

THE ROLE OF THE MARKET WOMAN IN THE NIGERIAN ECONOMY

Introduction

The so-called market woman is the metaphor for resilience; her life typifies the female's will to survive under the most trying conditions. The target for overzealous local government officials who chase her from pillar to post, she has mastered the art of being ubiquitous; and despite the often squalid nature of her business environment, she manages to live to a ripe old age. She outlives her husband mainly because she is much younger than him, although in many parts of the country she is forced to go through harrowing widowhood rites often based on the suspicion that she has a hand in his death.

It is not known how the phrase **market woman** came to be associated with uncouth behavior but it is not far fetched to assume that it had to do with the fact that most, if not all market women in the past were uneducated; a fact for which the society at large is to blame. Girls do not choose illiteracy; it is usually a choice made for them by their families who would prefer to give them out in marriage at an early age than send them to school. It is indeed a credit to her indomitable spirit that despite a literacy rate of 48 percent the Nigerian woman plays a major role in the economy through her activities in the informal sector.

Women in National Economy

Women, including girls, make up 49 percent of Nigeria's population (2006) and constitute 37.14 percent of Nigerians in gainful employment (3). With only 7 percent presence in the industrial work force and 26 percent in the service sector, it is apparent that women are highly concentrated in the informal sector of the economy. For most of them life revolves around the family, the farm and the market place. They form the backbone of the agricultural sector as they make up 67 percent of the agricultural labor force and produce about 75 percent of the food. The woman's work in the agricultural sector is largely without financial reward; and between ten hours of farm work and seven hours of domestic chores the average rural woman has 17 hours daily of unpaid labor. Women's gainful employment is mainly within the services sector where they function largely as petty traders and sales persons. Their preponderance in retail trade is a result of their social role as producers who not only produce the food as subsistence farmers but also are responsible for feeding their households; it therefore behooves them to sell the surplus foodstuff after the family requirements have been met.

This tradition accounts for the fact that most Nigerian women both in the rural and urban areas who are retail traders mainly engage in the sale of foodstuff. With increased urbanization, two categories of women in the retail business have emerged namely: the village women who sell surplus food from their farms and the urban-based traders who purchase from middlemen and sell to consumers.

Women in the Market

The majority of women traders in urban areas such as Lagos and other state capitals, whose businesses hardly go beyond the sale of foodstuff, cannot afford proper market stalls. Acquisition of *lock-up shops* and stalls usually provided by the local government is subject to bureaucratic procedures that are beyond the grasp of illiterate market women; a situation that fosters abuse of office. There have been allegations that some civil servants of the local government service take advantage of it to allocate stalls to their selves, thereby becoming the primary allottees. In the ensuing process of multiple transfer of tenancy the rents escalate above the women's reach, forcing many of them to occupy illegally every available space within and surrounding the markets, including garages, recreation grounds and thoroughfares, while others hawk their wares from door to door in residential areas. Laws that prohibit street trading exist in most cities but threats of punishment hardly deter the women who believe that it is the duty of government to provide adequate and affordable market stalls. The result is a no-win situation where government officials destroy illegal stalls only for the latter to spring up again the next day.

Women's problems are daily being compounded by the changes in the global economy, the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the consequences of Nigeria's intentional debt burden. With many families going through financial difficulties as men lose their jobs, women's income now go into such expenses as house rents and school fees that used to be the responsibilities of their husbands. These new roles only succeed in raising women's level of poverty, as their earnings cannot withstand such challenges. This has become more problematic as some retrenched male workers and jobless youth are increasingly encroaching on their business stronghold by taking up petty trading. These new entrants have an edge over the women because it is easier for them to borrow either from bank or family, besides they are not encumbered with the distractions of domestic work. Today the seeing men retailing greens, pepper and tomatoes at roadsides is becoming a common feature in Nigeria. Women traders are additionally confronted with unfair competition from big wholesale

companies that are now branching into retailing. For instance the Lagos women foodstuff sellers complain that the company from which they purchase rice for retailing now sells directly to consumers at a rate that undermines their own chances of staying afloat.

Influence

Despite numerous constraints the market woman has continued to play a significant role in the Nigerian society. Apart from being the actual breadwinner for her family she has also recorded some resounding successes in the public arena. She was at the forefront of resistance to colonial rule as she and her colleagues protested against some obnoxious impositions by the colonial administration. It is on record that Egba market women led by late Mrs. Funmilayo Rnsome Kuti rejected flat rate tax for women and forced the Alake to abdicate in 1948. In Lagos, market women worked closely with the early nationalists especially the great Herbert Macaulay who encouraged them to form a central organization under the leadership of Madam Alimotu Pelewura in 1923. Macaulay gave strong support to their resistance against the British for introducing price control for certain foodstuff. By 1943 Madam Pelewura had become so influential that her press conference on the price control issue got wide newspaper coverage and made front page headlines. Continuing in the footsteps of her predecessor the current leader of the Lagos Market Women and Men Association, Madam Abibatu Mogaji, has been an active player in Nigerian politics. Although the octogenarian has never sought public office, successive administrations had used her to mobilize Lagos women to support their various programmes. The military found her especially useful in dousing agitations against many of their unpopular policies; consequently in the course of her long career she has wined and dined with more Heads of State and Governors than the Chief Executive Officers of some multinationals. It is perhaps a befitting feather to her political cap that her son is today the governor of Lagos state, the commercial nerve center of the country.