

The Changing Status of Women in the Socioeconomic Sector of the Niger-Benue Confluence Region of Nigeria, 1900-2010

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Abstract

Globally, the status of women in society has undergone a remarkable evolution throughout history, reflecting shifts in cultural, economic and political landscapes. While women were traditionally confined to domestic spheres, their roles have progressively expanded, challenging societal norms and fostering positive changes. In the Niger-Benue confluence region of Nigeria, the status of women has been largely traditional as they were not allowed to be heard and seen in the political and economic sectors. This study therefore examines the changing status of women in the socioeconomic sector of the Niger-Benue confluence region of Nigeria. It explores the socioeconomic factors that have shaped the changing status of women, including access to the effects of Christian and Islamic religions, education, economic empowerment, employment opportunities, and cultural factors. Data were collected from studies of published and unpublished works of literature, oral interviews, and archival records. Findings reveal that education and economic empowerment have improved the status of women in the Niger-Benue region, but cultural and traditional constraints remain a challenge. This study has important implications for policies to further advance the socioeconomic status of women in the region. It suggests that policies on women's inclusivity in socioeconomic sectors should focus on improving access to education and economic opportunities, as well as initiating dialogue to challenge cultural notions that limit the advancement of women.

Keywords: Women, Social Status, Economic Status, Niger-Benue Confluence, Nigeria

Introduction

The socioeconomic status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region of Nigeria has undergone significant transformations over the past century. In the early 1900s, the socioeconomic landscape of the region was predominantly influenced by traditional norms and colonial policies. Women were primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture, domestic duties, and informal trade. Their roles were largely defined by patriarchal structures that limited their access to formal education, economic resources, and political participation

(Agbaje, 2019).

The introduction of colonial rule brought about significant changes, as European powers imposed new economic systems, educational policies, and social hierarchies. Nonetheless, these changes often reinforced existing gender inequalities, restricting women's participation in the formal economy and confining them to marginal roles. The post-independence era marked a period of significant sociopolitical transformation in Nigeria through nationalist movements and the struggle for independence which brought about new opportunities and challenges for women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region. The newly independent Nigerian state (1960) implemented various policies aimed at modernizing the economy and promoting social development. Educational reforms in particular played a crucial role in enhancing women's access to formal education and professional opportunities (Mowaiye, 2011). Despite these advancements, traditional gender roles and sociocultural norms continued to pose significant barriers to women's full participation in the socioeconomic sphere.

Key concepts central to this study include socioeconomic status, gender roles, and economic participation. Socioeconomic status refers to an individual's or group's economic and social position relative to others, based on income, education, and occupation. In this context, it encompasses women's economic participation, access to education, and social standing within the community (Smith, 2020). Gender roles, on the other hand, involve the behaviors, tasks, and responsibilities that a society considers appropriate for men and women (Ibrahim, Ame and Paul, 2022). Economic participation involves women's engagement in the labor market, including formal and informal employment, entrepreneurship, and agricultural work, as well as access to economic resources and decision-making power (Ibrahim, Ame and Paul, 2022). This paper aims to explore these transformations in detail, analyzing the historical context, key drivers of change, and persistent barriers that have shaped women's roles and opportunities in the region. This paper also examines how these roles have evolved and their impact on women's socioeconomic status.

Investigating the changing status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region is essential for several reasons. First, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the broader patterns of gender inequality and social change in Nigeria and Africa South of the Sahara. By examining the historical and socioeconomic factors that have shaped women's lives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing women in the region. Additionally, analyzing policy interventions and development programs aimed at improving women's socioeconomic status offers valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and advocates working to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

In addition, this study highlights resilience; despite facing significant obstacles, women have found ways to navigate and challenge traditional norms, engage in economic activities, and contribute to their communities. Their stories testify to the potential for change and the importance of supporting women's efforts to achieve socioeconomic equality.

The following sections of this paper provide (1) a detailed analysis of the historical context, (2) socioeconomic indicators in the 20th Century, and (3) 21st Century changes in the status of women with case studies of women from different backgrounds in the Niger-Benue Confluence region. Before discussing these aspects, I will first provide a brief background of the women in the Niger-Benue confluence region of Nigeria.

