

**WOMEN AND ECONOMY IN AFRICA: A FOCUS ON IHITTE UBOMA
SOCIETY OF IGBOLAND, SOUTHEAST NIGERIA, 1991 -2015**

Chiemela Adaku Okeke

*Department of History and Strategic Studies,
Federal University, Ndufu Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State*

&

Chinedu N. Mbalisi

*Department of History and International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*

Abstract

Women have contributed immensely to economic development of Igboland. Men have since dominated various aspects of the economy with the role of women not fully recognized. Fundamentally, women have remained invaluable in the maintenance and sustenance of many families in different epochs. Presumably as it were, women are often seen in most Igbo societies and not heard. This cliché that “women’s roles end in the kitchen” appears inconsequential in the twenty first century. Events in the recent past and global developments have conferred greater recognition on women and their contributions in developing the economy of their society. Ihitte Uboma women of Igboland have contributed to the economy of their communities and development of their society over time. In the areas of agriculture, manufacturing, trade, politics and many other sectors, women have played significant roles in infrastructural development yet the role of women in the economy of Ihitte Uboma has not received adequate attention from scholars and researchers. This expose examines the efforts and contributions of women in the economy of Ihitte Uboma and the growth of the society. The work argues that the contributions of these women have remained understudied and as such creates a historical gap in knowledge. An attempt is made here towards the reconstruction of this aspect of the history of Ihitte Uboma. The work adopts the qualitative and historical descriptive-narrative methods for proper analysis. Materials from both primary and secondary sources are used. The various concepts and variables relevant to this work are clarified to avoid ambiguities. Ester Boserup’s Women in Development theory is used. The work concludes that women in Ihitte Uboma have made invaluable contributions to the economy and growth of the society over time. They have contributed immensely and complimented the efforts of men in building and developing their society as demonstrated in this work.

Keywords: Women, Sustainable Rural Development, Agricultural Multi-Functionality

Introduction

In African society and Igboland in particular, agriculture forms the bedrock of the economy which is an important facet of every human society. A society without a strong or sustainable economy would appear underdeveloped and doomed. Economic activities constitute important part of human endeavour. From time of yore, when man was created, his struggle for survival has remained largely continuous. The growth of the political, social and intellectual sectors of every society is largely dependent on the success of its economy. Agriculture provided that vent for the interconnectedness between the various sectors of human endeavour which was vital for survival at every phase. Olanda Equaino writing on agriculture in Igboland avers thus, “agriculture is our chief employment, and everyone, even children and women are engaged in it. Everyone contributes to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars”¹. Similarly Elizabeth Isichei observes that “the invention of agriculture was the most fundamental of human discoveries.”² Writing on agriculture, Heaton avers that “the nature of work, the prevailing mode of production and exchange, and the social relationships which arises there-from, form the bases on which an economy is built up and from which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of an epoch or history”³. This work is a discourse on the contributions of women to the economy and economic growth of Ihitte Uboma people of Imo State.

The economic activities of every society have been greatly affected by the physical environment and climate. Geographical location sets the parameter for the economic activities of a people. The above assertion applies exactly to Ihitte Uboma and its environs. The geographical area known and called Ihitte Uboma, today embraces two clans: Ihitte and Uboma. They are among the twenty seven Local Government Areas of Imo State. The area is strategically located on the eastern part of Imo State. The name Ihitte Uboma, as a Local Government was not in existence until May 3rd 1989 when it became a local government. Formerly, the area was known as Etiti and then it comprised Obowo, Ihitte and Uboma clans. Today there are only two clans, Ihitte to the South and Uboma to the North. It covers a land area of over 109 square kilometres. The area experiences two seasons in a year, the dry and the rainy season. The Imo River which is one of the major rivers in the area is of great significance to the people as it is a source of livelihood to them. Eze Cyril Okafor refers to the soil in the area as one of the best because of its fertile nature. Ihitte Uboma Local Government area of Imo State is known to be the “food basket” of Imo State with its rich cultivation and production in large quantities, of food and cash crops such as rice, cassava, palm oil, yam, vegetables, okro, *akidi* (Igbo native brown bean), and cocoyam amongst many others in large quantity. The

land is very fertile for cultivation and some areas house other natural resources such as stones which confer economic advantage on the people⁴. Without mincing words as this research observed, women in the area have remained resiliently active in every facet of the economy and are ensuring sustainable growth. Hence, their engagement in the economy, especially, agriculture and crop production are seemingly beyond subsistence.

Over the years, in many societies in Africa, the contributions of women in the economy and economic development of their society have remained, at best, contentious. The reason is that women in Africa have over time been perceived to be inferior to the male folk and therefore marginalized. There are avalanche of cultural and traditional inhibitions against women which seem to prevent the salient efforts of women in the economic development of their societies to go almost unnoticed. In many climes, women have been defined as the weaker sex, feeble minded beings, child bearers, emotional beings, man's helper, man's wealth preserver, man's soul mate and managers. Yet it is believed that motherhood is the most important experience and title a woman can have. Even though according to Chime, "the general belief in most African societies is that the role of women starts and ends with running the home and nothing more"⁵ women still remain the bedrock of families. Traditionally, the experience of marriage and motherhood dominates the life and identity of women in Igboland and African society as a whole also insists that the most important contribution of women to the society is to give birth to children as home makers. The above situation as it appears, could explain why the efforts of women economic development of their societies appear not to have been given adequate attention.

