

**IGBO FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS  
ORIGINATED FROM WESTERN FEMINISM:  
DEBUNKING THE FALSEHOOD**

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**Abstract**

*With the advent of the Feminist Movement in the contemporary West and its ripples across the world, it appears as if that marks the beginning of all women's enlightenment and struggles for equality with men. But this is not true, for prior to it or simultaneously, women in some other supposed male-dominated climes had already been involved in such struggles. Indeed, Igbo women's experience makes a viable case for this claim – as they have always had their indigenous feminist ways of persuading their menfolk for recognition, respect, and empowerment. This is why leadership of their communities used to feature gender-inclusive governance, especially prior to colonialism. It is also the reason for the women's resistance of the colonial system of governance, which sought to disempower, subjugate, and oppress them. This essay is motivated by a desire and need to disabuse the contemporary thought that, Western Feminist Movement stimulated the feminist tendencies to overwhelm the world and, particularly, Igbo society. It seeks to deploy expository method of literary discourses to render a thesis within the theoretical framework of Feminism, which avers that Igbo women have always considered themselves to be equal with their men even in matters of communal governance. And they play vital roles to that end. The essay concludes that, it is the feminist approach to life that provides the basis for women's continued empowerment in society as they are also considered by their men to be elemental in decision and policy-making processes.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women Struggles, Women Empowerment, Igbo women, Igbo society.

**Introduction**

In the contemporary world, most women seem to unite over one cause, namely, resistance to men's domination in society. This is evident in women's private and public lives. It can be seen in the home where wives now refuse to be left behind as children's primary care givers while their husbands go off to work since they nowadays agitate for their husbands to participate in domestic chores. One can find it in heterosexual social gatherings where women who hitherto never used to participate in discussions now participate. It also features in heterosexual groups, organisations or associations where women-members who used to be denied of leadership roles and benefits now clamour for and are awarded leadership positions, responsibilities and benefits. The resistance expresses both a presumption and actual confessions from women that they had endured for a long time various forms of social, economic and political inequality, suppression and subjugation by men, which they now decide to end or, at least, curb.

Intellectually, the women's decision to stem or curb the men's domination by agitating for equal rights of the sexes is called 'Feminism,' It holds the theoretical view that men and women ought to and should be treated equally socially, politically, and economically (Hooks, 2000). From the intellectual conceptualisation, it is clear that feminism is associated with socio-political and economic activism. That is why it is also conceived as a “political, cultural, or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women” (Gwanet, 2020). Hooks explains this more technically by averring that it is a movement that “aims at ending sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression”. With this, therefore, “Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests” (Gwanet, 2020:1).

According to Tomaselli (2018), feminist movement and tendencies in society are often historically traced to literary works and socio-political activities of Western crusaders, with its motherhood generally credited to the Briton, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). This is because Wollstonecraft's most important literature, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and her other works which, together, analyse the oppressed condition of women in modern society are believed to be the original recurrent theme that sparked feminist radicalism. But Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) disagrees with this. According to Gwanet (2020:1), de Beauvoir wrote that “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defence of her sex” was the Italian, Christine de Pizan (1364 to 1430), who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century. This means that de Beauvoir recognises de Pizan rather than Wollstonecraft as the mother of the feminist movement.

Yet, Rampton (2015), – a specialist in early medieval social history and women's activities and roles – also disagrees with de Beauvoir and traces the motherhood to individuals who lived and struggled for women's rights even earlier. According to her, the roots of feminism lies either in ancient Greece with Sappho (610-570 BCE), or the medieval world with Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). It was after the two activists that Rampton says Christine de Pizan emerged. Then, after the three, Rampton mentions Olympe de Gouge (1748-1793), as having emerged before Mary Wollstonecraft. And following Wollstonecraft, according to Rampton, was Jane Austen (1775-1817), who is rarely mentioned by history as being one of the foremothers of the women's movement.

Since the individuals credited with the motherhood by both de Beauvoir and Rampton are rarely accorded the honour by the general history of feminism, we celebrate Wollstonecraft as the mother which the history honours. But beyond Wollstonecraft and apart from Jane Austen, other Western European and North American feminist leaders abound. There were Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), and Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi (1555–1592), who worked in the 16th century (Gwanet, 2020). There were also Marie Le Jars de Gournay (1565-1645), Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), and Francois Poullain de la Barre (1618-1672), who wrote catalytic pieces during the 17th century (Gwanet, 2020). With a deviation from literature to speech-making, there was Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), whose 1851 extemporaneous speech on racial inequalities, which was titled “Ain't I a Woman?” addressed American feminists at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention and a feminist movement in North America. There were also activists like Betty Freidan (1921-2006), and Simone de Beauvoir who contributed immensely to the gender-equality consciousness now inundating the world.