Women in the Niger-Benue Confluence: A Brief Background

Niger-Benue confluence is located in central Nigeria and forms part of a contested political space called the Nigerian Middle Belt. In the post-colonial era, historians, through various

research posit that the Middle Belt of Nigeria is the cradle of several ethnic groups. The study of the area become significant not only for the search for a proper identity of the diverse peoples of central Nigeria but also for understanding the broader sweep of West African history (Weise, 2013). Nigerian and international scholars define The Niger-Benue confluence as a coherent and self-conscious region. Among these scholars was Ade Obayemi, who addressed the emergence and state formation processes of the Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples of central Nigeria as well as their neighbors, in his seminal chapter, "The Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples and their neighbors before 1600 CE," including the Nupoid-speaking peoples, the Igala, the Igbira, and, the Idoma-Speaking Peoples (Weise, 2013).

The Niger-Benue Confluence region is within the present-day Kogi State, established from old Kwara and Benue States on August 27, 1991, with Lokoja as its capital. It is the most centrally located state in Nigeria, situated on longitude 7° 30' N and latitude 6° 42' E and with a total area of 29,833km² (11,519 square meters). The region comprises the Igala, Ebira, Kabba, Nupe, Bassa, Yoruba, and Kogi divisions of the former Kabba Province. It shares common boundaries with Niger, Kwara, Nassarawa, and the Federal Capital Territory to the North, Benue, and Enugu State to the East, Enugu and Anambra State to the South, and Ondo, Ekiti and Edo States to the West (Hadizat, 2023).

Women in the Niger-Benue confluence share the same characteristics as every other woman in Africa; the major differences are in the types of occupations in which they engage and sociocultural lifestyles. The Niger-Benue Confluence region of Nigeria is a diverse area with a mix of various ethnic groups, each with its unique cultural and physical traits. Women in this region, much like their male counterparts, exhibit a range of physical characteristics influenced by their ethnic backgrounds, geographical locations, and lifestyle. Here is an overview of the physical traits and identification of women from some of the prominent ethnic groups in the Niger-Benue Confluence: Igala women generally have a medium to dark complexion and are known for their robust build; they often have pronounced facial features such as high cheekbones and broad noses (Aruwa, 2022). Their faces are adorned with traditional scarification, known as *Iko*, which is a common cultural practice among the Igala people. These scars are usually on the face and can serve as identifiers of ethnic affiliation and personal identity (Boston, 1968).

Nupe women typically have a medium complexion with a tendency towards a darker skin tone compared to some other groups in the region. They often have slender builds with delicate facial features (Nadel, 1942). Like the Igala women, they have facial markers and wear elaborate hairstyles while adorning themselves with traditional jewelry. Nupe women are also known for their skills in traditional crafts such as weaving and beadwork, which are often reflected in their attire and accessories (Nadel, 1942).

Ebira women usually have a medium to light complexion and are noted for their strong, athletic builds. They often have well-defined facial features and cultural markers. The traditional Ebira attire includes brightly colored hand-woven fabrics and headscarves. Ebira women are also known for their unique traditional body tattoos, which serve as cultural identifiers (Audu, 2010).

Okun women typically have a medium to dark complexion; their skin tone is often a rich brown, which varies among individuals but generally falls within the range common to West African populations (Aboyade, 1991). The women tend to have high cheekbones, broad noses, and full lips. These features are characteristic of the Yoruba ethnic group, to which the Okun people belong. Their facial features often carry a strong resemblance to other Yoruba sub-groups, reflecting their shared ancestry (Aboyade, 1991). Okun women generally have a medium to robust build. Their physique is often sturdy, which can be attributed to their engagement in various physical activities, including farming and traditional labor. Traditional clothing for Okun women includes brightly colored wrappers, blouses, and headscarves.

Women found in the Niger-Benue Confluence may have different physiques and characteristics, but their role in the region is similar as the majority of them carry out domestic activities, agriculture, and handicraft with little economic power (Aladekomo, 2004). These roles were carried out during the precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods; however, with changes that came with colonial rule and post-independence Nigeria, many women's roles began to change (Aladekomo, 2004). The paper shall discuss this aspect in the subsequent section, but first I will discuss the theoretical framework and research methodology used to carry out this research.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This study made use of the theory of empowerment, which originated from American community psychology and was propounded by social scientist Julian Rappaport in 1981. The roots of the theory extended into history and are linked to Marxist Sociological Theory. Empowerment Theory was first used by Zimmerman in 1995 and further developed and publicized by Zimmerman in 2000. The theory was further modified by several authors.

The theory of empowerment states that empowerment and women's development rely heavily on a series of actions that make them participate fully in empowerment activities, improve their quality decisions, and bring about circumstances/opportunities whereby learning, practice, skills and status could be enhanced (Zimmerman, 1995 & 2000). The theory further posits that by women engaging in worthwhile and structured activities will enable them to acquire important skills, abilities, and confidence that would help them to be more productive, healthy, and independent in their respective homes and beyond (Reischl et al., 2011). Empowerment Theory forms the theoretical foundation of this study as it has strong implications for the research. It could be understood that establishing and implementing empowerment programs concerning the economic empowerment of women would enhance development, raise their economic standard and private assets, and motivate them to effectively contribute knowledge acquired to become positive agents of change in their communities (Ibrahim, Ame and Paul, 2022).