In Igboland in general and Ihitte Uboma in particular, the contributions of women to the economy and development of their society have remained dynamic as it evolved. They have played major roles in the progress of the society which cannot be overlooked. Their roles in the economy development of their land include active participation in almost every facet of economic activity in the society. Sylvia Leith-Ross in Chukwu showed her excitement on how impressed she was at the role of women in the Igbo economy. In her words, "Their women because of their economic importance both as mothers, farm cultivators and traders, have rather more power than is generally thought"⁶. Without the participation of the women, the aggregate macro growth of the society would be impeded. Ihitte Uboma located at the banks of Imo River and its tributaries had been referred to as the food basket of Imo State due to the massive economic activity that goes on in the area. Women form the nucleus of the major economic scale of Ihitte Uboma. Women played invaluable roles in the economy and even assist men in building their society. Their roles cannot be easily quantified in overt economic terms as they are seen in almost all sectors of the economy ranging from agriculture, manufacturing, trade and commerce. They have also gone a long way in facilitating the smooth running of the economy through many

activities and sponsored projects to ensure that Ihitte Uboma is viable. Unfortunately, these efforts by these women are not known beyond their immediate community. This situation militates against the historical knowledge of their economic activities and contribution to growth and development of their society.

Various factors contributed to women's effective participation in the development of the economy. Such factors include: the changing status of Igbo women due to modernisation, rapid socio-economic changes in the country, issues of inter-group relations, women empowerment programmes, women organizations and leadership status, education and the natural resources embedded in the area. The women's role in the growth of the economy of the area has also not been without challenges which include family ties, problem of finance, scarcity of land, poor presence of government in this agro-economic area, poor infrastructure, bad roads, inadequate means of transport to convey farm product from the farms and to the markets. There is also unhealthy opposition and lack of cooperation among women, illiteracy, and belief system

Against this backdrop, it is evident that women in Ihitte Uboma have contributed immensely to the economy of the area, but are faced with constraints of neglect. This study is designed to understudy the contributions of women to the economy and economic development of Ihitte Uboma. It will consider the challenges encountered by women in their endeavour and with a view to show casing the efforts of these women to human society and studies in economic history.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Women play important roles in the economic development of their society. They control most of the non monetary economy and contribute significantly to the monetary economy. The most topical issue in international development programme is women; they work around the home and outside the home. There are different views of women just as there are different cultures. Writing on women, Nnaemeka simply described them as "child bearer, house wife, farmer, bread winner and destined to a life of labour and service to men"¹⁵. Abati described women as "de-centred and de-natured specie of humanity harassed by culture, intimidated by policies and subsumed helplessly and almost inevitably by matrilineal and patriarchal structures when pampered by the male ego"¹⁶. The classical and neoclassical economist on their own part sees women as having nothing to contribute to development. This study would have considered these views as stated by different scholars before it concludes. Women as used in this work are all female individuals from the ages of 18 years upwards residing in Ihitte Uboma. These include indigenous and non-indigenous women in Ihitte Uboma.

Sustainable Rural Development

Sustainable rural development is defined by the United Nations “as improving the quality of life for the rural poor by developing capacities that promote community participation, health and education, food security, environmental protection and sustainable economic growth, thereby enabling community members to leave the cycle of poverty and achieve their full potentials”¹⁷. It refers to the use of resources – human, natural and man-made in ways that allow current generations to satisfy their needs without jeopardizing the capacity of future generation to miss theirs. It comes in four different phases mainly: diagnostic phase, phase of consensus building, phase of planning and the phase of implementation. This is majorly the contribution of women in the area of study. Through their activities, they have contributed in championing the course of achieving within their community and encouraging members to leave the cycle of poverty. This is mostly seen in the public projects such as building of markets, establishment of vocational institutions, empowerment programmes among other numerous concerns.

Agricultural Multi-functionality

The term agricultural multi-functionality has been defined by Durand and Van Huylenbroeck as “the joint production of commodities and non-commodities by the agricultural sector”¹⁸. It refers to the fact that an economic activity may have multiple outputs and by virtue of this may contribute to several societal objectives at once. The key element of the concept is the existence of multiple commodity and non-commodity outputs produced by agriculture based economy. It emphasizes that in addition to producing food and fibre, agriculture also produces wide range of non –commodity goods and services, shapes the environment, affects social and cultural systems and contribute to economic growth. In Ihitte Uboma, agriculture is multifunctional as it is a source of multiple outputs which is not limited to food and fibre. It has gone a long way in producing non-commodity output such as the creation of employment and establishment of facilities that aid the growth of the economy. It should also be noted that women in Ihitte Uboma are multifunctional in their operation nature as this study attempt to show.

Theoretical framework: Women in Development Theory

This work adopts the women in development theory. The women in development theory, is a theory that came into prominence in the 1970’s. Women were invisible in early economic development theory which was influenced by a prevailing developed world middle class view. For instance, Marxist theory did not recognize the importance of women in reproducing the labour force as well as their work. To challenge this social construction, women scholars began to document women’s economic impact. This gave

rise to the emergence of the women in the development theory. Activist of this theory advocate for targeting resources at women and make visible the significant productive capacity of women or their income generating contribution. They emphasized on programmes that recognize women's economic role and argue that the problem of development is in the exclusion of women from real development process. The proponents therefore argue that economic projects would be more effective and more efficient if women were included and also sought for ways to integrate women into the main stream of the economy.

