

EVOLVING GENDER ROLES IN IGBO COMMUNITIES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Esther Chiamaka Okezie

Department of History and International Studies, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus, Anambra State Nigeria.
Email: gratefulheart246@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender roles within the human societies are not fixed or permanent, and are influenced by the historical, cultural and socio-economic changes throughout history and depending on the power relations of the societies and the changing expectations of the society at different historical periods. This paper studies how gender roles in the Igbo communities have been changing historically, that is, changes over the years since the pre-colonial, colonial, and present times. The Igbo society used to be traditionally defined as a system of gender complement where men and women held different but mutually dependent roles in the economic, political, and socio-cultural arenas. The women were actively engaged in agriculture, local trade and governance of the community, through institutions like the umuada and the men-controlled Yams, long distance trade and official political systems. The paper presents the claim that such roles did not necessarily mean inequality but were designed in such a way that could provide social balance and community survival. Nevertheless, western patriarchal systems brought by colonialism changed the existing gender relations in the region by restricting the role of women in the official government, as well as redefining male and female gender roles. During the post-colonial and modern times, the gender roles have been further altered by modernization, education and globalization and thus more women are involved in education, politics and economic activities. The changes notwithstanding, some aspects of traditional gender norms and inequalities remain, which forms a complicated continuity and change interplay. Based on a historical and qualitative methodology, which relies on both primary and secondary sources, the research indicates the flexibility and strength of the gender systems in the Igbo community. It finds that to foster gender equity and formulate culturally pertinent policies across modern communities, the historical development of gender roles should be properly understood.

Keywords: Gender roles, Igbo society, historical perspective, gender complementarity, social transformation.

Introduction

Historically, gender roles in Igbo society have undergone significant transformation under the influence of indigenous cultural systems, colonialism, and modern socio-economic developments. Traditionally, Igbo society maintained a complex structure of gender relations which, although largely patriarchal, was also complementary, flexible, and characterized by negotiated power between men and women. The analysis of these changing roles cannot be possible without a critical look into the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial contexts (Obi-Nwosu, 2021). Gender roles were also arranged in a complementary manner and were not accompanied by strict

hierarchies as in pre-colonial Igbo society. Men and women had different spheres of influence which were dependent on each other. The women were not restricted to the household chores and they were involved in economic, political and spiritual life. As an example, women had dominated the local markets, trade networks, and played a major role in agricultural production, thus maintaining household and community economies (Oluwagbemi-Jacob & Uduma, 2018). In addition, institutional structures like the *umuada* and women assemblies enabled women to enjoy political power, arbitrate over disagreements and sway on community decisions. This form of political organization in dual sexes guaranteed that the voices of women were part and parcel of governance and social organization (Opata et al., 2021).

Notably, gender in the pre-colonial Igbo society was not necessarily strictly based on biological sex. Gender roles are fluid in such practices like female husbands and male daughters where people can take up the role of the opposite sex when the need arises (Nzegwu, 2012; Nagoshi et al, 2014). These traditions provide emphasis on the pragmatic and adaptive character of Igbo gender systems that were less concerned with rigid gender binaries, and more so social stability and continuity of their lineages. Nevertheless, these gender relations in the indigenous context have changed drastically with the arrival of colonialism in the late nineteenth century. Administrative systems of the colonies brought in western patriarchal standards that favored men in the political and economic arenas. Institutions and traditional roles of women were sidelined as well as their involvement in formal governance was limited. According to scholars, the colonial rule affected the status quo of power and resulted in a more significant gender disparity and the loss of women power within the Igbo community (Opata et al, 2021). A change can be observed through the introduction of warrant chiefs and indirect rule systems where women were not included in the decision-making process.

Igbo women also resisted the colonial period with most successful resistance being witnessed in the 1929 Women War. This movement of protesting against colonial policies and taxation shows the longevity of agency and political awareness of women against structural marginalization. These incidents highlight the strength of indigenous systems of gender and the ability of women to oppose systems of oppression. The modern era of gender roles in the Igbo communities has not been different as the communities respond to modernization, education, urbanization and globalization. Although patriarchal conventions are still strong, the role of women in other areas other than homes is currently being acknowledged. Women are currently more active in education, professional life, and political leadership, but the differences still exist. It has been shown that even in the current day, traditional demands, including the main role of women in upbringing children and managing houses, are still present along with the modern ones, which makes many women have a dual load (Afifah et al, 2025).