This study also employs a qualitative approach, which emphasizes words and comprises the use of primary and secondary data from historical records, oral traditions, archival records, and scholarly research. Pieces of information obtained were analyzed using descriptive methods with the view to reveal the significant changes in the role of women over the period (1900-2010) undergirded by the "What is?" question.

Qualitative research can be defined as the collection and analysis of non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights of a problem or generate new ideas for research. Qualitative research is the opposite of quantitative research, which involves collecting and analyzing numerical data for statistical analysis (Bhandari, 2020). Qualitative research is commonly used in the humanities and social sciences, in academic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, education, health sciences, history, etc. Qualitative research is sometimes defined as a market research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. As stated earlier, qualitative research is used by historians to analyze data obtained from historical research; it is therefore pertinent to examine historical research methods.

Historical research is a process of collecting, interpreting, and preserving data about past events or ideas to find how they affected the present events, actions, and ideas. Historical research studies possible reasons behind certain events to explain their influence on the events that followed. Historical research may not just help to figure out connections between past and present events, it can also provide researchers information regarding possible future

events (McDowell, 2002).

The strength of historical research employed in this paper makes the reading list in a professional community with a history that is known, valued, and disseminated to the current and future generations of readers. History provides readers with a sense of honor as a profession. The research also yields insight into pedagogical problems that could not be achieved by other means. This method permits researchers to use practices to elevate emerging and current practices (Stahl and Hartman, 2004).

Historical research, while invaluable for understanding women's role in the Niger-Benue Confluence region comes with several inherent limitations that can affect the accuracy and comprehensiveness of findings. These limitations stem from the nature of historical sources, the subjectivity of historians, and the complexity of reconstructing past events. This is because historical research is a complex endeavor fraught with technological and methodological constraints (Stahl and Hartman, 2004). Despite these challenges, historical research remains crucial in carrying out a study of this kind, providing valuable insights into the human past and helping to understand the changes from the past to the present. Nevertheless, by acknowledging and addressing these limitations, the research strives to produce more accurate and nuanced interpretations of the role of women and the Niger-Benue Confluence region.

The inherent limitations of historical research were mitigated through varieties of strategies that improve the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and reliability of historical narratives. Historians and researchers employ these methods to address issues related to source limitations, interpretation subjectivity, complexity in reconstruction, and technological and methodological constraints (McDowell, 2002). One effective way to address source limitations was by utilizing a wide range of sources by corroborating information through cross-referencing multiple types of evidence, such as written records, artifacts, and oral histories. I also carried out a critical analysis to assess the reliability and bias of sources, understanding the context in which a source was created, including an author's perspective and purpose for a better gauge of credibility. This method includes analyzing who wrote the document, why it was written, and for whom it was intended.

The Role of Women in the Niger-Benue Confluence: Precolonial Context

Throughout the precolonial period, women were exposed to patriarchal social norms relating to decision-making, land ownership, and access to political power. Across kingdoms, chiefdoms, and communities, this led to negative outcomes for women's socioeconomic empowerment, resulting in women often having limited access to finances, social protection, and opportunities to participate actively in an economy. This region where the Niger and Benue rivers meet has been home to diverse communities, each with unique social structures, economic practices, and political systems. The economy of the Niger Benue Confluence region is structured around agriculture, fishing, trading, water or canoe transportation, and indigenous industries such as weaving, bronze casting, pottery, wood carving, and so many others.

Women in this region were not passive observers but active participants in shaping their societies. This section explores the multifaceted roles of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence during the precolonial period, highlighting their roles and contributions in the economic and sociocultural spheres.

Women in the Niger-Benue Confluence played a vital role in the economy of the region and were the backbone of agricultural production, which was the primary economic activity. Nevertheless, most of the farm work and all commercial farming are now done by men. Women cultivate only domestic crops such as yams, millet, sorghum, beans, guinea corn,

vegetables, and spices near the compounds. Benniseeds, tobacco, and cotton are also planted and sold by men and women.

Women employed traditional farming techniques, utilizing hoes and other simple tools to till the land. Their deep knowledge of the local environment and seasonal cycles enabled them to manage agricultural production effectively with the men, ensuring food security for their families and communities (Awe, 1992). Women's agricultural activities extended beyond mere subsistence farming, as they also engaged in the processing and preservation of both food and cash crops into consumable products. These included palm oil, shea butter, textiles, breweries, and tobacco traded locally and regionally. The surplus produce from their farms was often sold in local markets around the confluence and their communities, with cowries serving as the principal mode of exchange. These provided additional income that was essential for the economic sustenance of their households.

