

# Futures of Nigerian Women

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*This paper examines the changing social conditions of Nigerian women as Nigeria has industrialized. The customs and traditional laws affecting the status of women are discussed along with the changes that have taken place as result of contact with the West. Traditionally Nigerian women enjoyed active participation and leadership in the economic system. As Nigeria has industrialized, the conditions of Nigerian women in the economic system have come to resemble the conditions of women in Western societies. Nevertheless, pre-industrial traditions are a strong historical influence and may partially determine the course of the future for women.*

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### *Introduction*

The changing role and status of women has been a seemingly constant feature in contemporary Western life for several decades. Current news stories often touch on the subject of women and equality. Some argue that women have made great strides and that the vestiges of inequality have disappeared; others point to evidence of inequality in the home, the workplace, the church, and the government. Most discussions examine the past, the present, or the future of women in the context of Western development. And those analyses venturing into an examination of the status of women from a cross-cultural perspective are most likely to allude to the extremely harsh circumstances of women in non-Western parts of the world. This paper examines the status of women from a cross-cultural perspective and notes some ways in which certain non-Western societies traditionally afforded women better status.

Changes in customs, however, have taken place among indigenous peoples since coming into contact with Western economic and legal systems. By examining these changes; one can perhaps glimpse into future issues regarding the status of women.

Before contact with Western civilization, the vast majority of Nigerians were cultivators or traders. Farming was the affair of the family group with each household acting as a unit of production. Within the family group, the division of labor would typically assign men to clear an area for farming and women to plant the crop and to weed (Imoagene, 1989). Roles in the family were sex-based, but the woman's role was not devalued.

Nigerian women are and historically have been involved in the social, economic, and political life of Nigeria. Women's groups, including market woman groups, women's bands, women's committees, clubs, guilds, unions, and societies range from the informal to the very formal and consist of from 5 to 500 members (Enabulele, 1985). Women traditionally have had economic opportunities within the social system and the right to keep their earnings (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1985).

"Merchant Princesses" historically have controlled a significant part of the retail trade and have organized themselves into formal markets (Westwood, 1984). These market women are a political force to be reckoned with: astute, sure of themselves, and completely independent and powerful. They follow a tradition of women binding together to determine their own fate whether in age-groups or in village-wide assemblies (Enabulele, 1985).

Women's voices were heard in public meetings, and they have held positions of authority and power at all levels, including as rulers and warriors (Mohammed, 1985). In the religious arena, traditional roles which held high

status were conferred on women (Oyekanmi, 1993). Women had their own political organizations and controlled independent groups with powers paralleling those of men (Mohammed, 1985). Nigerian women have never been considered incompetents.

### *Nigerian Customary Law*

Modern day Nigeria operates under three major sets of customary law in addition to its constitutional and statutory laws. These are Ibo, Yoruba, and Islamic customary laws. The Nigerian constitution states that customary law governs within a tribal group whenever statutory law does not preempt it. A married woman has an unqualified right to hold and deal with her separate property, to the same extent as a man, only under customary law (Oyajobi, 1989). Under statutory law, a married woman is subject to the common law of coverture as adopted from the English common law of coverture and modified by legislation (Uzodike, 1993).

Land held in common by an extended family was typical in Nigeria before European contact. Women were expected to marry and leave the home of their birth to join the family of their husband; their inheritance rights under customary laws reflect that expectation. Under Ibo customary law, women are deliberately left out of any inheritance in an effort to keep family property under the control of local family members (Uzodike, 1993). Yoruba women share equally in the property of their fathers under customary law, and, if an eldest child is a female who does not marry or leave the family homestead, she will become the head of the family (Otaluka, 1989).

Islamic customary law allows female children to inherit from their parents, but provides that their share will be only half that of the male child (Uzodike, 1993; An-Na'im, 1987). A muslim wife even inherits from her husband at his death, (Uzodike, 1993) a custom quite in contrast to the patrilineal nature of other customary laws in Nigeria.