One of the strongest advocates/proponents of this theory is Ester Boserup. Her avowals are contained in her book, *Women in Economic Development*,¹⁴ exclusively dedicated to elucidating the various aspects of the theory. She recorded the many hours women spent carrying out survival activities as growing, harvesting, processing and preparing food. There exist lots of connection between the theory and the condition of women in the study area. Firstly, the study brings to limelight and makes visible, the economic contributions of women in Ihitte Uboma. Secondly, the work shows that women complement men and without them, the economy of the area wouldn't get to where it is today. Thirdly, the work exposes how far women have been integrated into the economy of Ihitte Uboma. Finally the theory just like the study advocates for targeting resources at women and empowering them. From the foregoing, this study aligns itself with the women in development theory in explaining women in the economy of Ihitte Uboma. Besides, human society in all of its forms of existence and nature is predicated on its economy. Economic development provides the indices to measure the extent to which a society has experienced changes and growth or otherwise over time. Human factors are a fundamental determinant of economic development. Ihitte Uboma women like the men folk are also considered major determinants of economic development in the area.

Women in the Various Sectors of the Economy: Agricultural Production

Agricultural production is a complex and challenging process. Globally, women constitute half of the world's population and produce most of the agricultural products. Women are increasingly active in virtually every agricultural production in Ihitte Uboma. They played this significant role to a varying degree. They account for more than half of the work force by participating in different activities either directly or indirectly. They are seen in almost every agriculture activities except felling of trees and spraying of chemicals. Their role goes in line with the assertion of Boserup who contends that "nearly all the tasks connected with food production are performed by African rural women with the exception of tree felling and other heavy duties¹⁵". They participated mainly in bush clearing,

weeding, sowing, planting, harvesting, transporting and marketing of produce. During the harvesting season women are maximally utilized. Patience Azubuike in an interview stated that “women carry bundle of harvested crops as load on their heads and mostly on bare foot to their various homes or markets”¹⁶. In some cases, their young children aid them in conveying produce out of the farm, while those with the vehicle would usually park at a certain distance from the farm due to bad roads. Agriculture is indeed, an integral part of their daily life activity practiced throughout the year at different levels. Some farmers planted crops along the river banks during the dry seasons. These were mostly vegetables to help sustain their families. Farmers also planted on family land, church land and community land. For instance, in recent past, some people were given a piece of land in some churches and communities in the area like Onicha, Amainyi and Abueke to farm on and realize funds for the projects.

The women also participated in livestock farming. Livestock plays an important role in supporting women and improving their financial situation. In Ihitte Uboma, two third of livestock farmers are women. They specialized in poultry, fishery, keeping of snail, pigs, sheep and goats. They are prominent in managing poultry which is popular in the area. According to Claribel Okeke, fish farmer, informed that “live stock management is a very lucrative business in Ihitte Uboma stating that she has not been to the market to buy fish because her pond provide for her family’s need”¹⁷. Ebere Mary on her part stated that she has poultry and it has been a source of income for her family since the death of her husband¹⁸. Ebere Mary on her part stated that she has poultry and it has been a source of income for her family since the death of her husband¹⁹.

The role of women in the agricultural production is very evident in the area. Not minding the dual responsibility on the shoulders of these women, they still engage in effective farming. The women apart from taking up the responsibility of agricultural production also undertake household upkeep and other specialized employment. Being a rural area, they have their farms nearer to their homes to attend to after doing other paid employment. Most women are nurses, teachers, traders, church workers, government workers among others. Patience Azubuike, a full time farmer and trader had stated that through her occupation she supports her husband with the needs of their family and contribute her quota for the development of the church and community at large⁵. Joseph Okorie stated that aside full time women farmers, most teachers are also good farmers as land is always made available to them at the school premises²⁰. It is safe to say that all categories of women in Ihitte Uboma in one way or the other have access to land for farming. These lands are used mainly to cultivate edible crops and surpluses are sold in markets around the area.

Rice and Cereal Production

Rice being one of the less important cereals widely grown in Nigeria, has become the most popular staple food in the country and second popular crop after maize in the world. It has moved from being a luxury food eaten mainly on Christmas days and other festivities. Rice is one of the cereals that is planted and harvested in the area. Ihitte Uboma is gifted with the ecology for rice production in some communities such as Eziam, Onicha, Uboma, Umuawuchi, and Umunumu. The J.P Company employed a large number of rice farmers in her rice field at Onicha Uboma. The rice has grown in popularity over the year because it is a stone free rice. The area was assigned to be developed by the World Bank in the post Nigeria - Biafra war in 1977 for rice production. The failure of the WB to develop the area caused the community engage in rice production at a low capacity using manual tools. However, JP Company is making efforts to mechanise rice production to cover most of the thousands of hectares of land. Mr. Eze Ndubuisi, a rice farmer from Abakaliki in Ebonyi State, who engaged in rice farming in Onicha Uboma stated that in a favourable climatic condition, about 60 bags of rice is gotten from one hectare thereby having about 20,000 bags of rice while in an unfavourable condition produces about 30 bags of rice in per hectare²¹.

The women in the area are not left out in the cultivation of the rice. The indigenous women and women from other states especially, Ebonyi state aid in the cultivation of rice. Eze Ndubuisi said that women are key players in the rice producing industry. They are the main cultivators of rice in the area. The women constitute over 70 percent of rice farmers in the area²². Similarly on women in the rice industry, Madam Kate said the role of the women has been indescribable. In her words "there would not have been a rice mill and field in this area if not for a woman. So many people get paid employment because of this woman who established a rice mill in Onicha Uboma, which is one of the greatest achievements²³. The women participated in the processes of producing the rice, from preparing and clearing of the land to the broadcasting of the seeds, harvesting and other processes at the mill. Many have their individual mill apart from the JP Company. It was discovered that the individual rice farm was a lot exhausting as it involved mostly manual labour.