However, all these do not disclose in any way that African nations and, particularly, Igbo people, had any trace of feminist tendencies or practised and experienced such socio-political activism early enough in history. Indeed, the sort of history that informs the above celebration of the West also records, according to Rampton (2015), that the first feminist gathering in the world, which was solely devoted to agitating for women's rights, was held in the Seneca Falls, New York, the United States of America in 1848. And the organisers of the gathering were Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), (a New Yorker and mother of four children) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), (the Quaker abolitionist). Such history also avers that it was only since the Truth's 1851 speech that women of other races began to propose alternative feminisms (Gwanet, 2020). Then the feminist trend is recorded by Gwanet (2020), to have accelerated in the 1960s due to the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America, and Southeast Asia. It was, therefore, since that time that women in former European colonies and the Third World, started to propose for "Post-colonial" and "Third World" feminisms (Gwanet, 2020). This means that, according to this kind of history, feminist consciousness and socio-political activism began in Igbo nation only in the 1960s – after Nigeria's Independence. Yet, alternative historical evidence shows that such a claim is false, for feminist consciousness had been part of Igbo women's culture long before the time. This essay is motivated by our knowledge of this falsehood and intention to decry it and expose the truth.

Before the exposition, though, we find it expedient to delineate Western features of women's struggles that constitute or characterise feminist activism. This is discussed, albeit briefly, with reference to the three 'waves' that Western feminist history is classified, and the understanding is applied to rationalise our claim of Igbo women having engaged in the struggle prior to Nigeria's Independence. Also, as a way of charting the theoretical framework of this essay, we distinguish various kinds of feminism to aptly contextualise our position. This is because feminism has classes or character-distinctions that make this essay unconcerned with all of them, even though their general thrust is plausibly covered by its view.

#### **A Brief History of Western Feminist 'Waves'**

Scholarly periodisation of feminist activism in history divides the movement into three main phases and aims, with each technically referred to as a 'wave.' Each 'wave' is distinguished from others by the quality of inequalities wrestled and the historical time frame that the struggle took place. Thus, according to Drucker (2018), and other historians of Western feminism, the first wave took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and promoted equal contract and property rights for women while, opposing possessive ownership of married women by their husbands. By the late 19th century, feminist activism added to that struggle another concern of denial. This was enfranchisement, for they had been disenfranchised before then. Hence, women sought to be awarded the right to vote in general elections as they are also human beings, with intelligence and dignity. In United States of America, therefore, first-wave feminism ended with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1919 which grants women voting rights.

The second wave started in the 1960s and was concerned with ideas and actions associated with campaigns for the legal and social rights of women (Gwanet, 2020). It went by the slogan "The Personal is Political," identified women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand how their personal lives reflected sexist power structures (Drucker, 2018). Betty Friedan was a key player in second-wave

feminism, for in her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she criticised the idea that women could find fulfilment only through childrearing and homemaking (Drucker, 2018). Furthermore, Drucker (2018:1) avers that Friedan's *New York Times* obituary "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result, permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world" and "is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century." Indeed, Friedan hypothesises that women are victims of false beliefs requiring them to find identity in their lives through husbands and children (Drucker, 2018). "This causes women to lose their own identities in that of their family" (Drucker, 2018:1).

The third wave began in the 1990s and is concerned with a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of second wave (Gwanet, 2020). It began in the early 1990s and sought to challenge the definitions of femininity that grew out of the ideas of the second wave, arguing that the second wave over-emphasized experiences of upper-middle-class white women (Drucker, 2018). "The third-wave sees women's lives as intersectional, demonstrating how race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality are all significant factors when discussing feminism. It examines issues related to women's lives on an international basis" (Drucker, 2018:1).

#### **Theoretical Framework: Towards Igbo-kind of Feminism**

In struggling against men's oppression, domination, suppression, discrimination, and subjugation in virtually all facets of life, women and their apologists have had to approach the situations differently. This underpins the reason for availability of various kinds of Feminism, with varying objectives, nuances and perspectives. In that regard, Castle (2004), avers that there are cultural feminism, eco-feminism, libertarian feminism, material feminism, moderate feminism, gender feminism, separatist feminism, amazon feminism, and radical feminism.

