THE CALABAR HISTORICAL JOURNAL
Vol. 14, No. 2, December 2025, pp. 198-219, ISSN: 2315-8816
https://thecalabarhistoricaljournal.com/

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN IN IMO STATE: A PRE-IPOB ANALYSIS, 1999-2011

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Abstract

Women in Imo State have historically played crucial roles in both economic and social spheres. However, their experiences before the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation have often been overlooked in scholarly discourse. This paper examines women's socio-economic activities in Imo State and their contributions to households and communities before the heightened Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation, a period marked by relative stability. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, relying on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women from diverse backgrounds and areas within the six purposively sampled Local Government Areas in Imo State. The paper draws on feminist narratives and social capital theory to explain the structural factors and social networks shaping women's socio-economic realities in the pre-IPOB agitation era. Findings indicate that the period 1999 to 2011 experienced a relatively stable socio-economic environment that enabled significant economic participation among women. This was particularly evident in agriculture, petty trading, and small- and large-scale enterprises, enabling women in Imo State to contribute to household and community economies while benefiting from social support networks. The paper establishes a crucial background understanding of women's socio-economic status in Imo State before the period of heightened IPOB agitation, highlighting existing vulnerabilities and strengths that shaped their experiences during subsequent conflict.

Keywords*: Socio-economic Status, Feminist Narratives, Social Capital, IPOB Agitation, Imo State Women*

Introduction

Socio-economic status is a multifaceted concept that describes a person's, family's, or group's social and economic standing within a society. Max Weber's work on social stratification highlights the interplay of class (economic position), status (social honour or prestige), and party (power in the political sphere) in determining an individual's place in society.[1] His ideas laid the foundation for modern frameworks of socio-economic status. Research dating back to the 1970s highlights women's

[1] Max Weber, Economy and Society, ed. Guenther Rothand Claus Wittich, vol.1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 926–39

pivotal role in global socio-economic development, demonstrating that increased economic autonomy correlates with smaller, healthier families and higher investments in education.[2] Furthermore, higher socio-economic status directly improves maternal health outcomes, broadens access to healthcare, and reduces poverty-related disease rates.[3]

In Nigeria, women have historically made substantial contributions across various sectors, often navigating complex political, cultural, economic, and social settings. Their strength and determination are particularly evident in their involvement in the informal economy and their crucial roles in household and community sustenance.[4] In her analysis of the Nigerian women's movement, Hussaina Abdullah emphasises how women sustain local economies and domestic stability through extensive informal trading networks and agricultural labour, even while operating under broader structural constraints.[5] In his foundational work on economic development, W. Arthur Lewis emphasised women's significant, though often undervalued, contributions in developing economies, particularly in the informal sector and agriculture.[6] Studies such as Kamene Okonjo's examination of Igbo women's roles underscore their integral participation in both community politics and economic organisation.[7]

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[2] Ester Boserup, Women's Role in Economic Development (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970),85–98; Irene Tinker, Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 4–15; Esther Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development, *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no.4 2012): 105 1–79.

[3] World Health Organization WHO), World Health Statistics 2010 (Geneva: WHO Press, 2010), 4–10.

[4] Hussaina Abdullah, "Wifeism and Activism: The Nigerian Women's Movement" in The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 209 – 35.

[5] Hussaina Abdullah, "Wifeism and Activism:

[6] W. Arthur Lewis, The Theory of Economic Growth (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), 139–42

[7] Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual- Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 174–78.

In Imo State, particularly from 1999 to 2011, women created positive impacts in the local economy, agriculture, education and healthcare, despite historically entrenched patriarchal structures, such as traditional norms around land ownership and limited representation in informal decision-making processes. While much scholarly attention on the State has focused on periods of significant sociopolitical upheaval, there is a notable dearth of research on women's lived experiences before the period of agitation, a significant gap this paper attempts to fill. To address this problem, this paper therefore aims to unravel the socio-economic status of women in Imo State before the period of the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) agitation from 1999-2011, bringing to the fore how their involvement in agriculture, trade, and social activities like ceremonies, health, and education contributed extensively to household income and the stability of the communities at large.