Moreover, the modern Igbo culture is characterized by a dynamic interaction between tradition and the change. As an illustration, the traditional perception of men as authority and providers is gradually being overtaken by caring and child-rearing, which

means that fathers are becoming more cooperative partners in the family (Afifah et al, 2025) . On the same note, the accessibility to education and economic opportunities by women has contravened the gender norms and increased the social functions of women. In spite of these developments, the problem of gender inequality is still high. Patriarchal systems still determine the power to access political authority, economic assets and the right of inheritance usually at the expense of women (Chikwendu et al, 2025). However, the fact that indigenous values that support complementarity over subordination still prevail gives grounds to facilitate gender equity in the cultural context.

Most African cultures were patriarchal and women were not fully placed in the background since their cultural systems gave them important functional roles as they had male counterparts. Those roles were constructed and determined in the cultural context of every society and defined the duties of responsibilities of both men and women. According to Parpart (2019), women had a significant impact and in some instances, power in most pre-colonial societies in Africa. In these societies, women dominated major economic processes and played important roles in the development of the community. Women also tried to control key economic activities and exercised a certain degree of power in the decision-making procedures of a group of people in even hunting and gathering societies where men could have formal power (Parpart, 2019). This trend was apparent in the Igbo society where the gender roles were organized in such a manner that women could have some autonomy and power. Abdul et al. (2011) note that in the case of Igbo and Ibibio, women in both groups had control over their lives and exercised political power by acting as a community and using institutions.

In spite of this, scholars have been engaged in a consistent debate touching on the real meaning and consequences of these roles. Other scholars maintain that the tasks that women were supposed to perform were eventually secondary since men held superior and more dominating social roles. Ukaegbu and Oguejiofor (2022) argue that the roles attributed to men were accompanied by perks like property ownership, political involvement, and social exposure, which made them the leaders. On the contrary, women were mostly relegated to the domestic setting and rendered reliant on men when it comes to accessing vital resources, which supports a social arrangement that is dominated by men. Nevertheless, this understanding has been criticized by other scholars who believe that it is a more subtle interpretation of gender relationships in the Igbo society. According to Chukwuma-Ali (2019), Igboland gender roles were essentially complementary but not hierarchical. In this view, women being assigned less physically challenging duties did not signify inferiority; but a cultural appreciation of womanhood and motherhood. On the same note, Oluwagbemi-Jacob and Uduma (2018) claim that the traditional Igbo society was typified by a role complementary system, as men, women, boys, and girls worked together to ensure the survival and well-being of the family and community.

Despite these interpretations, it can be seen that women used their influence in the scope of their assigned roles. Gender roles in communities like Ihiala were well

established by the culture and its traditions, which dictated different roles of men and women in the political, socio-cultural and economic arenas. Regardless of these differences, women were engaged in the economic life of the community, especially in the trade and agricultural area, so they made a significant contribution to developing the locality (Chukwu, 2015). Moreover, the role of women was not confined to the economical aspects but also social and cultural duties that strengthened the unity of the community. The oral narrations of community members emphasize the timeless significance of the role of women in keeping families stable and contributing to the life of the community (Adinnu, 2023; Okereke, 2023). The stories are very informative and shed light on what it means to live in a specific way and reaffirm that traditional gender roles are still relevant in modern contexts. The significance of research about changing gender roles in the Igbo societies through a historical lens is that it would shed some light on the gaps in the socio-cultural context and the current issues that plague gender dynamics. Historical sources demonstrate how colonialism and immigration transformed the traditional Igbo social life, which tended to upset native gender complementarity systems and introduce more strict patriarchal standards (Molokwu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there are still numerous problems in modern society, including domestic violence and marginalization based on gender, which suggests that structural inequalities have not been solved (Okezie, 2022).

More so, the fact that insecurity and social-cultural tensions still persist in Nigeria underscores the necessity to examine how the gender factor affects the overall developmental indicators (Ezeogidi et al., 2020; Okezie, 2021). As an example, the persistence of the denial of social and economic rights by widows in some areas of Igboland highlights the failures between the traditional system and the human rights paradigms (Okezie et al., 2023). These problems prove that although gender roles have changed, inequalities have been ingrained in the cultural and institutional structures. Also, the modern research on organizational performance, workforce motivation, and sustainability seldom uses gender as a historical variable, thus overlooking its impact on the economic productivity and social progress (Muogbo et al., 2025a; Muogbo et al., 2025b; Muogbo et al., 2025c). Through historical prism, this paper will fill these gaps to present a more comprehensive picture of how gender roles contribute to the development of society and the relations between humans (Chukwu et al., 2025).