Apart from agriculture, women in the Niger-Benue Confluence were active in trade and commerce. They dominated local marketplaces, trading goods such as foodstuffs, handcrafted items, textiles, and pottery. These markets were not just economic centers but also social hubs where women could interact, exchange news, and build networks. Women traders often traveled long distances to exchange goods, thereby establishing extensive trade networks that connected different communities and facilitated the flow of goods and information (Parpart and Staudt, 1989). When Richard and John Lander passed the Niger-Benue Confluence on October 25, 1830, they noted that women in the region actively engaged in trade in and around the confluence. The Ebira women carried out most trading activities at markets every day in Okene and every fourth day at Nagazi and many small markets. These Ebira women traveled great distances to trade and goods from as far as Sokoto could be bought at Koto market. Some women became influential merchants trading items such as salt, kola nuts, and cloth, which were highly valued in different parts of West Africa. Their participation in trade was supported by kinship and social networks, which provided the necessary support and resources for their trading activities. This economic independence allowed many women to accumulate wealth within their communities.

In the sociocultural sector, women were the primary custodians of culture and tradition in the Niger-Benue Confluence. They were responsible for children's education, ensuring that cultural values, norms, and practices were transmitted from one generation to the next. This education was informal, taking place within the family, community gatherings, and through traditional ceremonies and festivals (Denzer, 1994). Storytelling, songs, proverbs, and folktales were educational tools used to impart wisdom and knowledge to the younger generation. These narratives often contained moral lessons, historical accounts, and religious and other cultural values. Through their roles as educators, women ensured the continuity of their cultural heritage and the preservation of their communities' collective memories.

Women were generally the transmitters of cultural values to the young in the precolonial era because of the connection and close ties that primarily associated them with procreation. Thus, during the formative years of children, mothers nurtured the young in line with the cultural dictates of their communities. Despite the patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society to which the confluence area belongs, women played leadership roles in partnership with men. They harnessed the power to organize the family and the society at large, and on them were conferred the enormous task and responsibilities of child upbringing.

In the Niger-Benue Confluence, it was common for people to trace ill-brought children back to their mothers. Children were taught languages, especially by their mothers, and learned to speak other languages via intergroup relations with other ethnic groups. It was common for children to speak or understand at least two languages during the

precolonial period. Women also possessed extensive knowledge of traditional medicine which they used to treat various ailments and ensure the wellbeing of their families and communities. They acted as herbalists, midwives, and healers, using natural remedies derived from plants, roots, and herbs to cure illnesses. Their expertise in traditional medicine was highly respected, and they played a vital role in maintaining the health and vitality of their communities (Mba, 1982).

As midwives, the women were responsible for assisting in childbirth and providing postpartum care. They also offered support and guidance to expectant mothers to ensure safe deliveries and the health of both mother and child using traditional herbal medicines and healing techniques. The contributions of women to healthcare were indispensable, underscoring their importance in the social fabric of the region.

Women also played vital roles as mediators and peacemakers; they often intervened in disputes to restore harmony and order within their communities. Women used their diplomatic skills to negotiate peace agreements, resolve conflicts, and foster alliances among different groups. Their involvement in diplomacy extended to intercommunal and interethnic relations, where they acted as emissaries and negotiators (Afigbo, 1991).

In addition, women were active in times of conflict and wars in various communities in the region: e.g., the Nupe and Igala kings waged wars of expansion using the waterways to exercise their sovereignty around the region. Wars of expansion were waged on smaller kingdoms such as the Bassa, Koto-Karifi, Oworo, Kakanda, and the Fulani expansionist attack of Lokoja. During these wars, women provided support to warriors by organizing supplies, caring for the wounded, and maintaining the home front. Their contributions were crucial in sustaining the community during periods of upheaval and ensuring the continuation of daily life.

It is a well-known fact that religion was an integral part of life in the Niger-Benue Confluence, and women played prominent roles as spiritual leaders and religious practitioners. Women served as priestesses, diviners, and spiritual healers by conducting rituals, offering prayers, and acting as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds. Their spiritual authority was recognized and respected, and they were often consulted on important religious matters and decisions (Falola & Amponsah, 2012). As priestesses, women presided over religious ceremonies, festivals, and rites of passage and ensuring the proper observance of religious customs and traditions. They were responsible for maintaining the spiritual wellbeing of their communities, invoking blessings and protecting against malevolent forces.