This paper utilises a qualitative research approach. This methodology is specifically chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of women's socio-economic activities in Imo State. While primary data from interviews and focus group discussions formed the bedrock of our analysis, secondary data provided essential contextual information and supported our findings. These included community reports, organisational records from women's groups, contemporary news reports, relevant academic papers, and historical accounts relevant to the 1999-2011 period in Imo State. This paper is geographically limited to Imo State.

To avoid generalisation, the paper focuses on six (6) purposively selected local government areas: two (2) from each Senatorial Zone—Aboh Mbaise and Oru West for Okigwe Zone, Oru East and Oguta for Owerri Zone, and Onuimo and Ohaji/Egbema for Orlu Zone. The year 1999 was chosen as the starting point because it marked the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which ushered in reforms in various sectors of the country that related to women's rights and socioeconomic opportunities. The paper terminates in 2011, a year that marked a gradual shift from the perceived peace and serenity in Imo State and a build-up to the emergence of IPOB agitation. By analysing

these experiences, we can better understand the challenges women faced during the subsequent period of agitations and the long-term implications of conflict on their socio-economic statuses.

Theoretical Framework

This study grounds its theoretical framework in Feminist Narrative Theory and Social Capital Theory. Feminist narrative theory examines how stories are constructed and interpreted through a gendered lens, deconstructing patriarchal storytelling conventions to highlight alternative narratives centred on women's agency and lived experiences.[8] The framework illustrates how women, despite systemic marginalisation, actively construct vital economic spaces, sustain households, and build durable community networks that challenge assumptions of passive subjugation. Founded by Pierre Bourdieu, and Robert D. Putnam, Social Capital theory posits that, social networks significantly influence individuals and communal well-being, thereby enhancing access to information, credit, and collective action.[9] Women in Imo State utilized social capital through informal associations like market groups and cooperatives for information sharing and collective bargaining.[10] Social networks were critical for informal sector trades, agriculture, artisans, etc to access credit and market information.[11] Despite patriarchal controls, local associations like *Umuna, Umuchukwu, the Omu Out* system, and the *Esusu* system empowered women by enhancing their social capital. However, social capital theory has been criticised for reinforcing inequalities or excluding outsiders from the association.

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[8] Susan S. Lanser, "Toward a Feminist Narratology," Style 20, no. 3 (1986): 341–63.

[9] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258; Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 18–24

[10] Ada Okwuosa, "Women's Associations in Nigeria: A Tool for Economic Empowerment," African Journal of Gender Studies in 4, no. 1 (1998): 15–28.

[11] Kate Meagher, "Social Capital or Analytical Liability? Social Networks and African Informal Economies," Global Networks 5, no. 3 (2005): 605–10.

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Economic Activities of Women in Imo State, 1999–2011

The pre-IPOB agitation era in Imo State was characterised by peace and stability, which meant that women, amid cultural biases, were able to take advantage of the situation to establish economic activities that contributed significantly to their social standing, households, and immediate communities. This section is tasked with the discussion of their activities under the two major headings: Agriculture and Trade.

Agriculture

Agriculture in Imo State, particularly in the local government areas chosen for this paper, forms the backbone of the local economy. While patriarchal norms generally prevented women from holding land title deeds, they gained access to land through male relatives like husbands, sons, fathers, or uncles. Women also leased land; for example, Mrs Ifeanyi Okeke from Isu Village leased a large hectare of land for her cassava farm while serving as the head of the Owerri zone Agricultural Cooperative Society.[12] A clear division of labour existed in farming; women, who did most of the labour on their husbands' farms, cultivated their own yam varieties and "women's crops" such as cassava, cocoyam, water yam, melon, okra, maize, fluted pumpkins (*Ugu*), and peppers. They primarily handled planting, weeding, harvesting, storage, processing, and marketing, significantly contributing to food security and household well-being. Women's involvement in agriculture was often a collective effort, supported by groups like Umuna (association of married daughters) and Umuchukwu (association of unmarried daughters) for collective farming, and the Otu Olu group (labour-sharing group) for labour-intensive tasks.[13]

This communal connectivity, explained by the social capital theory, highlights how social connections, trust, and reciprocity within these associations were vital for agricultural productivity

[12] Amaka Emeka (farmer), interview by author, Umuduru, Oru West LGA, June16, 2025.
[13] Amaka Emeka (Farmer).

and women's survival. Communal associations like *Umuna, Umuchukwu*, and *Otu Olu* represent a feminist response to individual disempowerment. By fostering "social connections, trust, and reciprocity," women mitigated individual limitations (like lack of land titles or capital) through mutual aid and shared labour. This collective action helped them increase agricultural productivity, share burdens, and strengthen their survival and economic interdependence, demonstrating a grassroots form of solidarity and empowerment.