*Cultural feminism* is the theory that seeks to overcome sexism by celebrating women's special qualities, women's ways, and women's experiences, often believing that the "woman's way" is the better way. *Eco-feminism* (Castle, 2004: 2), on the other hand, "Is the theory which emphasises the basic principle that patriarchal philosophies are harmful to women, children, and other living things." This is because the theory believes that patriarchy emphasises the need to dominate and control women. *Libertarian Feminism*, which is based on individualism, minimum government or anarcho-capitalist philosophies, focuses on individual autonomy, rights, liberty, independence and diversity. Individualist Feminism also encompasses men and focuses on barriers that both men and women face due to their gender. *Material Feminism* is a movement that focuses on liberating women by improving their material condition. The movement revolves around taking the "burden" off women regarding housework, cooking, and other traditional female domestic jobs.

*Moderate Feminism*, "is populated mostly by younger women or women who perceive that they have not directly experienced discrimination. They often believe that the ideals of the feminist movement are no longer viable, and therefore question the need for further efforts" (Castle, 2004: 2). Moderate feminists, therefore, view feminism as overbearing and too overt and, although they participate in espousing feminist ideas, they do not accept or want to be labelled as 'feminists'. *Gender Feminism*, which is otherwise known as the *National*

*Organisation for Women (N.O.W.) Feminism*, is the theory that states that equality of men and women rests on women being granted some special privileges while men cease to be the central issue or 'barrier' in feminism. Castle (2004: pp. 2-3), says that "N.O.W feminism encompasses only women and fights to offer special privileges to women with the intent of making women equal to men." There is yet *Separatist feminism* which is often depicted as a group of lesbians. These are feminists who advocate separation from men; sometimes total, sometimes partial. The core idea underpinning this movement is that "separating" from men (by various means), is perceived as that which enables women to see themselves in a different context. Many feminists, whether they separatists or not, think that this is a necessary "first step" of personal growth. However, they do not necessarily endorse permanent separation.

*Amazon feminism* focuses on physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to be, look, or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. This movement rejects the idea that certain human characteristics or interests are inherently masculine (or feminine) and upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood. "Amazon feminists tend to view that all women are as physically capable as all men" (Castle 2004:3). *Radical feminism* is the breeding ground for many of the popularly feminist ideas. Even though currently its ideas are no longer as universally accepted as they used to be and, it no longer serves to solely define the term "feminism." It used to be the cutting-edge feminist theory between 1967 and 1975. This is because the movement views the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression – one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class. Hence, its main intent is on social change (change of rather revolutionary proportions). Radical feminism questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on gender. It attempts to draw lines between biologically determined behaviour and culturally determined behavior in order to free both men and women as much as possible from their previous narrow gender roles.

From Castle's insight, we submit that it is the joint views of radical, amazon and eco-feminisms that this essay is particularly concerned with. That is because the views represent the sort of crusade against men's oppression of women that the essay seeks to expose its primordial existence among Igbo women right from recorded history. Despite that, the essay specifically views Igbo kind of feminism as 'Womanism.' This is because womanism, though is a feminist ideology, it is slightly different from the mainstream feminist theories described above – especially in objective and approach to activism – for while it (womanism) is not only concerned with oppressions from sexism but also racism and classism. Feminism is only concerned with oppression from sexism (Odoemene, 2008). Since oppression based on sexism predominates the West, Western feminist crusaders thought and still think that it is the only oppression for women to struggle against.

But in Africa and, particularly, Igbo society, the struggle is slightly different. Black women experience a different and more intense kind of oppression expressed as racism and classism (Odoemene, 2008). Since most of them are married from another clime, they are usually regarded as strangers by both their immediate in-laws and in-law community. That is racism. Also, since Igbo men seem to arrogate to themselves a class in society which women are culturally and ritually subordinated, not because they (women) are not as rational as men



(like mainstream feminism would wish to rationalise), but because women are just not men, the men practise classism. Hence, women are denied certain rights due to both their strangeness in marriage and non-belongingness to men's class. Womanism, therefore, “brings a racialised and often class-located experience to the gender experience suggested by Western feminism which includes an active opposition of separatist ideologies in gender relations” (Odoemene, 2008:5). Furthermore, it

...seeks to improve the relationship between the sexes by constantly putting the menfolk in perspective in the scheme of things. In other words, it includes the word 'man', recognizing that black men are an integral part of black women's lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Gender complementarity, instead of distancing and altercation, has been one of the strongest and central foci of Womanism theory. Womanist refrains from bitterness in her confrontation and relationship with men. In this arrangement, Womanism seeks to identify with the African man who is considered a partner in progress and in the struggle for social and political freedom and development. It accommodates and seeks male support rather than negate men, since they are central to women's lives, not just merely as husbands (Odoemene. 2008:5).