Women's involvement in religious leadership in Okun land where the mighty woman's cult of *Ofosi or Ohosi of the Abinu, Ikiri, Oworo, Owe*, and some *Ijumu* towns are all said to derive from *Olle* in *Bunu*, the founder being a man who came from the Igala – Idoma side of the Niger. This was a testament to their spiritual prowess and the high regard in which they were held by their communities. Women were also central to the performance of rituals and ceremonies that marked significant events in the community's life cycle. These included birth, initiation, marriage, and funeral rites. Women played key roles in organizing and conducting these ceremonies, ensuring that they were carried out following tradition and cultural norms. Their participation in rituals and ceremonies reinforced social cohesion and provided a sense of continuity and belonging within the community.

The rituals and ceremonies often involved elaborate preparations, including the establishment of sacred spaces, the preparation of offerings, and the performance of dances and songs. In Ebira land, Okun, Bassa, and Igala land women were responsible for many of these tasks, drawing on their knowledge of cultural practices and religious symbolism. Through their roles in rituals and ceremonies, women contributed to the spiritual and cultural vitality of their communities.

The precolonial period in the Niger-Benue Confluence region of Nigeria was marked by the significant roles women played in various aspects of life that shaped their status in the region. Their contributions in the economic, social and religious spheres were indispensable to the functioning and development of their communities. Women were not only the backbone of agriculture and trade but also the custodians of culture, educators, healthcare providers, and spiritual guides. Understanding the precolonial status of women in this region provides a nuanced perspective on the social dynamics and cultural heritage of the Niger-Benue Confluence. It highlights the importance of women in shaping the history and identity of the area, challenging the often-patriarchal narratives that have dominated historical discourse. The contributions of women in the precolonial Niger-Benue Confluence underscore their vital role in the past and provide valuable insights into the ongoing significance of women's roles in contemporary Nigerian society.

Socioeconomic Indicators of the Status of Women in the 20th Century

On January 1, 1900, Frederick Lugard announced to the people gathered on the parade ground at Lokoja that he had taken over the administration of the Northern Protectorate. According to Apata, "What he took over was a restricted territory of Kabba and Ilorin together with a strip on either side of the River Niger and Benue. The remaining parts of the Northern Protectorate were outside British control. It was this restricted zone where the British had some influence which formed the core area of the initial provincial units created by Lugard" (1990, 143).

The British territory was divided into the Colony of Nigeria, and two groups of provinces were carved out known as the Northern and Southern Provinces, which formed the Protectorate. The whole country came under the control of a Governor and Commander-in-Chief to whom the Lieutenant-Governors of the Northern and Southern Provinces and the Administrator of the Colony were responsible. The Governor was assisted by an Executive Council consisting of a few of the senior officials (Abubakar, 1980). The new administration brought some changes in the confluence region and these affected women's activities and status in the 20th Century.

The socioeconomic indicators used to assess the status of women in this region during this period include education, health, economic participation, and social status. This narrative delves into these indicators to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changes and continuities in the status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region throughout the 20th Century.

Missionary activities and colonial rule brought educational opportunities for women in the Niger-Benue Confluence, although the opportunities were severely limited because of cultural delineation and lack of trust in the new colonial administration. The traditional belief that a woman's place was in the home further hindered educational progress for girls (Mowaiye, 2011). The majority of educational institutions were mission schools established by Christian missionaries, and these schools often prioritized boys over girls, and education for girls was largely restricted to basic literacy and domestic skills, with very few opportunities for advanced learning.

By 1910, the colonial administration saw the increasing demand for female education in the region. But this demand was retarded by lack of funds and teachers. The desire of the *Attah* of Epira to establish a school for girls in 1922 made clear that female education could be started with success. The Native Administration was, therefore, disposed to providing a substantial sum towards the recruitment and payment of the salary of a European schoolmistress. In retrospect, the school at Okene for girls was opened in May of 1922, and the permanent building was completed in 1923. This went a long way to meet the educational

demands of the province for females.

The mid-20th Century saw gradual improvements in female education, spurred by colonial educational policies and post-independence national development plans. The introduction of universal primary education in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s led to increased enrollment of girls in schools. Government initiatives and advocacy by women's groups emphasized the importance of female education, resulting in higher literacy rates and more girls pursuing secondary and tertiary education. Despite these advancements, significant gender disparities persisted, such as cultural practices, early marriage, and economic barriers that continued to limit educational attainment for many girls in the region. Nevertheless, the progress made during this period laid the foundation for further improvements in female education in subsequent decades.