Within the six local areas, cassava, cocoyam, and other crops (excluding yam) were largely designated as "women's crops" because women were heavily involved in production and, especially, processing. These crops require less specialised knowledge for planting and mature earlier than yams. Women were exclusively responsible for processing, storing, preserving, and selling all foodstuffs, making them edible and marketable for household consumption. Studies revealed that, with the exception of yam, a higher percentage of women in Imo State were involved in producing all food crops, including vegetables.[14] Women in these six local government areas were heavily involved in producing and processing cassava into products such as garri, fufu, tapioca, and cassava flour, providing an important source of income and sustenance.[15]

Women played a crucial role in palm oil processing. In areas like *Ohaji/Egbema, Or*u West, and *Oru* East, women used manual and traditional methods to process palm oil nuts, from picking the fruits to boiling, separating fibre, and cracking palm kernels. However, pounding, pressing, and harvesting palm fruits remained the domain of men because of their strenuous nature.[16] This aligns with Akaegbu's assertions that oil palm processing is a major economic activity in Southern Nigeria,

[14] M. C. Okwusi and C. L. Aboh, "Gender Participation in Agricultural Production Activities in Owerri Agricultural Zone of Imo State, Nigeria," Journal of Agriculture and Social Research (JASR) 7, no. 2 (2007): 33–38.

[15] T. Akaegbu, "Traditional Methods of Palm Oil Processing in South-Eastern Nigeria," Industrial Research Quarterly 8, no. 1 (1998): 3–12; H. U. Nwalieje, "Contribution of Women to Oil Palm Processing in Anambra State, Nigeria," Journal of Agricultural Extension 18, no. 1 (2014): 547–55; C. O. Alaji, "The Role of Rural Women in Post-Harvest Activities in Nigeria," Journal of Rural Development* 15, no. 3 (2003): 139–51.

[16] Ezinne Igwe (farmer), interviewed by author, Umuoma, Oru West LGA, June 16, 2025

mostly carried out by rural dwellers, particularly women, using manual and subsistence methods, and relying on it for household use and income generation.[17] Women also processed harvested maize into maize flour, maize drink, cornmeal, and pap for both subsistence and marketing. Though men dominated fish farming in areas like Oguta Lake, women played a significant role, particularly in fish marketing and processing. This aligns with broader trends in Nigeria where women contribute significantly to fish production, processing, distribution, and marketing, supporting food security and livelihoods. While studies show that a greater percentage of the fish farming population in Oguta Lake are men, women's involvement in fisheries activities, particularly in areas like Oguta, was moderate, with fish marketing and processing being their most dominant occupations.[18] Women in Imo State were also involved in artisanal fishing, using traditional and small-scale techniques like hooks and lines, traps, and small nets, and contributing to income generation and the local economy through the sale of fish catches. They also built confidence and became more financially independent through their involvement in artisanal fishing.[19]

Trade

Trade was a pivotal economic activity for Imo State women, significantly enhancing their economic strength. Igbo women generally have long been recognised for their business acumen and industrious nature, serving as the backbone of trade and controlling the buying and selling of foodstuffs, including household and other items. As Boserup notes, West African women are renowned for their ingenuity in trade, accounting for 80% of market production and distinguishing themselves through economic independence.[20] This assertion is vividly captured by the vibrant energy of markets like *Eke Ukwu Owerri, Afor Ogbe, Nkwo Origi, and Nkwo Emekaon on a typical*