During the marriage, the Yoruba wife is entitled to whatever property she acquired before and during marriage and can freely encumber or alienate it (Uzodike, 1993) but she has very few rights in her matrimonial home. She has only a right of occupancy, even when she has contributed to it (Uzodike, 1993). She does not become a co-owner of the property which she has helped her husband to acquire (Omiyi, 1989).

Under customary law, after the death of her husband, an Ibo or Yoruba widow does not inherit the husband's property. She is, however, entitled to farm her deceased husband's farmland even if she has no surviving children (Omiyi, 1989). If she has surviving children, she serves as caretaker of the prop-

erty for her infant children (Oputa, 1989). She may maintain an action for maintenance and support against the head of the family, or against her husband's relative who has inherited responsibility for her. Additionally, she has a legal right to retain the use and possession of the matrimonial home subject to good behavior (Uzodike, 1993).

Islamic law was particularly beneficent in granting women property rights. It guaranteed women an independent legal personality, including the capacity to hold and dispose of property in their own right, a specific share in inheritance, access to education, and some participation in public life (An-Na'im, 1987).

With the introduction of Islam, a bridegroom was required to give the bride-price money directly to his wife, rather than to her family. The bride-price, which may have included real estate, and remained her separate property. Women could trade on their own account, independent of their husbands and could be judges, elders, witnesses and scribes (Oputa, 1989). Daughters no longer lost their rights to family property upon marriage, and Islam restricted the right of men to initiate and terminate marriage, although it did not entirely negate male dominance in the area of marital relations.

### *Contact with Western Economic Systems*

Colonialism fundamentally altered the basic social, economic and political relationships of communities in the region. Farmers were coerced, often through taxation, to grow crops for export at the expense of foodstuffs for domestic consumption. Indigenous crafts were suppressed to create a market for British exports; urban areas became centers for transport rather than centers for production (Perchonock, 1985).

In contrast to Western culture where a great deal of emphasis is placed on individual rights and individual property ownership, individual ownership of land was virtually unknown to indigenous Nigeria. Property was held by the family unit as a whole and decisions about its use were governed by the group's interests. Family members had only a possessory interest in the land and could not alienate it without the consent of the family head and its principal members (Uzodike, 1993).

Changes in the traditional concepts of land ownership came about as land became of greater economic value (Ojo, 1966). As the governments of African countries continue to formalize or change customary law regarding the ownership of land, women are losing rights to and access to land (Nelson, 1981). The inheritance of land has tended to shift to agnatic descent groups, that is, passes through the fathers only (Eades, 1980).

The colonial administration introduced Western formal education and made it available to men in preference to women. Female university education was not emphasized; rather, women were taught the skills needed to be good housewives. This Western formal education fostered the growth of skills appropriate to a western economy of segregated and unequal roles. Men jumped at the chance to be treated with favor and adopted the sexism of the colonialists. Indeed, legislative measures of the time were drafted to promote male dominance.

### *The Influence of Industrial Development in Nigeria*

It is well-accepted today that almost every Nigerian woman contributes effectively to the family economy as a wage earner, in farming, trading or some other income-generating services (Atsenuwa, 1993). In Nigeria today women are identified more by their talents and capabilities than by their relationships to men (Obadino, 1985). There are no legal restraints on employment opportunities for women (Akande, 1993). The Nigerian constitution expressly prohibits discrimination against women (Nigerian Constitutions 41, 1989). Nonetheless, the Nigerian experience with industrialization is not atypical. In fact, there is a great deal of similarity between female labor force participation experiences in the West and in Nigeria.

Nigerian women have shared similar experiences with Western women as Nigeria industrialized and was drawn onto the global economy. For example, in the urban areas in Nigeria women tend to be concentrated in female-dominated industries (International Labor Conference, 1985). This resembles the dichotomy or dual labor market found in female labor force participation worldwide (International Labor Conference, 1985). The result has been that Nigerian women occupy lower-paying and less stable jobs with fewer opportunities for advancement. For example, Nigerian young women experience higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts (Topouzie, 1990). This reflects conditions of inequality in the workplace similar to that of women on the Western world.