Maternal and child health was a crucial indicator of women's socioeconomic status in the early 20th Century. Access to healthcare services in the Niger-Benue Confluence was limited, and traditional birth attendants continued to play a central role in maternal care. High maternal and infant mortality rates were prevalent due to inadequate medical facilities, poor sanitation, and lack of prenatal and postnatal care (Ovaioza and Rhoda, 2020). With the establishment of colonial health services and the expansion of healthcare infrastructure in the mid-20th Century, maternal and child health began to improve. The introduction of modern medical practices, vaccination programs, and better access to healthcare facilities contributed to the reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates. Nonetheless, rural areas still faced significant challenges in accessing quality healthcare.

Reproductive health services, including family planning and contraception, became more widely available in the latter half of the 20th Century. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) launched campaigns to promote family planning, aiming to reduce high fertility rates and improve women's health outcomes. Increased awareness and access to reproductive health services empowered women to make informed decisions about their reproductive lives, thereby contributing to better health and socioeconomic status (Ovaioza and Rhoda, 2020). Throughout colonization, the people's health was fair, with no significant epidemics except for a small outbreak of smallpox in 1933 which the health officials adequately controlled through vaccination and treatment. To ensure healthy people, the residents of Kabba Province established eight dispensaries in the province. In contrast, many more were established in the confluence region to meet the demands of the people. The Igalá Native Administration completed a sick rest house at Idah during the year 1943 to help the colonial administration. Qua Iboe, Church Missionary Society and other missionary societies in the region also carried out valuable medical work in many ways to assist the colonial government through sensitization, training women on hygiene, and providing free medical assistance to sick people.

The participation of women in the economic sector of the confluence region in the early 20th Century increased on a large scale as women in the Niger-Benue Confluence were primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture, trading, and crafts. In Igalaland, however, there was abundant farmland and a ready market for other products so that the people did not have to depend on the oil palm as was the case further south. The oil palm industry was controlled by the womenfolk who traditionally did not take a very active part in agriculture. Thus, women played a vital role in the local economy through farming, food processing, and market activities. Other economic activities included active engagement in indigenous arts and crafts such as weaving, pot making, calabash making, wood carving, basket weaving, hair making, and brewing. The Bassa-Komo women engaged in basket weaving and pottery making, extensively practiced by the older women who could not carry loads to the market. The Ebira people did cloth weaving, and smelting of Iron was entirely in the hands of the Ebira Koto people. Beer brewing was the primary industry in Bassa-Komo and Igalaland, which had

contributed to the economic uplift of the practitioners. This uniqueness in the indigenous industry of the region was due to the area's unique geographical location which aided the development of iron, cotton, and guinea corn.

Britain's United African Company and John Holt, along with the colonial government, purchased products such as fish, cotton, benniseed, palm oil, ivory, and sheanuts from the local markets and shipped them overseas. To organize their trade in the region, these trading companies had native and British agents through whom goods were purchased, while in some cases they bought directly from the farmers who brought goods to the marketing boards. When coming from Europe, finished and foreign goods were also shipped into the region. With an already established market for these raw materials or cash crops, many able-bodied men and women began to profit from agriculture. Sheanuts were primarily brought in by Gwari and Bassa women who preferred to sell in the market than to take them to the two trading depots of the Niger Company and Messer John Holt that were established at Gerinya as a result of the low prices paid by these companies on their goods. In contrast, in the market, they sold at a reasonable price. With the economic development and stability recorded during this period, and the need for the province to be financially self-reliant, the colonial administration introduced taxation into the region following the colonization of Nigeria. The people were taxed based on their income and property owned. Everyone was expected to pay taxes to meet the colonial expenditures, especially in the construction of infrastructures for the smooth running of the colonial government. Taxation was spread across the region, and men and women from 18 years of age and older were expected to pay taxes; failure to meet the payment attracted punishment from the tax collectors. The tax ranged from 3£ (3.94\$) to 6£ (7.88\$) depending on the economic resources and activities in the districts. By 1927, tax slips were issued to all payers, and any adult found without a slip was charged to pay a fine of 10s (Pedraza, 1960).

The mid-20th Century brought changes in economic opportunities for women, particularly with the growth of the formal economy. The expansion of educational opportunities enabled more women to enter formal employment professions such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work. Government policies aimed at economic development and gender equality also contributed to the increased participation of women in the workforce (Mba, 1982). Nonetheless, women continued to face barriers such as gender discrimination, lower wages, and limited access to higher-level positions. Informal economic activities, including petty trading and small-scale farming, remained important sources of income for many women, reflecting the dual nature of women's economic participation in the region.