[17] Akaegbu, "Traditional Methods," 5; Nwalieje, "Contribution of Women," 550; Alaji, "Role of Rural Women," 142
[18] Caroline Nzeribe (artisan farmer), interview by author, Oguta Ameshi, Oguta LGA, June 25, 2025
[19] Caroline Nzeribe (artisan farmer)
[20] Ester Boserup, Woman's Role, 87.

market day, where women's undeniable presence formed the very heartbeat of commerce. Before the agitation, women in the six local government areas were not just participants in trade but indispensable pillars of the local economy, dominating market activities. Their involvement in agricultural production granted them access to markets and cash. They controlled the trade of staples like cocoyam, maize, plantain, cassava, rice, beans, vegetables and fruits. Processed agricultural products such as palm oil, *fufu*, fish, *cassava* flour, pap, palm wine, *garri, abacha, and tapioca* were also key items.[21]

Beyond local trade, some women were involved in long-distance commerce, trading with countries like Cameroon, Gabon, Guinea, and Equatorial Guinea for palm oil and other goods. Women in these areas also engaged in livestock trade and the sale of fish, both smoked and fresh, with women from Oguta specialising in the fish business. Other goods traded included provisions, spices, utensils, cookware, second-hand clothes (*okirika*), textiles, fabrics, and crafts like baskets, mats, and fans.[22] In the *Umuna* community of *Onuimo* Local Government Area, women were the primary marketers of traditional pottery. Food vending and small-scale food processing were common, with many preparing and selling cooked meals and snacks, including traditional delicacies like *abacha*. Some women also hawked their items. An interviewee from Orlu local government area explained that her petty trade, hawking *abacha* with native stew, yielded about N5,000 daily profit, enabling her to contribute to a cooperative that paid school fees and provided food for her family.[23]

In markets like *Afor-Enyiogugu* in Mbaise, women engaged in diverse trades, exchanging produce and strengthening social connections, these activities by women align with Hopkins assertion that "the market place, whether for petty trading or for putting up an attendance, for med part of women's way of life. However, her rewards could be found as much in the social life offered

[21] Rebecca Amadi (petty trader), interview by author, Isieke, Oru East LGA, June 15, 2025.
[22] Ifeoma Ojukwu (petty trader), interview by author, Izombe, Oguta LGA, June 25, 2025
[23] Amanda Ike (trader), interview by author, Egbema, Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025

by the market place as in her financial profits. Petty trading was a skill, a pleasure and a necessity, and to walk through almost any market was to appreciate that the marketplace was the essence of social life from childhood upwards.[24] This applies especially to these areas, where women were renowned for their sharp business acumen, sophisticated negotiation skills, and effective credit management. They sourced goods strategically, knowing that palm oil came from *Ohaji/Egbema*, fish from Oguta, and agricultural produce from Orlu. Their strong financial management, even with small profits, allowed them to reinvest, contribute to "*Esusu*" (rotational savings), and access informal loans from their associations, significantly boosting household incomes and children's education.[25]

Many women left their homes not just for money, but for the pleasure of associating with other women. *Ekeukwu* Owerri market, for many, was a vibrant social arena, a place to meet, gossip, share jokes, exchange ideas, and maintain social networks. Market associations provided a crucial support system, resolving disputes and advocating for women's interests, often guided by traditional leaders like the "*Omu*" system (a female traditional ruler or leader and her executives). For many of these women, petty trading offered a degree of economic independence and satisfaction, as they contributed to family upkeep without solely depending on their husbands.[26] Petty trade was often a necessity, covering daily expenses, school fees, healthcare, and other family needs, especially in the face of hardship. These market women significantly contributed to the state's local economy, facilitating the flow of goods, generating income, and providing employment through the informal sector.[27]

Trade within the market also served as an avenue for girls to learn the rudiments of trading. From childhood, girls accompanied their mothers or grandmothers to markets, observing practices,

[24] Anthony G.Hopkins. *An Economic History of West Africa*, 1973
[25] Focus Group Discussion (traders), Aboh Mbaise, June 12, 2025.
[26] Rita Ezeifedi (business woman), interview by author, Umuduru, Oru West LGA, June 16, 2025.
[27] Rita Ezeifedi (business woman

learning about goods, and absorbing the market lifestyle, with traditions passed own through generations of women. The market served as a living school, instilling trading traditions and fostering social etiquette around traditional market cycles.[28] Trading was not merely an economic activity but a deeply ingrained social, cultural, and even religious part of life, demonstrating resilience, skill, and communal spirit. Women also operated small shops and kiosks, selling diverse items from provisions to convenience goods, and were involved in related services like hairdressing, tailoring, and small eateries, offering convenience and a safe environment.[29]