Fig. 1: A Section of the J.P Rice Fields at Umuakara Community



Fig. 2: Mechanized tools for rice production in Umuakara, Onicha Uboma

Source: Picture taken during the field work

Women and the community have benefited by forming new relationships especially with rice farmers from Ebonyi state who also bring their experience to improve cultivation in the area. Their families lack no basic needs as they became better helpers to their husbands. Some took up the rice production as full time job while others took it up as a part time job. So many women combine rice farming with their irregular employments. On the importance of the rice mill and its services to the people, O. C. Okeke said it has the ability to produce stone free rice. He also informed that for some time, they have been using it for their church diocesan synod²⁴.

The women faced a lot of challenges in their rice production effort. These challenges included the issue of bad road, inadequate labour to help in their large individual farms because of lack of mechanized tools in the area. Poor financial capital also poses a major challenge to them as some people are unable to process their rice due to lack of finance to

facilitate such process. Ndubuisi decried the absence and support of government which affects adversely, the quantity and variety of rice sieves like the one used by JP rice Company. The non availability financial assistance to the women to establish personal rice farms at their various fields, make the place in waste. On the aspect of cereal production, maize was the commonest cereal produced in the area. It was majorly a woman and children crop planted along side other crops such as cassava, yam, pepper, vegetable, and cocoyam. After harvesting the maize, it is either eaten roasted, fried or cooked. It could also be used for processing of pap, cornflower or flakes. Patience Azubuike stated that “maize was not so much a lucrative business as they all planted and harvested almost at the same time, though a few farmers practiced late planting”²⁵. It served mostly the feeding needs of families and provides income for those who planted in large quantities. The *nri oka* (maize food), a special delicacy was processed out of the maize seeds.

Entrepreneurship, Arts and Crafts Sector

Ihitte Uboma women complemented farming with arts and crafts and some practiced it as their main occupation. They were actively involved in craft production to make ends meet. Their participation was not mainly based on the timing of next agricultural activity except in rare cases. Their activities went beyond part time production to full time production. Before 1991, the issue of non agricultural produce being on part-time bases as an economic activity as J. D Flint contends was applicable to Ihitte Uboma. In his words “a large number of people regarded craft as a part time activity normally practiced when the peak of farming was over”²⁶. In Ihitte Uboma, it was not completely so as many people were/are fully engaged into arts and crafts as lifetime business. Recently, the participation of women in non agricultural production became a highly sort one as the women at home and diaspora helped in achieving family goals and needs through their craft. Some of the art and craft of these women include basket, akpara production, knitting, broom making, pottery, soap production, fashion designing, decoration, and mat weaving weaving, among many others.

Basket (Akpara) Production

Ihitte Uboma is no doubt, an agrarian society, basket served very many different purposes. In fact, it was of invaluable use to farmers in the area. Basket/akpara production simply known as basketry is a process of weaving extracts from palm fibers into a basket. It is considered to be one of the oldest craft and continuously fits into current needs of the society. It served the purposes of carrier, hat, mat, bawl basket and many others. Basket making in the area is not gender specialized craft rather some fishers were known for that

in some of the villages. The *ekete* which is the wood type and the flat oval shaped typed known as *akpara* were the most needed and popular one in the area. The women were involved in making basket. It served as a source of revenue to the families involved.

Textile and Knitting

This is a very area where wool yarn is manipulated to create a fabric or textile. The women of the area were good knitters. They knitted mostly caps, sweaters, hair nets, sandals, bags and many others. According to a skilled informant who specialises in knitting by name Ogechi, informed that in Onicha Uboma community, “knitting business requires little or no capital to start. It is a very lucrative business for any interested person to learn the skill within a short period”²⁷. Further on the peculiar nature of the knitting skill, the business only demands patience and people patronize such business because of its uniqueness. Women do not need educational certificate to engage in this peculiar and special craft. It is one way of adding value to people’s income and life.”²⁸

Broom Production

Brooms have been used for centuries to sweep off dirt and dust in and around the house, offices, and whatever environment one finds him or herself in most traditional African society nay Igboland. It is a common household item segregated by two types. The first is made with natural material while the other is plastic broom. In Ihitte Uboma, the broom is made up of natural materials. Brooms are made from palm fronds (leaves) by mostly women and children. In the area, brooms have been produced in large quantities and tied in an attractive was by sometime dyeing the head or handle in different colours. There are some that add pole so that they can be used to clean high buildings and the ceilings. These brooms are sold in large quantity to distributors from the city centres such as Umuahia, Aba, Owerri and Even Lagos and Abuja. Apart from the short brooms, there is another type known as the *akpankpa*, it is the palm front itself used in sweeping the surrounding – *mbara azi*. Mary Ebere told the writer that “the business is flexible and anyone who knows packaging will make quick money within a short time”²⁹. Through the broom production craft, so many women have complimented their husbands. Broom sellers also contribute to help in completing church and village projects and train their children up to tertiary institution.

