Women in Nigeria

From precolonial times to the early 21st century, the role and status of Nigerian women has continuously evolved. In precolonial societies, women, while not equal to men, held significant roles that complemented those of men, often gaining power through seniority. This balance was disrupted by colonial powers, who introduced new forms of patriarchy that shaped women's roles in Nigeria for decades. Today, we see increasing pressure for change as Nigerian women continue to challenge and renegotiate these inherited structures.

Pre-colonial Times

Women were an integral part of their communities. Beyond the household, power was generally held by men, but in many areas specific titles were given to female counterparts who complemented male leaders. They also played a very important role in trade and commerce

HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILY:	**COMMERCE AND TRADE:**
- Men generally served as heads of the household ➔ but women held important patrilineal roles - Women cared for the family and managed daily domestic life - Women were also responsible for aspects of the family's financial security ➔ Necessitating a degree of financial independence - Women exercised significant control over younger household members ➔ Indirectly wielding power through the labour and support of their children, forming a substantial bloc withing the household - Seniority increased a woman's authority and the respect she commanded	- Landownership - Land was communally owned and tied to the marriage union - Women usually ensured food security through agriculture - Range of economic activities were reserved for women (labour division along gender lines) - Crafts such as pottery - Spinning and weaving - Dyeing of cloth - Food processing and preparation - Women were also central to trade and could accumulate significant wealth through it
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL POWER: Generally male-dominated	

- But wives of leaders were installed alongside their male counterparts
➔ Complementing them while not being fully equal
- There are also multiple records of powerful women holding leading positions as e.g. chiefs of a community

The Colonial Disruption

The colonial period marked a fundamental and often violent restructuring of Nigerian society, not merely a change of government. The disruption of underlying systems had profound consequences for women in Nigeria. Colonial policies effectively imported Western forms of patriarchy. Whereas women had previously held major roles in the marketplace and exercised forms of governance within the domestic sphere, the colonial era eroded much of this influence.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL POWER:	COMMERCE AND TRADE:

- Western education system
  o favoured boys over girls
  o disenfranchised women from the new occupations created under colonial rule
  o when girls were educated, their training reinforced domestic roles
- Exclusion from political power
  o colonial authorities interacted almost exclusively with men
  o the principle of indirect rule meant governing through recognised native authorities
 	
  o only men were employed in tax collection, law enforcement, and other official capacities
	- British male administrators interacted only with men when collecting taxes or conducting trade, driving women out of these spheres
	➔ undermining women's commercial independence
	- The economy became geared toward the export of cash crops
	  o such as cocoa beans, rubber, and groundnuts
	  o this sector was male-dominated, pushing women into food-crop production, which yielded lower returns
	➔ again undermining women's commercial independence
	- The import of cheap manufactured goods from Europe
	  o weakened the domestic market traditionally controlled by women
	➔ once more undermining women's commercial independence

Post-colonial Development

Although activism and political awareness have grown over the decades, the position of women in Nigeria has not fully rebounded from the disruptions of colonialism. Women remain significantly underrepresented in political life, and patriarchal structures continue to shape many aspects of Nigerian society.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Female representation in Nigerian government remains low. In 1999, there were only three women among the 109 members of the Senate, representing just 2.8%. By 2007, this had increased to 7.3%. Since then, the proportion of women in government has fluctuated between 5% and 7%.

Major hurdles for female participation:

(1) **Patriarchy:** Nigerian society remains largely dominated by men, which reinforces perceptions of women as docile and restricts their presence in public life, making meaningful political participation difficult.

(2) **Stigma and the Reality of Politics:** Politics in Nigeria is widely perceived as a corrupt and violent arena. Elections are often marred by irregularities, ballot snatching, clashes, and even fatalities. Many women find it difficult to engage in such a hostile environment. At the same time, women who pursue political office are frequently stigmatized, being labeled as shameless or promiscuous.

(3) **Low Education:** Women in Nigeria are often disadvantaged in terms of education, which makes them less likely to be qualified for official positions in government.

(4) **Time Schedules:** Pre- and post-election meetings are often scheduled at times that conflict with when a responsible mother would care for her children. Household responsibilities further limit women's ability to participate in politics. The difficulty is heightened by the prevalence of career politicians, making political competition especially tough for women.

(5) **Financials:** Running for political office in Nigeria requires substantial financial resources. Even with support from political parties, many women cannot meet the

necessary financial obligations to contest elections. This also disenfranchises a large portion of the population living in poverty.

(6) **Religion and Culture:** This is particularly pronounced in northern Nigerian states, where both Christianity and Islam traditionally afford women limited roles in public life. Women are often seen as culturally submissive. This helps explain why the few women who enter politics in these regions are often less observant in their religious practice.

FURTHER PROBLEMS:

Abuse and domestic violence remain widespread in Nigeria, which also has the highest rate of female genital mutilation on the African continent.

In twelve states, polygamous marriages are legally recognized on the same terms as monogamous marriages, forming part of West Africa's "polygamy belt." These marriages are common and deeply embedded in local culture.

Education for young girls is severely affected by early child marriage. About 44% of girls are married before the age of 18, often depriving them of educational opportunities. The causes are a combination of cultural, social, economic, and religious factors. Although policies have been introduced to combat these practices, their impact has been largely unsatisfactory.

There is also a significant gender pay gap in Nigeria, although precise figures are not readily available.

Short Summary on Activism

Nigerian women's activism has a long history, rooted in precolonial society. Despite colonial and postcolonial constraints, women have organized to challenge patriarchy, fight for education, economic rights, and political participation. From grassroots movements to formal advocacy, Nigerian women continue to push for gender equality, legal reforms, and greater representation in politics and society.

This activism is reflected in the creation of various NGOs and grassroots movements, such as:

- **Women in Nigeria (WIN):** A major research and advocacy group formed in the 1980s.
- **Campaign for Democracy:** Organized to strengthen democratic values and end military dictatorship in Nigeria.
- **#BringBackOurGirls:** A global movement led by Nigerian women demanding action for kidnapped schoolgirls.
- **EndSARS:** Young, tech-savvy Nigerian women were at the forefront of organizing, fundraising, and providing legal aid during protests against police brutality.

The Aba Women's War of 1929

- **Trigger:** Although tensions had been building through colonial policies, the immediate trigger was the threat of direct taxation on women after all stocks and women in male households were counted. This would have further undermined women's financial independence. Tens of thousands of women responded with massive protests stretching across hundreds of kilometres.
- **Methods:** A distinctive tactic was "house sitting," where women would occupy a man's house, dance, chant, and publicly shame him for perceived wrongs—a form of protest rooted in precolonial traditions.
- **Results:** British troops eventually restored "order," killing 55 women in the process. During the protests, multiple native courts were destroyed or damaged, personnel attacked, and European factories looted.