

The role of Nigerian women

From precolonial times to the early 21st century, the role and status of [women](#) in [Nigeria](#) have continuously evolved. However, the image of a helpless, oppressed, and marginalized group has undermined their proper study, and little recognition has been granted to the various integral functions that Nigerian women have performed throughout history.

In the precolonial period, women played a major role in social and economic activities. Division of labour was along gender lines, and women controlled such occupations as food processing, mat weaving, pottery making, and cooking. Moreover, land was communally owned, and women had access to it through their husbands or parents. Although a man was the head of the household in a patrilineal system, older women had control of the labour of younger family members.

Women were also central to trade. Among the [Yoruba](#), they were the major figures in long-distance trade, with enormous opportunities for accumulating wealth and acquiring titles. The most successful among them rose to the prestigious chieftaincy title of *iyalode*, a position of great privilege and power.

In politics, women were not as docile or powerless as contemporary literature tends to portray them. The basic unit of political organization was the family, and in the common matrifocal arrangement, which allowed a woman to gain considerable authority over her children, a woman and her offspring could form a major bloc in the household. Power and privileges in a household were also based on age and gender, thereby allowing senior women to have a voice on many issues. Because the private and public arenas were intertwined, a woman's ability to control resources and people in a household was at the same time an exercise in public power. She could use food production to gain respect. She could control her children and influence men through this power. She could evoke the power of the spirit or gods in her favour. Or she could simply withdraw and use the kitchen as her own personal domicile for interaction with her

colleagues, friends, and children.

Beyond the household level, power was generally dominated by men, but in many areas specific titles were given to women. The queen mother, a powerful title among the [Edo](#) and Yoruba, could be bestowed upon the king's mother or a free woman of considerable stature. In her own palace, the queen mother presided over meetings, with subordinate titleholders in her support. Yoruba and [Hausa](#) legends describe periods when women were either the actual kings or heroines. Such women as Moremi of [Ile-Ife](#) and Amina of [Zaria](#) are notable legendary figures, as are the powerful queens in the Ondo and [Daura](#) histories.

The most serious threat to the influence and privileges of women occurred during the 20th century, when patriarchy combined with colonial changes to alter gender relations. As male chiefs collaborated with the British colonial administration in collecting taxes and governing, the position of female chiefs declined in importance. When the economy became increasingly geared toward the production of cash crops for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnuts (peanuts), and palm oil. Women, pushed to the background, were forced to shift to the production of subsistence crops. A previous land-tenure system that had prevented land alienation gave way to land commercialization, favouring those with access to money gained from the sale of cash crops. Western-style education also favoured boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations introduced by colonialism.

The most powerful agency of change for the modern woman has been Nigeria's formal education system, from which a large number of elite women have emerged. Intelligent, educated, and confident, they can be found in all leading occupations; they now challenge many aspects of patriarchy and are gradually organizing to ensure that the political arena expands sufficiently to accommodate them.