critically examining the biases and assumptions underlying historical knowledge production. By decolonising African historiography, it is possible to create more inclusive and diverse narratives that accurately reflect the continent's history and the role of gender within it.

The dominance of male perspectives:

This is another significant challenge for the role of Nnewi market women in African historiography. Historical research shows that men have been the primary actors in the public sphere and as such, their activities have been documented more extensively than women's. The result is a skewed representation of African history, where the experiences of women are underrepresented. It sheds light on the difficulties experienced in the comprehensive understanding of African history without considering the role of women in shaping it. Addressing this challenge requires an inclusive and multidimensional approach that actively seeks to incorporate diverse sources, which will recognise the agency/accounts of Nnewi market women in a bid to challenge dominant narratives and biases in African historiography. By doing so, historians can promote a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the roles and contributions of Nnewi Market women in African history.

Attempts at the erasure of women's experiences

Women's experiences in pre-colonial times have often been ignored according to available data; thus, as a result, they have largely been excluded from mainstream historical narratives. The implication of this is the silencing of women's voices, which has resulted in an incomplete understanding of African history. For example, the role of women in pre-colonial African societies has been largely overlooked despite solid evidence showing that women played significant roles in the economic, social and political spheres at the time. In Igboland, for instance, such pieces of evidence can be seen from the various names born by the people of the area – *Nneka* (Mother is supreme), *Nneamaka* (Mother is beautiful) and *Nnebuugwu* (Motherhood is honour) and several folklore songs, which depict the people's belief in the supremacy of motherhood⁴² and women by extension. That goes a long way to showcase the relevance of women in African historiography. It is important to note that beyond the vision of Nnewi market women to bring about development in Nnewi history, Taiwo Ojoye and Azuka Onwuka⁴³ posits that the most significant force that helped that vision to come to reality was the lack of fear for any

obstacle – including man and deity. Nnewi has a peculiar saying: "*Oo mmadusili Edo nyanwelu Nkwo*" (Human beings gave Edo the go-ahead to own the Nkwo market). Thus, their relentless courage and determination have contributed immensely to advancing the areas they find themselves in. To address the marginalisation challenge, historians need to actively seek out and incorporate oral histories, diaries, and testimonies of Nnewi Market women.⁴⁴ By giving voice to their experiences, historians can provide a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of their roles in historiography.

Conclusion

This paper argued that Nnewi market women have significantly shaped gender discourses in African historiography. Their socio-economic and political activities have challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to the emergence of a new discourse on gender relations. This contemporary discourse has highlighted the agency and contributions of these women to African history. It has attempted to re-evaluate the dominant patriarchal perspectives that have characterised African historiography, bringing diversity in perceptions to the discipline. Further research on the experiences and struggles of Nnewi market women and other African women can continue to enrich our understanding of gender efforts towards development in African history, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive insight into women's contributions to African economic, political, and social history.

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