

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF IGBOLAND, 1960 – 2023

**Agomuo Kevin Obinna, Ph.D**  
Department of History and International Relations,  
Abia State university, Uturu.  
clarity\_llb@yahoo.com  
08066703497

&

**Onyendi, Goodness Chinaza Nelvin**  
Department of History and International Relations,  
Abia State University, Uturu.

Email: [onyendi.chinaza@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng](mailto:onyendi.chinaza@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng); [nelvinchinaza@gmail.com](mailto:nelvinchinaza@gmail.com); Phone:  
09024073964/08060979262

### Abstract

This study examines the role of Igbo women in socio-economic development since 1960, focusing on their participation in agriculture, trading, professional sectors, and leadership. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, including content analysis of documentary sources, this research traces the historical shifts in women's roles and analyzes the impact of government programs on economic empowerment. Findings reveal that Igbo women, traditionally seen as caregivers, have increasingly transitioned into diverse economic activities and leadership positions, contributing significantly to the region's development. The study underscores the need for policies that enhance women's economic inclusion and equal opportunities.

**Keywords:** Igbo women, socio-economic development, entrepreneurship, gender inequality, women's empowerment

### Introduction

In many developing nations, including Nigeria, traditional gender roles have historically confined women to roles such as childcare, homemaking, and supporting their husbands in agriculture and skilled crafts. This expectation has limited women's economic independence and led to a perception that their value lies in domestic capabilities alone.<sup>1</sup> Although societal progress has gradually allowed women to engage more in socio-economic activities, the underlying belief in women's subordination to men persists in many Nigerian communities. Often, men view their wives as possessions primarily responsible for domestic happiness, which restricts women's opportunities and reinforces discrimination against them. Even as women demonstrate substantial potential and contribute across various sectors, their achievements are often marginalized or seen as secondary to those of men.

Today, Nigerian women are actively contributing to the economy through farming, trading, and skilled crafts, while also entering professions across diverse fields. Programs and policies have emerged to support these efforts, such as the Family Support Programme (FSP) and Better Life for Rural Women, which aim to empower women, particularly in rural areas. Despite these advances, women continue to face significant barriers in gaining equal opportunities to participate fully in economic and social development, often being excluded from decision-making roles and resource allocation. This situation persists even as national and global recognition of women's roles in economic development grows slowly within Nigeria. In rural communities, where women perform nearly 40% of agricultural activities and play a crucial role in food production, their contributions remain under-acknowledged, thereby limiting their full impact on Nigeria's socio-economic growth.<sup>2</sup>

### Definition of concept

Socioeconomic development refers as a multifaceted process involving major changes in social structures, attitudes, and national institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth, reduction of inequality, and eradication of poverty.<sup>3</sup> According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):

It is a process aimed at improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people, especially in underdeveloped or developing regions. It involves increased access to resources, education, health services, and an overall enhancement in human capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

It aims to expand people's choices and improve their well-being, especially for impoverished and marginalized communities.

Another term that needs to be defined is 'development', a term which has been defined variously by different people and has been a subject of many theories. In this paper, we shall see 'development' from the point of view of Dudley Seers, as when a country experiences a reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment. According to Dudley Seers, the questions to ask about a country's development are therefore: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result 'development' even if per capita income doubled.<sup>5</sup>

### **Traditional roles and economic contributions of Women in Igboland pre-1960**

Traditionally, Igbo society operated on a gendered division of labor that positioned women primarily in the domestic sphere. Here, they were expected to be caregivers, homemakers, and active supporters of their husbands in agricultural work, which was the backbone of the rural economy. As homemakers, Igbo women were responsible for child-rearing, preparing food, and maintaining the household. These tasks not only supported the family but also upheld the broader communal structure by sustaining family units.<sup>6</sup> Though their work was often categorized as "supportive" in traditional views, it was indispensable to the family and society.

In agriculture, Igbo women played a significant role in subsistence farming, cultivating essential crops such as cassava, coco-yam, maize, and vegetables. Women were often assigned the task of cultivating specific plots of land (*ugbo*), from which they produced food for the household. This work extended beyond cultivation, as women were responsible for processing and preserving harvested crops, ensuring that there was food available throughout the year. Women also specialized in cultivating crops like vegetables and legumes, which could be sold in local markets for additional household income. This type of agricultural contribution went beyond sustenance; it provided economic stability, demonstrating the ways in which women directly contributed to the economic resilience of Igbo families and communities.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond agriculture, Igbo women were active participants in trade and local markets, which were critical hubs of economic and social interaction. Markets were managed by women's associations, and women often acted as both sellers and consumers of goods, ranging from agricultural produce to crafts. Igbo women's entrepreneurial roles in the market extended the family economy by providing an avenue for surplus crops to be sold and for other goods to be acquired. These markets were more than economic centers; they were places where women could exercise social influence and forge alliances that furthered their households' and communities' prosperity. Through such involvement, women helped shape the economic landscape, often using the proceeds from their sales to contribute to family needs, fund social obligations, or invest in the well-being of their children.<sup>8</sup>