The social status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence was deeply influenced by cultural and social norms. In the early 20th Century, traditional practices such as early marriage, polygamy, and widow inheritance shaped women's roles and status within their communities. These practices often limited women's autonomy and reinforced gender inequalities (Amadiume, 1987).

The latter half of the 20th Century witnessed changing social dynamics driven by modernization, urbanization, and increased exposure to global influences. Women's social status began to improve as educational and economic opportunities expanded. Legal reforms and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting women's rights also contributed to shifts in social attitudes and practices. Women increasingly challenged traditional gender roles and asserted their rights in various spheres of life. The rise of women's movements and the establishment of women's rights organizations played a crucial role in advancing gender equality and improving the social status of women in the region (Steady, 2006).

The 20th Century revealed a complex and evolving landscape for women's education, health, economic participation, and social status that underwent significant transformations, reflecting broader socioeconomic changes and the impact of policies and advocacy efforts

aimed at promoting gender equality. While notable progress was made in improving the status of women, challenges and disparities persisted. Cultural practices, economic barriers, and gender discrimination continued to limit women's opportunities and hinder their full participation in society. Understanding the historical context and socioeconomic indicators of women's status in the Niger-Benue Confluence provides valuable insights into the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary Nigeria.

21st Century's Changes in the Status of Women

In the 21st Century, the status of women in the region has undergone substantial changes, reflecting broader global and national trends toward gender equality and women's empowerment. Through examining key indicators such as education, health, economic participation, and social dynamics, this section will provide a comprehensive analysis of the progress and challenges women face in the region.

The Niger-Benue Confluence region has witnessed significant improvements in women's access to education through the various efforts of both government and private sectors. These efforts began in the 20th Century and a significant impact was recorded in the proceeding century. Although female enrolment for post-primary and higher education was limited in the 1960s and the 1970s, there was an upshot of such enrolment in secondary schools in the 1980s. The situation came about as the people began to appreciate the value of female education with educated women accomplishing great things in their various endeavors. The development and expansion of education for the people in the confluence region continued into the 1990s with the establishment of two higher education institutions: (1) Kogi State Polytechnic in 1993 and (2) Kogi State University in the year 1999 (Aladekomo, 2004). Government policies, non-governmental organization initiatives, and international support have collectively contributed to increasing female enrollment in primary, secondary and tertiary education. The introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999 and various scholarship programs specifically targeting girls played pivotal roles in narrowing the gender gap in education and raising the status of women in the region (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

The emphasis on higher education and professional training for women has also seen a positive trend, and more women are pursuing degrees in fields such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), law, medicine, economics, history, literature, etc. that were traditionally male-dominated. Universities and vocational training centers in the region introduced programs aimed at encouraging female participation in these fields, thereby expanding their career opportunities and economic independence (Emmanuel and Adeniyi, 2019). The region has produced accomplished women such as Professor Emily Alemika of the Department of Public Law, Faculty of Law, University of Jos (UNIJOS), who is the first female law professor to have come out of the entire Kogi State, and Hassana Oseiwu Ali who is a professor of mathematics. The region has also recorded many women in academia and other career paths. According to Professor Elemika,

You can imagine starting primary school between the ages of 13 and 14 years. Before primary school, I had stayed with more than 12 people but none of them sent me to school. All I was known for was the fact that I was hardworking and very good at helping people. So, I was always asked to help either an aged person or a young woman giving birth or someone who has business to do and felt I would be of help (Drsheddy, 2016, 1).

The preceding narrative is the main experience of many women especially of the rural

communities in the region.

Healthcare access for women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region has also improved significantly in the 21st Century through initiatives such as the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) and various maternal and child health programs that have reduced maternal and infant mortality rates. The increase and availability of antenatal and postnatal care, coupled with increased awareness about reproductive health, have contributed to better health outcomes for women and their children in the region (Ovaioza and Rhoda, 2020). Access to reproductive health services, including family planning and contraceptive methods, has also increased. This has empowered women to make informed decisions about their reproductive lives, leading to a decline in unwanted pregnancies and improved overall health. Efforts by both government and NGOs to provide education and services related to reproductive health have been instrumental in this regard. These developments have greatly influenced women's choices and improved their status in the region.