Traditional Ihiala: Gender Roles Economic, Political, and Socio-Cultural

Economic Roles

Traditional Ihiala relied mostly on manufacturing, agriculture and trade as an economy. In these two sectors of the economy, there is demarcation of roles based on gender.

Manufacturing (Craft Production)

The traditional Ihiala society, similar to most Igbo communities was a diversified system of indigenous production commonly called craft production. These arts were a

source of economic support and also embodied the culture and creative capabilities of the community. The most notable of these trades was pottery and blacksmithing which were both entrenched in the social-economic life of the community. One of the most important and ancient traditional crafts is pottery in Igboland. The evidence suggested by archaeologists suggests that the creation of pottery began in the Late Stone Age, and its initial application was reported in places like Afikpo (Chukwu, 2015). Even though pottery was not a common activity among all of the Igbo people, it was of great significance in Ihiala as it was an economic activity and a cultural object. The art was also a great asset because of its essential use in both the household setting and religion as well as commerce. The cooking, storage, and ritual sacrifices were performed with pots, thus, connecting the craft to survival in daily life and spiritual life (Adinnu, 2023).

Production of pottery was considered a female preserve in most Igbo societies including Ihiala. This division of labour was based on cultural beliefs as well as the historical traditions which were gendered. According to Chukwu (2015), in the northern Nigerian communities like Kano and Gwari, pottery was commonly an activity of men whereas in Igboland, it was still a female activity. Oral traditions in Ihiala give an account of the origin of pottery to the wife of Eze-Dara the ancestral founder of the community, who is said to have been the first potter. This mythical connection supported the fact that the responsibility of pottery belonged to a woman, as it was a part of the culture (Okereke, 2023).

Nevertheless, the fact that women were the only ones to participate in pottery did not mean the total lack of males. Men were involved in the indirect contribution by doing physically challenging work like clay excavation. Women were also not allowed to dig clay because this kind of labour was deemed to be too hard and inappropriate to them (Agukwu, 2023). This structure brings out the complementary aspects of gender roles in which both men and women played a part in production within the parameters of the culture. Blacksmithing on the other hand was a male dominated trade in Ihiala. This is a highly physical occupation that demanded great technical skills that culturally did not allow women to participate in. During the process of blacksmithing, men created the hoes, machetes, armllets, and other metal tools that were required in agriculture and warfare (Chukwu, 2015). Blacksmithing was not only a value in terms of the economy, but also symbolic in that it was linked to power, innovation, and technological skill. The rigid division of labour between pottery and blacksmithing by gender highlights the wider trend of labour division in traditional Igbo society.

Trade and Commerce

Trade was one of the main aspects of the traditional Igbo economy, and Ihiala was not an exception. There was exchange of goods and services through the market systems which led to the development of inter-community relations and economic development. Men and women engaged in trade but their roles were gender differentiated. Local trade and retailing markets were dominated by women. In Igboland, women have traditionally been major participants in trade especially in the local market

where they dominated the marketing of food products and household commodities (Chuku 1995). The women increased their trade networks during the colonial period, as they added the European imports, including salt, kerosene, tobacco, and textiles, to their trade. This flexibility shows the robustness and entrepreneurial strength of the Igbo women.

The dominance in local trade was explained by several factors associated with women. To start with, safety issues restricted the involvement of women in long-distance trade since in most instances, these travels entailed passing through hostile or foreign land (Chukwu, 2015). Second, most of the goods that were traded locally were those produced by women, especially agricultural goods and processed food products. This allowed them to control supply as well as market transaction expertise. Chukwu (2015) goes ahead to stress the fact that effective trading involved patience and ability to relate with people, which was culturally associated with women. Women were found to be more appropriate to handle negotiations of several buyers and ensuring smooth relationships within the market. Men on the other hand were more engaged in long distance trade which demanded physical stamina, movement, and risk taking. The fact that they were involved in regional and inter-community trade networks also led to the growth of the economic frontiers in Igboland.