Pottery Production

Pottery was probably the earliest craft practiced by the Igbo. Archaeological data from Afikpo and Nsukka indicate that pottery had been produced in Igboland for over three thousand (3000) years³⁰. Pottery production is not as popular in Ihitte Uboma as it is in some traditional Igbo areas Uhuru, Ishiagu, Nsukka, Afikpo, Okigwe, Umuahia, among others. The craft is preserved for women but not practiced in all communities except for

those that possess clay valleys. Neighbours from Okigwe, Umuahia, and people of the area cooperate during the production process. Some of the items that were produced included household utensils like clay pot for preserving water and others used for musical instruments. In Ihitte Uboma, potters used a substance called *ngba* to mix their clay and the decoration was done after firing. Pottery is veritable source of income as the women made regular income and assisted their family. Recently, the pottery industry has not been active as it was on the eve of 1960. The influx of modern utensils that could serve the same purpose as the pots has made the potters products less desirable.

Soap Production

Soap production is a craft in Ihitte Uboma that dates back to time immemorial. It is one of the special crafts Ihitte Uboma women were known. Everyone and every household need soap for laundry work. The process of preparation is not cumbersome to say the least. Producers make use of Shea butter oil, coconut oil and other chemicals to process the black soap (*ncha nkota*) which is very useful to the people of the community. The black soap has medicinal value. It helps in clearing rashes, pimples and the maintenance of healthy skin and body. It is also used in taking care of a new born baby. Mrs. Josephine Ogu, stated that “the industry is not cost exhausting rather it takes nothing to make it but one gains a lot after production. She also stated that the soap is good for the face, body hair and also good for treating skin problem”³¹.

Fashion Designing, Decoration and Cake Production

Fashion designing industry is one of the valuable economic activities practiced by Ihitte Uboma women. The industry has lots of women specializing in one aspect of the industry or the other from time immemorial. These aspects involved weaving, bead making, tailoring, turbans and fascinator making, making of Ankara, slippers and hand bags. The styles and designs changes from period to period. For instance, fascinator and making of Ankara slippers, shoes and bags are all recent innovation. Ijeoma Nwaigwe, a fashion designer stated that “it is a very lucrative and challenging business. Anyone designer that want to succeed and make profit would have to move along with current styles and designs to make in the business”³¹. When asked about the economic importance and financial implications to her customers, she said the prices differ, practitioners consider location and style. Some of the customers that returned from the city with complicated styles are charged more while customers from within the village are charged less. Some people abroad send clothes to be made for them. They market their turbans and fascinators outside Ihitte Uboma depending on the demand¹⁹. Fashion design is not exclusively for women, but women are the dominant gender in the business in the area. Some women specialize in this area separately while others combined the three at once.

Cake making and decoration goes hand in hand while catering services comes on its own. The services are needed during events. It is a moveable enterprise. It created employment opportunists, served as a craft anyone can partake in and made things easier for the women. So many children and households were raised through such means. It is time consuming with enough stress but it financially rewarding to the individuals involved in it.

Watch Technician

The multi talented women of the area were also involved in repairing watches, selling watches and clocks and selling watch spare parts. Some of these women were seen at the market places or at their respective stalls. Mrs. Martha a watch technician started the job since 1993, it was introduced to me by my father and he encouraged me to go into the business.



Fig. 3. With Mrs. Martha a watch technician

Source: Picture taken during the field work

Today my life has changed because of my obedience. I am able to support my husband, we have trained our children in school and we also have two cars. I am not bothered about white collar jobs because this pays more”³³

Mining and Quarry Industry

A quarry is a place, typically a large deep pit, from which stones and other materials are been extracted. The quarry industry is one of very lucrative industries in the area. The business is engaged in by both men and women. To start a quarry in the area, an individual would purchase a plot of land in the stone part and employ manual labourers in digging out the stones. This is followed by the breaking of the stones into pieces or

different sizes using a sledge hammer. The broken pieces once gathered are sold to prospective buyers. Many women in the area and other settlers from the Abakaliki area engage in local quarry production due to absence of mechanized system. The women specialized in breaking the stones which was dogged out by the men. Mrs. Esther Njoku stated that stone extraction and breaking has been one of the toughest jobs in the area for both women and men. She also noted that she participated in it because she had no other means of financial support. The business is a tough one and leaves the individuals involved suffering from pain. It benefited mostly the land owner and buyers. One of the most challenges faced by the industry is lack of machine or help in breaking the stone in the area and the non presence of government support to the industry³⁴. It is noteworthy at this point that the industry involves mainly part time workers who combine quarry with other occupation such as trading and farming to compliment. Women dominate local quarry business in Onicha Uboma, Abueke, Ikperere and Nzunomi communities in Ihitte Uboma.



Fig.4. A picture of the local quarry industry

Source: Picture taken during the field work

Trade Commodities and Market Organization

Trade in Ihitte Uboma involved mainly buying and selling of various items or commodities by traders in the markets in the area. The people involved in trade to compliment the different agricultural activities abound in ecological conditions which made some villages produce more of a certain item than others. Therefore, trade was unavoidable as it provided the vent for people to buy what they could not produce. On trade, O.N. Njoku states that “trade was in consequence a crucial component of the economy, for it was through trade that disparities in productive capacity between

commodities were bridged.³⁵ The local and long distance trade were the two major types of trade in existence, each having specified commodity and organization it is known for.

The local trade also known as the rural retail market trade took place among members of a community. It developed naturally largely due to the complimentary role it played in providing for the needs of the community. It didn't pose a lot of transportation, logistical and security challenges. It also curbed the existence of large amount of money for the trade. The trade was dominated by women because it was seen as an adjunct to women's normal domestic chores. According to G. T. Basden "it might be affirmed that the whole of the native trade is in the hands of the women and by them largely the markets were controlled"³⁶. The items/commodity was predominately food items produced locally and also non food items. These included yam, cocoyam, cassava delicacies, host of vegetable, fruits, *egusi*, *ogbono*, *achi*, kitchen cutlery, mortal broom, baskets, clothes, plastic containers, plantain, oil bean (ugba), palm oil, and kernel, dried and stock fish, and other numerous local products. This short distance trade was carried on between the villages/communities in the area.