The economic participation of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region has seen notable changes in the 21st Century as more women enter the formal workforce, taking on roles in various sectors such as education, healthcare, banking, and information technology. In the informal sector, women participate actively, especially in agriculture and trade. Women's ownership of agricultural assets increased when compared to the 20th Century; this indicates an increase in women's ownership of agricultural assets and an increment in the management of their household food security in the region. This increment came as a result of women's access to credit facilities by the banks and government empowerment initiatives. Furthermore, government policies promoting gender equality in employment, coupled with affirmative action measures, have facilitated this transition. Women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region have also made significant strides in entrepreneurship and small business ownership; this has become a crucial way of survival as many women own businesses (large or small scale) along with their formal occupation. Microfinance institutions and NGOs have also continued to provide financial resources and training to support women in starting and growing their businesses which has yielded a positive impact on the status of the women which has not only enhanced their economic independence but also contributed to the economic development of the region (Ibrahim, Ame and Paul, 2022).

Social and cultural norms in the Niger-Benue Confluence region have also undergone significant changes in the 21st Century as traditional gender roles that confined women to domestic responsibilities are gradually being challenged and redefined. With increased access to education and economic opportunities, empowered women assert their rights and take on diverse roles in society such as leaders in their workplaces, homes, religious worship centers, and in the communities as women leaders.

The influence of media and technology in the 21st Century cannot be overemphasized as it has also contributed to changing perceptions of gender roles and the status of women. The proliferation of social media and digital platforms has provided women with new avenues to express themselves, share their experiences, and advocate for their rights. This has established a more inclusive and supportive environment for women to pursue their ambitions and challenge societal norms (United Nations Women, 2020). Many women in the region now challenge the patriarchal settings of their various communities and are taking up roles irrespective of their gender. These roles are accompanied by financial fulfillment and satisfaction, thereby giving women the confidence to handle life and daily occurrences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated how the primary role assigned to a woman in almost all cultures is that of a mother, housewife, and homemaker. Thus, all that relates to a woman is seen from

the angle of her assigned primary role; therefore, the status of women had been that of dependence and vulnerability to men and society. In the precolonial period, women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region maintained their roles with little attempt to improve their status. Although many of them were actively engaged in economic and sociopolitical activities and gained some financial freedom, but that level of participation did not effectively improve their status.

This paper posits that socioeconomic indicators of the status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region in the 20th Century revealed a complex and evolving landscape. This was because women's education, health, economic participation, political involvement, and social status underwent significant transformations, reflecting broader socioeconomic changes and the impact of colonial policies. While notable progress was made in improving the status of women, challenges and disparities persisted. These challenges included cultural practices, economic barriers, and gender discrimination that continued to limit women's opportunities and hinder their full participation in society.

The paper concludes that the 21st Century has brought significant changes to the status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region of Nigeria as there are improvements in education, health, economic participation, political involvement, and social dynamics that reflect broader trends toward women's empowerment. Nonetheless, significant challenges such as gender-based violence, discrimination against women in workplaces, unfavorable economic policies, and economic inequality persist. Despite the progress made, gender-based violence remains a significant challenge in the Niger-Benue Confluence region as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse continue to affect women's lives. Efforts to address these issues through legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and support services are ongoing; but, there is still a long way to go in eliminating gender-based violence (Balogun, 2021). Economic inequality between men and women also persists, with women often earning less than their male counterparts and having limited access to resources and opportunities. Structural barriers such as discriminatory practices, lack of access to credit, and limited property rights hinder women's economic empowerment. Despite all these challenges, the status of women in the region has witnessed remarkable changes over the period examined in this paper.

The paper recommends an increase in access to quality education for girls and women in the region. This can be achieved by implementing scholarship programs specifically for girls in primary, secondary and tertiary education. An enhancement in school infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, will help to the establishment of a conducive learning environment for girls. The government and NGOs should develop and implement adult literacy programs tailored to women's schedules and responsibilities and integrate vocational training with literacy programs to provide comprehensive skill development. If successful, adult literacy programs for women will greatly improve the status of women in the region.

Women's entrepreneurship should be promoted by fostering an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs. This can be achieved by providing microfinance and credit facilities specifically for women; offering training programs on financial literacy, business management, and marketing skills; and establishing women's business networks and cooperatives to enhance peer support and resource sharing. Women in agriculture should also be supported to increase their productivity and income in the agricultural sector. The various stakeholders in the region should provide female farmers with access to improved agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, and ensure that women have access to land ownership and control through legal reforms and advocacy. Training on modern agricultural practices and technologies to enhance productivity should be prioritized.

Improving maternal and reproductive health services to enhance the health and wellbeing of women, particularly in reproductive health should be paramount. This can be

achieved by expanding access to maternal health services, including prenatal and postnatal care; promoting family planning services and education to reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies; and implementing community health programs to address common health issues faced by women. If all these and more are addressed, the status of women in the Niger-Benue Confluence region will be greatly impacted in a positive way.

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