Social Activities of Women in Imo State, 1999–2011

Long before the emergence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2012, women in Imo State were the backbone of their communities. Between 1999 and 2011, they used traditional ceremonies, life rituals, and grassroots education and healthcare to sustain social order. Far from being restricted to the home, women actively shaped local governance, preserved cultural identity, and managed community welfare through powerful, informal networks.

Ceremony/Marriage

Before 2012, the August Meeting was the pre-eminent institutionalised assembly for Igbo women, including those in present-day Imo State. Scholars have moved beyond interpreting the August Meeting as a mere "homecoming" and instead conceptualise it as an indigenous form of grassroots participatory development.[30] Ezeh argues that the August Meeting embodies a distinct mode of indigenous feminism in which communal progress is privileged over individual status.[31] Within this interpretive frame, the August functions as both a festive gathering and a quasi-legislative forum in which women debate and institutionalise collective norms. In Imo State, August Meetings

[28] Nkechi Uzoh, interview by author, Osu, Isiala Mbano LGA, June 16, 2025
[29] Nkechi Uzoh, interview by author, Osu, Isiala Mbano LGA, June 16, 2025
[30] Mary-Noelle Ethel Ezeh, The August Meeting: A Form of Indigenous Feminism among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 2005), 15
[31] Mary-Noelle Ethel Ezeh

in many towns and villages served as a de facto assembly where women passed by-laws regulating community sanitation, market conduct, and oversight of local education. In some communities, women's organisations supervised major infrastructure projects such as health centres, primary schools, and town halls, effectively serving as a parallel system of social accountability.[32] Drawing on Chukwuezi's work on migrant-led development, one can describe these arrangements as part of a transnational social field in which women in the diaspora provided capital while resident women organised labour and monitored implementation. This translocal linkage enabled the synchronisation of resources, including money, expertise, and social pressure to support the rural homeland, reinforcing the August Meeting as a node of both symbolic and material reproduction.[33]

Lifecycle events such as marriages, naming ceremonies, and burials functioned as the primary "social theaters" through which communal morality was enforced and the social fabric maintained. In these ritualised gatherings, women were not merely passive participants; they often served as the principal custodians of normative order, shaping men's conduct and defining acceptable behaviour. Okonjo and Amadiume argue that traditional Igbo society operated on a dual-sex political system, in which women and men exercised distinct but overlapping forms of authority.[34] Women's management of burial and marriage rites represented a critical manifestation of what Anyanwu terms their judicial agency, a form of informal authority through which they mediated disputes and enforced sanctions.[35] Burial ceremonies, in particular, functioned as social audits in which the community evaluated the conduct of the deceased and, by extension, that of his family. Before 2012, the *Umuada* (daughters of the kindred) in many Imo communities deployed their participation in funeral rites as

[32] Mary-Noelle Ethel Ezeh,The August Meeting: A Form of Indigenous Feminism among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 2005), 15

[33] Barth Chukwuezi, "Through Thick and Thin: Igbo Rural-Urban Circularity, Identity and Investment," Journal of Contemporary African Studies 19, no. 1 (2001): 55–66.

[34] Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation," 174–78; Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed Books, 1987), 51–70.

[35] Ugochukwu D. Anyanwu, "The Judiciary in the Governance of Igbo Communities to 1960," in The Igbo and their Neighbours, ed. A. E. Afigbo (Lagos: University Publishing Company, 1993), 18–20.

leverage to ensure that husbands treated their wives and children with fairness and dignity. If a man was known to be abusive, neglectful, or unjust, women's groups often refused to perform the requisite rites until the family paid significant fines or performed public penance.[36] Through this practice, burial functions became sites of moral negotiation in which women's collective power was exercised to discipline male behaviour and safeguard the welfare of women and children.