The long distance trade developed as a result of the people's quest to satisfy their individual and collective wants beyond mere existence. O.N. Njoku has said "LDT may be seen, therefore as a mechanism by which the indigenous economy tried to overcome the limitations of local trade"³⁷. In this trade, the women played a major role in the persecution of this trade dealing on almost all sort of items. They moved to market in all other states and local governments to get the items. Some of these markets include Abo Mbaise, Onitsha main market, Umuahia, Lagos, and in recent times Dubai, China, Turkey, and the United States. The women brought or sold items from these areas. Some had to way bill their products from the producers. Some of the items involved mainly were palm product, clothing, medicinal *Aju* Mbaise, shoes and sandals, clothes, wrapper, among others. G.T. Basden commenting on the trading activities of women argued that "practically, the whole of the trade in Igbo country is in the hands of the women and they are extremely capable"³⁸. Ihitte Uboma women are no doubt an integral part of Basden's description.

Market Organization

Markets were generally well organized and regulated and its affairs and cleanliness left in the hands of the women. O.N. Njoku avers that marketing was an important criterion by which women's value was judged in the society. Marketing was central in the lives of the women³⁹. Basden again observed that "the Igbo women could not keep away from local markets anymore than an English women can be kept away from regent street"⁴⁰. Ihitte Uboma was mainly organized in eight-day period. This enables the people to prepare their

goods for the next market. However, there was always a market to attend every four days. The men also attended the market with their goods such as goat, palm wine, yam among others.

The cleaning of the markets remains reserved for the women who also has different association formed by them. In the local markets, divisions were marked out in different sectors for the selling of each product. For instance, there was an area for meat sellers, vegetable sellers, yam, other food stuffs and goods. Apart from buying and selling, the markets also serve for other social purposes. G.T. Basden “remarked that on market days, practically the whole of female population moved to the market place either to trade or to enjoy the general entertainment such gathering afford”⁴¹. Markets were information centres, gossip points for women and their friends.

Trading was done mostly but not entirely in the market place.⁴² Markets in Ihitte Uboma like in many Igbo communities is organized according to the four Igbo market days of Eke, Orie, Afor and Nkwo. There are different markets in Ihitte Uboma. The major market day in the area is the Eke. There is at least a different market in each community in the area. There is the Eke Ikpa market in Amainyi Nta, Eke Isinweke which has grown to become a daily market, Eke Umuawuchi, Eke Egbu among others. These markets are organized on eight-day basis and the proximity of the markets provides that there is a market to be attended every four days in Ihitte Uboma. It is worthy of note here that most of the markets were built with wooden materials and thatch for the roof. However, one could hardly see such structures due largely to modernisation. The markets have grown from ordinary village gathering into semi modern markets with modern structures. Some are made of Iron polls and zinc. There are also lock-up-shops and stalls in the market areas. Besides, selling and buying of goods and services go on in Ihitte Uboma in other venues, not necessarily in the market place. Some of such venues include stores and homes where people could actually get whatever they need without waiting for a market day. There are also mobile markets with moveable goods, the products are moved from one place to another on a daily bases to satisfy the needs of consumers. In some cases, the consumer ordered for the goods desired for and they get delivered to their doorsteps. Women are active participants in trade and market developments in Ihitte Uboma.

Women Entrepreneur Association

Kuratho et al writes that “entrepreneurship is the dynamic process of creating incremental wealth⁴³. Wealth is created by individuals (entrepreneurs) who possessed a common trait such as creativity, innovation, and participation in Ihitte Uboma. There are lots of female entrepreneurs each specializing in one or two business or the other. The women engage in

entrepreneur activities as a means of assisting their husband in taking care of daily needs of the family. Various entrepreneurial activities practiced by the women in the area include Garri processing, palm oil processing, baking, *moi moi*, plantain chips, poultry production, tailoring, palm kernel cracking, and oil bean processing. Women entrepreneurship associations therefore entails the coming together of women to source for means of creating wealth or helping its members raise funds for their various entrepreneurial activities. In Ihitte Uboma, such associations only existed at the church level, community level, or at the cooperative level. They sourced for funds as a group and managed establishment as a group also. Women form these associations in their various communities, churches, and villages. The associations were formed to sustain the wellbeing of the women. In the cause of doing this, they engaged in entrepreneurial activities as a means of sourcing for funds. For instance, some of such activities included taking on lease palm trees to process its oil and kernel, after which they are sold. Lands were cultivated by them and the proceeds were sold afterwards. They engaged in empowerment programmes to assist some of their members establish business. Some empowerment came in form of cash, raw materials, foods, and etcetera. Besides, as a means of empowerment, some entrepreneurs taught their children different skills by organizing skill acquisition programmes to assist them. In such programmes, the participants were taught soap making, turban, and fascinator making and bead making⁴⁴.