Chidam'odzi adds, “womanism prizes and praises the positive aspects of what was seen as the 'female character' or 'feminism personality' – womanhood, wifeness or motherhood: the promotion and preservation of the pride of being a female human being” (1995:46). Thus, it seeks to revalidate undervalued female attributes.

As a term, Womanism was adapted from the notable work of the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Alice Walker, whose *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, used the word to describe the perspectives and experiences of “women of colour”. Beyond Walker, one of the scholars who most clearly articulated Womanist consciousness was Maggie Lena Walker (1867-1934).

#### **Igbo Women's Womanist Activism and its Empowering Effect in History**

While keeping in mind the general meaning of feminism, its entailments of Western waves, the kinds of Western feminist activism that identify with Igbo women's kind of struggles as well as their Womanist denotation, we move to expose how feminist consciousness had been part of Igbo women's socio-political culture before Nigeria's Independence and how that formed the basis for the women's empowerment, even in the colonial society. To achieve that purpose, we establish for a fact that the historical Igbo culture recounted in this essay is principally that of the pre-colonial times (i.e. between the years 1800 and 1900) and colonial times (i.e. between the years 1900 and 1960).

Following this, we observe that in the pre-colonial Igbo society, men and women shared socio-political authority and power (although in differing degrees) (Chuku, 2009). Indeed, at the time, Igbo socio-political society was as matriarchal as it was patriarchal. Leadership positions existed in each community, managing different groups of people which oversaw vital purposes that contributed to general advancement, security, peace and unity of the community (van Allen, 1972). Apart from men's groups, there were women's groups

(market women group, titled women association, spiritual women group, farmers, dancers, etc.) which, held meetings and dialogues among women, just as men's groups did. Their meetings were focused on the establishment and operation of just institutions, protection of the dignity of women and men, welfare of their members and the good of everyone. Women's groups had as one of their constituents, the *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* (as it was called in some places) which, comprised daughters of lineages. There was a general leader of women who, of course, was a woman and managing women affairs. There was also a leader of youths, who could be either a male or a female and managing youth affairs; a leader of farmers who could be either a male or a female; council chiefs comprising both genders who served as advisers to the village head, etc.

Title system played a very crucial role in the pre-colonial Igbo political system. It signified wealth and power and was open to both men and women. Among Western Igbo, for instance, when a woman distinguished herself in conduct, and ability, measured in wealth, she was conferred with the title of *Omu* which offered a monarchical authority of leading women (Chuku, 2005).

Just as men, status was achieved and not ascribed to Igbo women. Van Allen (1972), avers that a woman's status was determined more by her achievements than by her husband's achievements. Women who symbolised Nnobi concept of womanhood, which is derived from the worship of goddesses were, for instance, given the title of *Agba Ekwe* (Amadiume, 1987). These women, seen as earthly representatives of the goddess Idemili, controlled the Women's Council (Amadiume, 2002). Acting as something like a queen, the women had the most central political relevance in all Nnobi and held the vetoing right in the village and general town assembly (Amadiume, 1987). This title was one of the most prestigious ones a woman could earn and gave *Agba Ekwe* women significant power, especially in the Women's Council.

Yet, the main political body was the village assembly where any adult, including titled individuals, who had anything to say on a matter under discussion was given the chance to speak, insofar as others considered the speech worth listening to (Van Allen, 1972). Women used to speak, especially on matters that directly concerned them (van Allen, 1972). And their views were always considered critical and relevant because they offered special insights arising from their spiritual, market, trade and maternal roles (Nzegwu, 1995). For Igbo women, social justices raised powerful images of creating equal opportunities, rectifying the wrong and restitution.

All of these indicate that political power in Igbo society was diffused (van Allen, 1972). Both men and women, elders and youths (insofar as they were adults), participated in various leadership positions to manage the affairs of their communities. In some parts of the society, women were in control of inheritance rights of landed and other immovable property. Women, particularly, wielded a lot of political powers and influences (Chuku, 2005). And the base of that power lay in their gatherings (van Allen, 1972).