Traditional marriage ceremonies (*Igba Nkwu)* served as another vital arena of women's agency. These events were profoundly social and political: beyond celebrating union, they served as diplomatic gatherings that reinforced inter-village alliances and managed kinship relations.[37] Nzegwu emphasises that such gatherings generated affinal social capital, bridging ties between lineages, clans, and villages and buffering intercommunal conflict.[38] Women played a central role in negotiating the symbolic and material exchanges that underpinned these alliances, ensuring that the ceremony not only consolidated the couple's union but also reinforced wider networks of reciprocity and solidarity.

The transmission of cultural identity was a highly structured social activity, centred on the domestic and kinship sphere and orchestrated primarily by women. One of the most salient expressions of this function was *omugwu*, the formalised post-partum period of care in which elder women guided new mothers through the early stages of child-rearing. Scholars such as Nzegwu interpret *Omugwo* as a critical site of cultural custodianship, where elder women transmitted not only pediatric knowledge and nutritional wisdom but also the "social grammar" of the clan, including modes of decorum, Kinship obligations, and proper conduct.[39] In the absence of a robust state-sponsored welfare system, these informal kinship gatherings functioned as buffer zones that cushioned families against social and economic shocks. Within the traditional *umunna* framework,

[36] Christiana Orji (women leader), interview by author, Umuora-Ezi, Aboh Mbaise LGA, June 12, 2025.
[37] Nkiru Nzegwu, Family Matters: Postcolonial African Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 180 - 81
[38] Nzegwu, Family Matters, 182
[39] Nzegwu, Family Matters, 182

women's daily social interactions functioned as a sophisticated, informal welfare state. By weaving vulnerable members such as widows, the elderly, and orphans into a resilient care collective, they maintained a level of social equilibrium that predated the regional shifts of 2012.[40] This "domestic labor" was, in reality, the structural foundation of community peace, where rituals of mourning and kinship mediation served as social infrastructure.[41] Consequently, the transition to later conflict-related activism was not a departure from Igbo tradition, but rather a strategic adaptation of these long-standing communal protections in response to modern crisis.[42] While these ceremonies provided the symbolic framework for women's authority, this power was most tangibly expressed through their aggressive advocacy for community welfare, specifically in the domains of education and healthcare.

Education

Education was a significant social activity for women in the pre-IPOB period. These women were active learners, acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and contributing significantly to the betterment of their households and communities. This section examines both the formal and informal roles women in the six local government areas played in educating themselves, their households, and their communities. A cursory look at the Informal education reveals that women are the first teachers for their roles were fundamental to sustaining local economies, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring the well-being of families. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and elder sisters were often the first teachers, imparting moral values, social etiquette, traditional stories, folklores, proverbs, local

[40] Nkiru Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Postcolonial African Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 180–86; B. Agidigbo, "The Kindred as a Social Safety Net: Traditional Welfare in Igboland," *Journal of African Social Research* 12, no. 2 (2017): 45–49.

[41] R. Ndimele," Social Infrastructures and Communal Stability in Pre-Conflict Igbo land," "South-East Journal of Sociology and Anthropology 8, no.1(2020):112–15;O.Chukwuka, The Labor of Care: Women's Agency in Rural Nigeria" (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2022), 89–94

[42] C. Ezike, "From Tradition to Activism: The Evolution of Women's Agency in South-East Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Politics and Governance* 15, no. 4 (2020): 210–14; West African Network for Peacebuilding, "Women and Conflict-Time Care in South-East Nigeria," *Policy Brief: Gender and Security* (2018): 12–15.

history, and the Igbo language, shaping a child's worldview and cultural identity. Women also played important roles in teaching younger generations about traditional ceremonies, rites of passage, cooking local delicacies, traditional songs, dances, and artistic expressions.[43] As proprietors of trades traditionally dominated by females, women transferred knowledge by training apprentices in hair styling, makeup artistry, salon management, sewing, pattern making, garment construction, and design. They passed on skills in local food preparation, preservation, small-scale food business management, and mentored younger women in market dynamics.[44]