At the market level, women formed cooperatives. There were two major types of market associations or cooperatives. The first was formed to bring people together with the sole aim of combining to raise funds. At this level, the women contributed money to the financial secretary of such association. Some associations made daily contributions while others made weekly contributions. Such contributions are shared at the end of each year and everyone gets back the amount they had contributed. Daily amount could be N100 to N500 naira or more. Patience Azubuike told the writer that she is one of the beneficiaries of these associations and the contribution she makes enables her sustain her family by the end and beginning of a new year⁴⁵. The second association was focused on lending money out to the women with interest and collateral. This helped in settling financial challenges that confront people in planning for their occasions, such as children's school fees, health bills and family upkeep. The women entrepreneurial associations have done well in assisting Ihitte Uboma women but it has also faced few challenges such as inadequate capital, poor management technique, scarcity and high cost of raw materials, and poor infrastructural.

Challenges of Infrastructure to Economic Growth

The invaluable role of infrastructure to economic development cannot be over emphasized. The term infrastructure refers to the basic equipments and structures such as electricity, good road network, mechanized equipments that are needed for a community or organization to function properly. They contributed to economic growth by increasing productivity and providing services which enhance the quality of life of the people. Infrastructure is the key element of poverty alleviation. In Ihitte Uboma, Ndubuisi Eze indicated that poor infrastructural facilities have been the major challenge militating against the full participation and progress of women in economic activities⁴⁶. Such challenges included-

Lack of Accessible Roads

Most of the women reported about the impassable nature of roads as one of the challenges they faced. There is no doubt that Ihitte Uboma had dilapidated roads both at the urban and rural areas. Poor road network inhibits free access into the food producing areas, and this imposed high cost of transportation on the people and their produce. It reduced the ability of people to access high quality input been an agricultural zone. The bad roads made it difficult to access the markets from the farm by both farmers and buyers. For instance, the location of the rice mill at Umudim needs a lot of people to locating it, but the bad nature of it road make it nearly inaccessible.



Fig. 6: Pictures of the road leading to Onicha Uboma, a local quarry and a rice producing community

Source: Picture taken during the field work taken in 2019.

Some women had difficulty bringing their produce to markets, because of the costly means of transportation. Transportation is usually on the high side, hence, limiting its availability to a few people that could afford it. It also hindered their access to other social infrastructure such as education and health facilities. Improvement of rural roads seems to be a clear means by which large number of people might acquire the opportunity to participate in the market economy and thereby raise themselves out of poverty.

Erratic Power Supply

According to Igbokwe “the unsteady power supply and poor state of Nigeria power system tend to hamper business activities.”⁴⁷ This situation applies to Ihitte Uboma. Some did not have stand-by generators to effectively power and sustain their businesses. The extra cost made by business people in providing generators raised the cost of production and decreased their net returns. The shortage of electricity affects the economic growth of the area, this stems from the fact that it caused a lot of damage to the household and economic sectors whose activities were limited due to non availability of regular power supply. Besides, the poor state of the market outlets constitutes another big challenge faced by women in their efforts at economic development of Ihitte Uboma. The use of old zincs in the building allows rain to disturb traders and their wares and businesses and sometimes, the over population in the market places leaving some people without a roof over their heads.

Conclusion

Ihitte Uboma women have been part of the development trajectories of their communities. The economic development of Ihitte Uboma would remain incomplete without the role of women. This work shows that women play a vital role in the growth of the economy of Ihitte Uboma especially, within the period of the study 1991-2015. Their role corresponds to the changing circumstances in the society. As noted in the work, the area was formerly known as Etiti. It embraces two clans the Ihitte and Uboma clans. Ihitte Uboma is a traditional agrarian society with one of the best fertile lands which earned her the food basket of Imo State. Being a food basket, the people of the area are pre-dominantly farmers. Land in the area as in most Igbo communities was controlled by the eldest of each family with women having no traditional rights to ownership of lands. Varieties of crops such as rice, cassava, yam, cocoyam, oil bean, plantain, pepper, vegetables, pineapples, etc. were cultivated on their rich soil. The animal based industry is extant in the economic activity in the area. Livestock such as goats, sheep, poultry, snails, pigs, were kept to complement agriculture. The mixed farming and shifting cultivation form the two major farming systems in the area. Transportation is a major sector of every economy and economic development. Unfortunately, the people have a very bad road network which

hindered effective production and is distribution of the goods and services from the farms to the markets.

The traditional Igbo economy rested on three major sectors -agriculture, manufacture and trade. The economic activity of women or contribution to the growth of the economy is based on the three sectors. In agricultural production, the women have been very active in planting, harvesting of crops, weeding of the farm, and distribution of farm produce. Women complimented men in other crops such as cultivation and harvesting of rice, palm oil and cassava production. They do not have specific areas they focused. There were no job specialization for the men and women in the agricultural sector. Everyone worked according to what the situation presented. The vital role played by the women in the traditional economy also extended to the non agricultural sector. This included arts and crafts. They participated in the quarry industry and trade. Their arts and craft kept increasing from the traditional act of pottery, basketry and broom production. soap production and other skilled jobs such as knitting, technician, decoration and cake production and many others. Their role in the trading sector was superb; they grew from going to any market to sell products to having a movable and daily market. One could get anything he or she have at any day and anytime. The cleaning of the markets rested on the women. The markets were organized and regulated in 8 market days. The women formed entrepreneur association to assist their husband with the needs of their homes through their savings. The women were faced with various infrastructural challenges in the course of their participation in economic activities. These challenges came in the form of poor power supply, bad road, and poor state of market outlet.