In spite of this, women's exercise of power and influence was never meant for competing with men, for rather than compete with men, women's organisations or gatherings acted as parallel authority structures that function within the arenas that were perceived as a female province (Chuku, 2005). To buttress this point, Uchem (2001:2), avers, "Women were not marginalized in traditional Igbo society... because of their relatively high socio-economic status." Although they were culturally and ritually subordinated, they were neither powerless

nor marginalised. Men's acceptance of their judgement and rules offered powerful checks and balances to the society (Nzegwu, 1995). Any discrimination, especially against a woman by a man or even a fellow woman, was frowned at where it was pronounced. Women used to exhibit high degrees of interest in such matters, whether they were invited into them (the matters) or not.

One way in which Igbo women wielded power recognisable by their men was, through the display of collective anger. Amadiume (1987), avers that women's collective anger used to be feared and avoided by men. This is because, although women had their interpersonal and intra-organisational problems, they were united against discriminations from the menfolk and men knew that confronting one Igbo woman meant confronting their organisations. Hence, they were anxious to avoid that. This does not mean that the men were timid and passive. It is just that Igbo traditions valued female assertiveness, collectivity and independence. Igbo men were accustomed to their women being in positions of power and influence and had developed respect for their administrative skills.

Another way was through the idea of "sitting on" a man. According to Nzegwu (1995), in pre-colonial Igbo society, any trouble-making man who discriminated against or devalued a woman, risked being "sat on" or shunned by women. Van Allen (1972), explains that a man could be "sat on" for mistreating his wife, violating women's market rules or letting his cows eat women's crops. The "sitting on" took various forms. Sometimes, women could besiege a man in his house and sing vulgar and obscene songs that taunted his manliness. At other times, they could physically assault the man by collectively beating him in public and making his main female victim (who is one of them), to literally sit on him – as a way of disgracing him and showing him weak before the woman that he once mistreated and thought to be weak. Still, they could destroy a man's prized possessions or chant war songs, dance around him with the intention of making his life miserable until he met the women's demand. When these happened, other men hardly attempted to rescue the man involved because they feared they could extend the calamity to themselves too. They considered that such a man brought the wrath on himself as he ought to have known the women's traditional rules better as a member of the community and, thus, avoided it (Nzegwu, 1995). Being part of a society where women's power and significance were a fact of life, Igbo men accepted women's judgement and abided by their rules without shame (Nzegwu, 1995).

These then were some of the feminist/womanist strategies indigenously generated by the women before their contact with the West and, applied for fights against any form of mistreatment deemed as discrimination from men. And the strategies worked for them as they (the strategies) made them (the women) feel assured of their views being heard and adequately factored into policy decisions (Nzegwu, 1995). Hence, pre-colonial Igbo society was structured and based on gender equality and social non-discrimination (unlike any society that the Europeans had ever seen).

It was colonialism that brought about serious alterations in Igbo indigenous political system, a lot of which negatively impacted on women. It eroded or, at best, drastically minimised the power, status and authority that they enjoyed in pre-colonial times. It diminished their dominant roles in village politics, village religious life and notions of lineage.

The Europeans arrived in Igbo territory to find a political system that was at variance with the system that they were familiar with in their countries. Coming from a rigidly



patrilineal socio-political system (Kies, 2013), they found in Igbo society a matrilineal system that was difficult to understand and administer for the optimum realisation of their colonisation purposes. The idea that a female could hold and wield political authority and power, equal to or surpassing that of male officials (as obtained in Igboland), was strange, nauseating and unacceptable to the colonialists (Farrar, 1997). Matrilineal society, to Europeans, manifests chaos and disorder (Matera, 2011). It is a culture that creates a world that is completely upside down, where women were ruthless petty dictators (Farrar, 1997). Hence, to set to their tasks successfully, they had to proscribe such culture and change it to the patrilineal society that they understood.