Community roles also underscored Igbo women's significance, as they formed associations and cooperatives to support mutual needs and mediate social welfare. For instance, women's groups provided communal labour to assist one another during planting and harvesting seasons, which was essential for managing the labour-intensive nature of traditional farming. Additionally, Igbo women were key players in communal ceremonies and rituals, where they often pooled resources and coordinated community welfare

activities. Such associations helped redistribute resources and fostered social cohesion, making women's contributions central to both economic support and social stability in Igbo communities.<sup>9</sup>

### **Transition and shifts in Women's roles from the 1960s onwards**

From the 1960s onwards, women's roles in Igbo communities began to shift significantly, with an increasing presence in economic activities outside the traditional confines of domestic and agricultural labor. This change was largely influenced by education, migration, and evolving social norms, which opened new avenues for women to participate in socio-economic development. The Nigerian government's post-independence emphasis on modernization and economic growth encouraged more Igbo women to enter formal education and workforce sectors previously dominated by men. This transition gradually redefined their roles, allowing women to contribute directly to the economy and advocate for greater social and economic rights.<sup>10</sup>

One of the primary catalysts for this shift was education. As formal schooling became more accessible to women, particularly after Nigeria's independence, it facilitated their entry into professional fields such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work. This educational progress empowered Igbo women to pursue careers that provided financial independence and altered societal perceptions about gender roles. For instance, many Igbo women entered the teaching profession, where they could influence younger generations and promote gender equality through education. By gaining education, women began to challenge the traditional structures that confined them to domestic roles and could aspire to greater economic and social autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

Migration patterns also played a crucial role in this transition. As rural-to-urban migration increased from the 1960s onward, many Igbo women moved to cities in search of better economic opportunities. Urbanization exposed them to diverse economic roles, from small-scale business ownership to positions in formal industries. For example, Igbo women became prominent in trading sectors, especially in regional markets where they capitalized on their traditional trading expertise. This shift allowed women to earn income independently, contributing not only to their families but also to the urban economies where they settled. Consequently, migration contributed to the gradual expansion of women's economic roles, both within their communities and in urban Nigerian settings.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the influence of foreign aid programs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) beginning in the 1980s also expanded the scope of women's economic roles. These programs aimed to improve the socio-economic status of women by providing microloans and training for small business development, particularly targeting women in rural communities. For instance, initiatives such as the Better Life for Rural Women program, introduced in the late 1980s, provided Igbo women with resources and support to engage in income-generating activities, from small-scale agriculture to craft production. This external support was instrumental in enhancing women's contributions to local economies and improving their economic agency within traditionally patriarchal structures.<sup>13</sup>

Another notable change in the post-1960s era was the increased presence of Igbo women in politics and activism. Educated and economically independent women began advocating for gender equality and challenging discriminatory practices. Women's movements gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the establishment of organizations that worked for women's political and economic rights. Igbo women who had migrated or accessed higher education were instrumental in pushing for policies that promoted women's participation in public life. Although gender-based challenges remained, these efforts gradually transformed social attitudes and expanded women's involvement in leadership and policy-making roles.<sup>14</sup>

### **Government Programs and Policies Supporting Women's Economic Roles**

The Nigerian government has launched several programs and policies aimed at empowering women economically, particularly in rural areas. Notable among these initiatives were the Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) program and the Family Support Programme (FSP), both of which were established to

address the socio-economic disparities faced by rural women. These programs were designed to enhance women's economic participation by providing resources, skills training, and support systems, empowering women to contribute to Nigeria's economic growth. Through these initiatives, women gained access to microcredit facilities, vocational skills training, and avenues for agricultural improvement, which collectively enhanced their economic independence and contributions within their communities.<sup>15</sup>

The Better Life for Rural Women program, launched in 1987 by former First Lady Maryam Babangida, aimed to improve the quality of life for women in rural areas by promoting self-sufficiency and income-generating activities. The program focused on vocational training in skills such as weaving, soap-making, and food processing, enabling women to start small businesses and earn income independently. Additionally, it facilitated access to microcredit and cooperative societies, allowing women to secure funding for their enterprises. Through this program, women who were previously restricted to subsistence agriculture could engage in small-scale industries, thereby diversifying their income sources and contributing more significantly to household and community economies.<sup>16</sup>

Following the success of BLRW, the Family Support Programme (FSP) was introduced in the early 1990s under the administration of First Lady Maryam Abacha. The FSP broadened the focus on women's economic empowerment to include health, education, and social welfare. Through FSP, rural women received support in agricultural ventures, access to medical care, and educational opportunities for their children. The program encouraged women's cooperative farming, which helped increase agricultural productivity and improve food security in rural communities. Moreover, FSP facilitated women's access to modern farming tools, fertilizers, and training in agricultural best practices, which further enhanced their contributions to rural economies and underscored the value of women's labor in agricultural sectors.<sup>17</sup>