Within households and communities, women were often the primary source of informal health education. They taught girls about hygiene, nutrition, childcare, first aid, and traditional remedies. Older women, experienced mothers, and Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) passed on invaluable knowledge about pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care. In these local government areas, women actively participated in community health outreach programs, serving as informal health educators and disseminating information on disease prevention.[45] Women involved in subsistence farming taught practical methods, crop cultivation, harvesting, and post-harvest handling to their daughters and other young women. Their knowledge of local crops, seasons, and sustainable practices was essential for household food security. Daughters were taught how to process cassava, palm fruits, and even elementary fish farming. Women actively participated in cooperative societies where they learned about savings, loans, and collective business ventures, thereby empowering each other economically.[46]

In the formal sector, women spearheaded the education of their children, especially the girl child. Despite cultural norms and a patriarchal system that often viewed the education of girls as a waste of

[43] Grace Okeke (farmer/trader), interview by author, Egbema, Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025.
[44] Iheoma Eze (business woman), interview by author, Umuapu, Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025.
[45] Focus Group Discussion (teachers/students/proprietress), Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025.
[46] Rita Smith (Teacher), interview by author, Ubogwu, Oru East LGA, June 15, 2025.

time, there was a general push by women to educate the girl child to eliminate gender disparity, particularly at the primary and secondary school levels. Through their various associations like the *Umuna* (married women association), Catholic Women Association, the Anglican Women Guild, etc., women school levels. Through their various associations like the *Umuna* (married women association), Catholic Women Association, the Anglican Women Guild etc, women advocated for formal education for girls, leading to an increase in pupil enrollment, including girls, especially with the availability of free primary education. According to statistics from the headmistresses of St. Thomas Primary School, Oru West, and Immaculate Conception Secondary School, Aboh, there was 85% and 75% significant increases respectively in pupils' enrollments between 1999-2011.[47]

Women introduced diverse initiatives to enhance children's education, providing scholarships, paying fees for poor children, and distributing free exercise books. They advocated for the extension of school feeding programs to secondary schools to bring out-of-school students back.[48] Through their various associations, women built and renovated schools, some alumnae built computer laboratory to ensure schools met international standards. Women also established private schools to complement government schools, ensuring affordable fees and providing transportation; women owned 75% of private schools in the reviewed areas, a testament to their natural inclination to impart knowledge.[49] This commitment is further supported by statistics from Imo State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), 2006-2011, showing that female teachers outnumbered male teachers in both primary and secondary schools. Despite poor remuneration and other harsh working conditions, women sustained the teaching profession, highlighting their role as the backbone of foundational education in the State before the IPOB agitation. From the table, it is shown that there was a steady decrease in the number of female teachers at the primary level, from 12,586 to 10,089, and a steady

[47] Focus Group Discussion (teachers/students/proprietress), Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025.
[48] Nnenna Ugo (school proprietress), interview by author, Umuora, Aboh Mbaise LGA, June 12, 2025. 46
[49] Nnenna Ugo(School Proprietress)

decrease in the number of male teachers, from 2,331 to 1,261. The SUBEB survey report (2006–2011) for Imo State showed that there were 67,997 female teachers in primary schools alone, while their male counterparts numbered 10,537.

This brings to the fore that the number of female teachers in primary schools was greater than that of their male counterpart by more than five times. Some women sacrificed essential needs to send their daughters to university. "I processed palm fruits and sold red oil, and from my profits, I trained my daughter in the university". "Today, she is a graduate and a Doctor. Her father said she will not go to university, but I sent her, and today she is in the hospital saving lives and send fruits to me, which her father now enjoys"[50]

Healthcare

Predating the IPOB agitation, Imo State women were deeply involved in healthcare, reflecting broader patterns across Nigeria. Their roles spanned both formal and traditional sectors. Several hospitals were operational in the six local government areas, including Federal Medical Centre (FMC), Owerri; Imo State Specialist Hospital, Owerri; Imo State University Teaching Hospital (IMSUTH), Orlu; General Hospital, *Awo-Omamma* (Oru East LGA); General Hospital, Okigwe; General Hospital, Ihitte-Uboma; and other private health facilities.[51]