To achieve that, the British imposed on the people their Western concept of state, education, family and gender roles (Chuku, 2009). They started a socio-economic order that favoured men. This was because, for them, masculine leadership establishes moral order in the world (Matera, 2011). Hence, in Igbo world of the time:

Men and boys were trained in skills needed to manage newly introduced technologies and also were employed in the Native Courts, the transport industry, in the mines, the Christian missions and expatriate trading centres. Women's access to Western education – the gateway to modern employment – was limited ... (to) domestic science training for girls (while) leadership and technical instructions (was) for boys. Access to the newly introduced British money also favoured men more than women through the male-dominated cash crop economy and the colonial gendered employment policy that discriminated against women. Colonial economic policy favoured men in access to land, extension services, high-yielding palm seedlings, fertilisers, demonstration farms, oil presses, kernel crackers, pioneer oil mills, cassava graters, loans, and other innovations and new technologies that put men in a position to dominate the export and local economies of the region (Chuku, 2009:89).

This completely scuttled the existing political culture of diffused authority, fluid and informal leadership, gender-shared rights of enforcement, and a fairly stable balance of male and female powers in Igboland. Women were pushed to the informal and petty sector of the colonial economy (Chuku, 2005). With Southern Nigeria declared a protectorate in 1900 and the British gaining firm control of the territory, Igbo society was divided into Native Court Areas through Native Courts Proclamation No. 9. This did not only completely violate the autonomous political way of governance once enjoyed in each village by fusing many independent villages into one and different Court Areas, it also turned out to be unfair to the women and their participation in politics as only men were recruited for the role of “native administrators” or Warrant Chiefs (WCs) (Agu, 1989; Kies, 2013). Also, all consultation of women prior to political decisions was abolished through the Native Ordinances Act of 1901 and, the function (i.e. consultations and decisions) vested only on the Native Courts (Chuku, 2009).

Women were oppressed in the arbitrary rule of the WCs as they (the WCs) wilfully disrespected customs and traditions that protected the women. The WCs, for instance, forcefully took women for marriage without following due customary processes. They paid no

attention to existing women's right to reject a suitor. They wilfully harvested women's farm products and carted away their domestic animals (Onwuteaka, 1965). In fact, Uchem (2001:31), summarises that all the traditional structures which formerly protected women were undermined by colonialism and Western Christianity such that they (the women) no longer had a collective political bargaining power for defending themselves.

Hence, right from the 1920s, having endured several years of socio-political relegation, oppression, suppression and subjugation arising from the British sexist political system and with low prices of agricultural produce arising from the global economic depression of the time, Igbo women could not bear an additional threat of direct tax imposition on them, particularly, in 1929. Accordingly, on November 23, 1929, they staged a massive protest that lasted for a month to collectively resist the tax regime, oppressions of the WC-Indirect Rule system and low prices of agricultural produces. It should be noted that prior to the 1929 riot, there were some other protests that women staged against the British system of rule. These included, for instance, "the 1916 demonstrations over colonial control of market places, the 1925 Nwaobiala Movement for societal order and preservation of Igbo heritage, and the 1929 Water Rate Demonstrations" (Chuku, 2009, p. 89). And "sitting on" a man, along with boycotts and strikes, used to be the women's main weapons and effective tools for restoring normalcy (van Allen, 1972).

Even though the colonial authorities usually responded harshly to the uprisings, the women never gave up (Chuku, 2009). Consequently, the British were eventually forced to start factoring in women's interests and representation in governance. The local administrative system had to be reorganized to appoint women among them (Chuku, 2009). Women could also participate in selecting new chiefs that would head the local administration (Chuku, 2009). The first known Igbo woman to be appointed in the local administration, for instance, was Madam Okwei (1872-1943), who was made to be a member of the Onitsha Native Court in 1912 (Chuku, 2009). Others were appointed in different Court Areas. And the trend of empowering the women and recognising them politically due to their womanist struggles continued until Nigeria's Independence in 1960. Even the Independence would not have been as successful as it was without women's active individual and collective participation in the decolonisation years (i.e. between 1940s and 1950s).

### **Conclusion**

This essay was motivated by a desire and need to disabuse the thought that feminist consciousness and women's socio-political activism began in Igbo nation only from the 1960s – after Nigeria's Independence – and, thus, that Western feminist movement which is bandied to have commenced before that time contributed in stimulating the Igbo women's enlightenment and struggle for equality with their men. It deployed the expository method of literary discourses to disclose that such thinking is false, for historical evidence shows that Igbo women had been involved in similar struggles either before Western feminist consciousness or simultaneous to it. Womanism had been part of Igbo women's culture long before Nigeria's Independence. Igbo women had always been equals with their men even in matters of communal governance until colonialism came to marginalise them. The marginalisation was also strongly resisted by the women until they were politically recognised, included and re-empowered by the colonialists.

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