Issues related to sexual harassment have surfaced in Nigeria and may be yet another indication of the country's increasingly Western cultural experience. Akande (1993) reports that women in the industrial workforce have suffered harassment from co-workers and employers.

The emerging labor market situation of Nigerian women appears to resemble the same historical shift which took place in Western societies during the Industrial Revolution. During the Nineteenth Century and continuing into this century in Western countries like the United States women have been

segregated in the work force and have experienced economic social inequality. This shift took place as the locale of work moved from the family farm to urban factory, and as the economic function of the family was transformed from a unit of production to a unit of consumption. Because of Nigeria's robust economy compared to many other African nations, it has been more rapidly drawn into the world capitalist system. Nigeria's considerable natural resources, especially oil, has hastened this process. In this process Nigerian women have come to occupy positions in the economic system similar to their Western counterparts, and suffer similar treatments in the workplace.

Although Nigerian women have experienced many of the same conditions of Western women in the course of the growth of a modern industrial economy, they also have had the cultural conditions of pre-colonial societies which existed in what we now call Nigeria. This has no doubt provided a somewhat different lens through which social and economic change has filtered. How these factors will meld together in the future will have a significant effect on the conditions of women on Nigeria. For example, the traditional extended family system has provided women with the support of mothers, daughters, sisters and other female relatives. This has been a key factor in the day to day functioning of the household though with urbanization this, too, has changed somewhat. Although many women in urban areas have been cut off from the support of the extended family, low cost domestic help is often available. This could also change as employment in other areas of the economy grows.

Another custom related to household labor is the tradition of inviting children from relatively poor members of the extended family to live within the nuclear family as foster children (Oyajobi, 1989). In short, most adult women do not expect to shoulder the entire burden of housework alone (Obadina, 1985). The future could place many women squarely in the challenge of the so-called "second shift" in performing full time paid employment along with the unpaid labor in the home. The care of children as more women enter into the world of work in a more Western and urbanized industrial economy could mean significant social change as well as the growth of social and political issues related to daycare. Because traditionally women have not carried the entire burden of household work alone and do not expect to do so, this social expectation could affect the future of female roles as well as male roles in the family in ways dissimilar to that of Western women. Perhaps, there will be more sharing of household responsibility. Another aspect of family life that is likely to be affected is that of child fostering. With increased participation in the labor market, women may find it beneficial to maintain the traditional practice of child fostering since these children often end up contributing to domestic work. Or, alternatively, women may find it difficult to provide the

care and supervision that foster children need and, consequently, reduce their reliance on these children. The implication is that the cultural practice of inviting the children of poorer relatives to join the family for long periods of time as foster children may wither away and may disappear altogether.

Other changes in the family structure in Nigeria could result in a weakening of the extended family as well as the social bond of marriage. With urbanization and industrial employment rather than family-centered farming the extended family may be fragmented. Further, as women earn income in employment without direct ties to a husband's work as in the case of farming enterprises the economic interdependence in the marriage will weaken or completely vanish. The end result could be an increase in divorce rates, a phenomenon that characterizes industrial and post-industrial societies. And given the inequality in the workplace among women this could lead to the creation of poverty among female-headed households similar to the Western experience.

In spite of the possibility that Nigeria will closely follow the patterns of Western societies it is also plausible that traditional and customary influences will combine with the industrial economic system in a different manner. The end result could strike a delicate balance between the traditional and modern. Certainly, the Western experience of women presents some important lessons for newly industrializing countries. This may affect future social and political outcomes in Nigeria especially given the active participation and leadership women have enjoyed in the past.

Additionally, the historical development of Nigeria differs from that of the West and its position in the global economy as a latecomer compared to the West but as a leader on the African continent has many future implications for social change.

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