These programs, although primarily focused on rural communities, also had a broader impact on the national economy by empowering women to actively participate in the informal sector. Women who engaged in these initiatives became integral to local markets and contributed to food production, processing, and sales, thereby strengthening Nigeria's informal economy. The increased income from these activities allowed women to reinvest in their families and communities, often funding their children's education and improving household welfare. By addressing the financial and social constraints faced by rural women, these government programs not only improved their economic standing but also contributed to poverty reduction at the grassroots level, enhancing national economic resilience.<sup>18</sup>

While these initiatives had considerable success in promoting women's economic empowerment, challenges persisted. Many rural women faced barriers in accessing credit, due to collateral requirements and complex bureaucratic processes. Additionally, social norms and cultural expectations often restricted women from fully utilizing these opportunities, as some communities continued to prioritize traditional roles for women. Despite these obstacles, the initiatives like BLRW and FSP represented significant progress in the Nigerian government's approach to gender equality and economic development. By providing rural women with resources, training, and access to markets, these programs helped shift societal attitudes about women's roles, showing that women's economic contributions were essential to both local and national development.<sup>19</sup>

### **Contemporary Contributions of Igbo Women to Socio-Economic Development**

Contemporary Igbo women contribute significantly to socio-economic development in Nigeria, playing dynamic roles across agriculture, trading, and professional sectors. In agriculture, many Igbo women actively engage in crop cultivation and food production, particularly in rural areas. They are essential in farming staple crops like cassava, maize, yam, and vegetables, which not only support household food security but also serve as a source of income. With modern agricultural practices increasingly accessible, Igbo women have adapted by forming cooperative societies to pool resources and collectively address

challenges in agricultural production. Through these cooperatives, they access credit facilities, improved seeds, and farming equipment, which enhance productivity and contribute to the broader economy.<sup>20</sup>

In trading, Igbo women have historically been known for their entrepreneurial spirit, and this remains a stronghold today. Women dominate the trading landscape, especially in foodstuffs, textiles, and household goods, operating in vibrant markets such as the Onitsha and Aba markets. These markets are not only local economic hubs but also support regional trade across West Africa. Women traders often engage in informal cross-border trade, generating revenue that supports their families and contributes to local economies. This trading activity also provides jobs for others within the community, as women frequently employ assistants or partner with other vendors, expanding the socio-economic impact of their enterprises.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to agriculture and trade, Igbo women have made remarkable strides in professional sectors, occupying roles in education, healthcare, and the civil service. Increased access to education has empowered many women to pursue professional careers, allowing them to contribute directly to societal development. For instance, female educators in Igbo communities play crucial roles in shaping future generations, while women in healthcare deliver essential services in hospitals and clinics. Their participation in these sectors is instrumental in improving literacy rates and healthcare access, contributing to the socio-economic development of the region. This shift toward professional engagement represents a transformative change, as women are increasingly seen as leaders and decision-makers in their communities.<sup>22</sup>

The emergence of women's associations and leadership roles further illustrates the growing influence of Igbo women on socio-economic development. Organizations like the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) and the Market Women's Association have provided platforms for advocacy, economic collaboration, and social welfare initiatives. These associations help mobilize resources for community projects, support women-owned businesses, and advocate for policy changes that benefit women's economic rights. Furthermore, the presence of Igbo women in local government, legislative positions, and leadership roles within these associations amplifies their voice in shaping economic policies and development programs at both local and national levels.<sup>23</sup>

These contemporary roles illustrate a profound shift in the perception of Igbo women from mere domestic caregivers to active agents of economic development. Although traditional expectations still influence gender dynamics, the achievements of Igbo women in agriculture, trade, professional fields, and leadership roles signify their essential contributions to Nigeria's socio-economic landscape. As more opportunities and support for women's economic empowerment emerge, the socio-economic contributions of Igbo women will likely continue to grow, reinforcing their position as vital drivers of development within their communities and beyond.<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the evolving role of Igbo women in socio-economic development from 1960 to 2023. The findings underscore that while traditional roles primarily limited Igbo women to domestic responsibilities, their economic contributions were significant even in pre-colonial times, particularly in agriculture and local trading. With socio-cultural shifts and increased access to education from the 1960s onward, women in Igboland began to transition into more diverse economic roles, marking their presence in formal employment, professional fields, and leadership positions.

The research further highlights the influence of government programs and policies, such as the Better Life for Rural Women and Family Support Programme, which provided resources and empowerment initiatives for rural women. These programs, along with the efforts of women's associations, facilitated women's participation in economic activities, creating pathways for greater economic inclusion and leadership. Despite enduring socio-cultural limitations, contemporary Igbo women have emerged as significant

contributors to Nigeria's socio-economic development, driving growth through agriculture, trade, education, healthcare, and organized advocacy. The study concludes that fostering these contributions requires continued support for women's empowerment and equal access to resources and decision-making platforms.

### Endnotes

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