Women in Imo State formed the backbone of nursing and midwifery services in hospitals, clinics, and primary healthcare centers, providing maternal and child health, general patient care, and community health services.[52] Female doctors in various specialties contributed significantly to healthcare.[53] Some women also worked in pharmacies, dispensing medication, and in laboratories, conducting tests. Some ran chemists and had formal knowledge of drugs. These women played a vital

[50] Ifeanyi Okeke (Farmer/ Trader), interview by author, Umunu, Isiala Mbano LGA, June 16, 2025.
[51] Uloma Okoro (nurse), interview by author, Isieke, Oru East LGA, June 15, 2025.
[52] Uloma Okoro (nurse)
[53] Ijeoma Uche (healthcare provider), interview by author, Aboh, Aboh Mbaise LGA, June 12, 2025

role in health education, disease prevention, and connecting communities to healthcare, particularly in rural areas, serving as the first point of contact for families seeking advice and treatment.[54]

While formal healthcare expanded, Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs), predominantly women, continued to play a crucial role in childbirth, especially in rural areas. They often bridged the gap between traditional practices and modern medicine through training and collaboration. Most village women preferred to use "*Nne Ônye Ama*" ("Mother who knows") for childbirth due to her low cost and safe service.[55] "*NneOnye Ama*" played a very important role then providing maternal and child healthcare to women. Her services were safe, accessible and sometimes the only option for some pregnant women who could not afford hospital fees. *Nne Onye Ama* was taking care of many of our women before and after they gave birth. Deaths of women and babies were low, as fewer deaths were caused by lack of access to prenatal care or because of non-accessibility to health facilities due to lockdown or the absence of doctors and nurses.[56] Within their households, women were the primary caregivers. They made decisions about healthcare, often bearing the financial burden, administering traditional remedies, and seeking medication from chemists before resorting to health centres or hospitals.[57]

Contributions of Women in Imo State to Households and Communities Before the IPOB Agitation

Women in Imo State actively participated in agriculture, trade, education, and healthcare, as well as other social activities, during the pre-IPOB era and collectively established themselves as foundational pillars of socioeconomic stability in Imo State. Within the economic sphere, through agriculture, they ensured household food security and diversified nutrition through their cultivation

[54] Focus Group Discussion (teachers/students/proprietress), Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025
[55] Amaka Nkem (housewife), interview by author, Umueme, Oru East LGA, June 15, 2025
[56] Focus Group Discussion (health care providers), Oru East LGA, June 16, 2025
[57] Esther Okechukwu (business woman), interview by author, Egbema, Ohaji/Egbema LGA, June 15, 2025.

and processing of 'women's crops', leveraging cooperative structures and social capital to overcome labour constraints and share knowledge. Their entrepreneurial spirit and mastery of trade, spanning local markets to long-distance commerce, formed the economic heartbeat of communities, fostering vital social connections, providing significant social and economic independence, and contributing substantially to both household and State economies.

Their Social engagements in education, health and other social activities show that women in Imo State were not merely beneficiaries but active agents; they were architects and financiers who drove formal schooling through advocacy, infrastructure provision, and sustained teaching. They also preserved indigenous knowledge through informal education within families and communities, impacting the younger generation. Finally, their pervasive presence in both formal healthcare professions and as Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA), and primary caregivers ensured robust health promotion, disease prevention, and overall well-being for their families and localities. These collective efforts, underpinned by strong social capital, allowed women to navigate patriarchal structures, build adaptive resilience, and significantly contribute to the development and quality of life in Imo State before the heightened IPOB agitation.

Conclusion

This paper has detailed a compelling narrative of the profound contributions women made in Imo State across agriculture, trade, education, and healthcare between 1999 and 2011. The findings underscore that women were far more than passive beneficiaries of development; they were active agents, crucial facilitators, and the foundational pillars of their households and communities. The pre-IPOB period attests to women's capacity to drive regional development through multifaceted socio-economic activities. Their ability to establish informal regimes of social order through ceremonies like the August Meeting and indigenous care networks like *Omugwo* provided the stability necessary for communal survival. Understanding these pre-agitation dynamics is essential for academic

discourse, as it provides the context needed to appreciate the disproportionate impact of subsequent conflict on women. Identifying these existing strengths is also vital for developing effective, culturally grounded post-conflict recovery and empowerment strategies.

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