Agriculture

In Igboland, including Ihiala, agriculture was in the heart of the traditional economy. It was not just an economic practice but a lifestyle that kept families and communities going. Ihediwa (2013) highlights the fact that agriculture was the key to survival and domestic economy, and both men and women were involved in the farming activity. Although all these were engaged in the same way, there was a clear division of agricultural tasks between the genders. The yam cultivation, which had had a great cultural and symbolic value, was mainly done by men. Yam, a masculine, symbol of wealth and social status was considered an important part of a male who could be judged by how large his yam barn was (Korieh, 2010). As a result, such prestigious titles as Diji and Ezeji were favored to men only.

Women, in their turn, grew a gigantic number of crops, such as cassava, maize, beans, vegetables, and cocoyam (Anedo, n.d.). Men were in charge of land preparation and planting of yams, whereas women were involved in keeping farms in constant order, weeding, harvesting, and processing. According to Ihediwa (2013) once plants had been planted, men would pull out of the daily farm activities and women had to take care of the farms during the growing period.

Gender complementarity was also present in harvesting activities. Yams were harvested by men and other crops were harvested by women and helped in carrying out the produce. The palm production process involved men climbing the trees to collect palm fruits with women processing the fruits into palm oil (Agukwu, 2023). This division of labour was efficient and strengthening the cultural norms. Gender specialization was also exhibited through animal husbandry. Men would raise bigger animals like goats and

cows whereas poultry farming was the task of women (Okereke, 2023). The activities served as important sources of proteins and a source of income to the household.

Political Roles and Institutions

The Igbo political systems were decentralized and participatory in the traditional sense that both men and women could enjoy political powers in their respective realms. According to Parpart (2019), the role of women in politics was diverse in pre-colonial Africa, and some societies gave them a considerable one with institutionalized organizations. The Igbo society had a two sex system of politics where the men and women had parallel systems of governance. Women organizations operated as independent organizations that concerned themselves with female related issues and they also helped in the governance of the community (Nzegwu, 2012). Such institutions were the women courts, market associations, and age groups.

In Ihiala, the political power of the male gender was carried out in institutions like Umunna and Nze na Ozo. The Umunna, a group consisting of members of the male line, dealt with legislative and judicial affairs, such as the distribution of land and settlement of conflicts (Igwegbe, 2023; Okezie, 2026). The Nze na Ozo was the most superior political institution and was a male organization (Madukasi, 2018). On the other hand, women used their political authority via the Umuada and Otu Nwunyedi. The Umuada, which was a group of daughters of the lineage, were very instrumental in conflict resolution, social control, and purification of rituals (Chuku, 1995). They exercised a lot of power in the political system as their decisions were binding even to male authorities.

Social Roles and Family Structure.

The Ihiala society was highly gender-based in the family set up. Men were considered heads of families, and they had the duty of providing and protecting their families (Ugwu, 2022). They had much influence on decision-making, which supported patriarchal systems. The women were involved in child bearing, child rearing and household administration. Girls were trained to be wives and mothers since early years and boys were trained to be independent and assertive (Okafor, 2023). Nevertheless, in spite of this division, both sexes did domestic labour, the labour being equally divided as it was in accordance with the cultural norms. Gender roles are also depicted in marriage practices. Although men officially negotiated marriages and rituals, women had behind-the-scene roles especially in ensuring that they chose the right spouses (Ohazulike, 2023). The same applied to the religious roles, whereby the men were the priests and the women were the priestesses and they all led a life of spirituality.

Conclusion

This paper has also revealed that gender roles in the Igbo people have been greatly changed over the periods in history, influenced both by the traditional cultural practices in the area, the colonial developments, and the modern socio-economic developments. During the pre-colonial period, Igbo society was a system of gender complements where men and women worked in different and mutually dependent

positions that guaranteed stability and survival of the society. Women were not just limited to domestic areas but also engaged themselves in economic, political and socio-cultural activities via economic institutions like umuada and market systems.

With the colonial rule however, this balance was destroyed by introducing Western patriarchal orders that undermined the traditional powers of women and restructured gender dynamics in a way that favored men. The changes formed the basis of most of the gender inequalities witnessed in subsequent times. Modernization, education and globalization in the post-colonial and the modern age have assisted in the restructuring of gender roles thus resulting to more women involvement in different spheres of life in the society. Although these new developments are there, the research indicates that aspects of old gender norms and inequalities still exist and this indicates a dynamic interaction between continuity and change. Finally, the development of gender roles among the Igbo people emphasizes on both resistance and change. This historical pathway should be approached with a slightly better perspective to the current gender problems and to create a more inclusive and culturally-based approach to gender equity within the Igbo society.

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