Not minding the challenges the women faced, they resiliently contributed through their activities to the social and economic development in their communities. It came in various packages such as erection of church halls, fencing of churches and schools, building of passages, market stores, and other educational projects. These projects were handled by the women and other climes in collaboration with the male folk. They all aimed at helping to improve the quality of social and economic life of the people. The women faced the challenge of neglect and near absence of empowerment by the government. They organized empowerment program on their communities to effectively contribute to the economic development of Ihitte Uboma.

From the above study, the indispensable role of women in the economy of Ihitte Uboma has become clear. Virtually in every area of the economy, the women played dynamic roles in developing the resources and economic potentials of the communities in Ihitte Uboma. The study among other things considers the various economic activities of the women ranging from crop farming, animal husbandry, trading, food processing, and

fashion designing and so on. The review of the major findings shows obviously that the contribution of the government in initiating projects is at low ebb. The women mostly initiated community development projects such as building of stalls and markets, health care center, kernel and oil mills, among others. These economic activities were funded by the women through fund raising exercises, personal contributions, and assistance from philanthropists and funds from established enterprises. Lack of government support, lack of social amenities, family/motherhood engagements, cultural restrictions, financial constraints and so on were recorded as obstacles encountered by the women. Provision of soft loans, social amenities and economic, social and political empowerment of the women would be of immense assistance to the women.

End Notes

1. Olaudá Equaino, *Equaino's Travel*, in O.N Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th -21st Centuries*, Nsukka: Great AP Express Publisher limited, 2014, p. 10.
2. E. Isichei, *A History of Igbo People*, London: MacMillan Press, 1977, p.27.
3. H. Heaton, *Economic History of Europe*, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1984, p. 78.
4. C. Okafor, 69 Years, Community King, Interviewed at Umuawuchi, 2nd January 2018.
5. C.T Chime, "Women Participation in Capacity Building and Leadership in the age of Globalization", *African Women International Magazine, Vol. 3, No1*, 2012, p.9
6. G. Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1960*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 6
7. M. Ebere, 62 Years, Farmer, interviewed at Amainyi Ukwu, 29th December 2017.
8. O.N Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th -21st Centuries*, Nsukka: Great AP Express Publisher Limited, 2014, pp. 56 & 57.
9. O.N Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*..... p.117
10. U. Obiora, *A Catalogue of Exhibition of Painting, Textile and Tapestry*, Owerri: Soronity, 1986, p.1
11. A.E Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 1981, p.141.
12. G.T Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, London: Frankass Ltd, 1966, p.138.
13. W.J Kalu, "Motherhood Concept Among Igbo Women" in E.J Otagburuagu & A. E Afigbo (eds.) *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio-Economic Change Before The Dawn of the 21st Century*, Nsukka: Institute of Africa Studies, University of Nigeria, 2008, p.64
14. B. Ester, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1970, p.14. E. Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, New York: St. Martin's press, 1990, p.283.
15. P. Azubuike, 56 years, Farmer, Interviewed at Umuawuchi, June 2018.
16. C.C. Okeke, 56 years, Teacher/Church Worker, Interviewed at Amainyi, June 2018.
17. M. Ebere, 62 years, Farmers, Interviewed at Amainyi Ukwu, 29th Dec 2017.
18. P. Azubuike, 56 years, Interview Cited.
19. J. Okorie, Principal, 66 years, Interviewed at Umuawuchi, on 17th march 2018.
20. N. Eze, 62 years, Farmer/Teacher, Interviewed at Umukaram, on June 2018.
21. N. Eze, 62 years, Interview Cited
22. K. Onuegbu, 47 Years, Farmer, Interviewed at Onicha Uboma, on June 2018.

23. O.C. Okeke, 64 Years, Anglican Priest, Interviewed at Onicha Uboma, June 2018.
24. P. Azubuike, 56 Years, Interview Cited.
25. J. E Flint, "Economic Change in West Africa in the 19th Century" in A.F. Ajayi Crowther(eds.) *Economic History of West Africa*, London: 1975 p. 386
26. O. Igbokwe, 33 Years, Business woman, Interviewed at Abueke, 4th Jan. 2018.
27. O. Igbokwe, 33 Years, Interview Cited.
28. M. Ebere, 62 yrs, Interview Cited.
29. D. D. Hartle, "Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria", Nigeria Magazine. 93, 1967
30. J. Ogu, 54 Years, Interviewed at Umuawueke, 2nd January 2018.
31. I. Okere, 60 Years, Fashion Designer, Interviewed at Isinweke, January 2018.
32. I. Okere, 60 Years, Interview Cited.
33. M. Ezeruwa, 56 Years, Interviewed at Amainyi, June 2018.
34. E. Njoku, 43 Years, Business Woman Interviewed at Umuakara, June 2018.
35. O. N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th and 20th Centuries*. Enugu: Magnet Computer Services, 2001. p.81
36. G. T. Basden, Among the Igbo of Nigerian: Alias The Igbo as seen by the Early White man", Lagos: University Publishing Company, 1982, p.89
37. O.N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th and 20th Century* p.172
38. G.T Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*...p.39
39. O. N Njoku, *Economic history of Nigeria, 19th and 21st Century*....p.120&122
40. G. T Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*....p.89
41. G. T Basden, *Among the Ibos*....p.56
42. O. N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*....p117
43. D. F. Kuratho and M.H Richard, *Entrepreneurship- A Contemporary Approach*, New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001.
44. O. Chikezie, 47 years, Teacher/Church Worker, Interviewed at Abueke, June 2018.
45. P. Azubuike, 56 Years, interview Cited.
46. N. Eze, 62 Years, interview Cited.
47. N. Eze, 62 Years, Interview Cited.