

# DECOLONISING THE EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE ECONOMY OF THE PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

**<sup>1</sup>Dr Namita Kumari**

Assistant Professor  
SPM College, University of Delhi

**<sup>2</sup>Dr. Pranav Kumar**

Assistant Professor  
CSSEIP, SSS, JNU.

**Abstract-** This research delves into women's economic rights, duties, and roles in various pre-colonial African communities. By examining historical and anthropological research, the paper highlights the significance and agency of women in their local communities regarding economic matters. Women enjoyed a relatively high status in pre-colonial Africa, which changed with the arrival of colonialism. Colonial powers disrupted women's traditional financial roles, and their construction of knowledge perpetuated a distorted version of the African past. This distorted view portrayed African women as subservient to male-dominated social and economic structures. However, recent research has debunked this colonial myth. The process of decolonising knowledge reveals the crucial role that women played in the pre-colonial economy, society, and politics of different regions in Africa.

## 1. Introduction

The narratives driven by colonial knowledge production have perpetuated the belief that women in Africa were confined in the domestic space and oppressed by their men. In the literature of this narrative, 'women are depicted as minors, who needed protection and guidance from their male counterparts.'<sup>i</sup>. Colonial literature provides essential insights into how pre-colonial African women were portrayed by Western perceptions. These women were frequently depicted in colonial literature as "backwards," reflecting the colonisers' prejudices and ethnocentrism. In colonial literature, European ideals and conventions were often presented as superior to those of pre-colonial African communities. African women were perceived as "backward" concerning Western ideas of modernity and progress as a result of this ethnocentrism.<sup>ii</sup>. African women's duties, customs, and practises were painted as old-fashioned, which supported the notion that European culture was superior. Selective tales that highlighted elements considered unusual or distinct by European norms were frequently used in colonial literature.<sup>iii</sup>. Native African spiritual beliefs, community living, and polygamy were among the practices that were frequently used in a way that showed African women as helpless, subjugated, or subservient.<sup>iv</sup>. The complexity of African communities and women's active roles within them were ignored in such representations. The flexibility and agency ingrained in these roles were sometimes overlooked by Western observers and African women's contributions to trade, agriculture, and governance were disregarded, which resulted in an inaccurate portrayal that downplayed their significance on the social, political, and economic fronts. Colonial literature's depiction of pre-colonial African women as "backward" has a long-lasting effect. Stereotypes that downplayed the agency, tenacity, and variety of contributions made by African women were reinforced by it. The negative portrayal of African women hindered their recognition as leaders and contributors to community development, affecting laws, missionary efforts, and attitudes.<sup>v</sup>. These skewed narratives' legacy endures, influencing modern comprehension and feeding societal myths.

However, in recent times, many contemporary African scholars now recognise that the colonial powers and, later, the Eurocentric views have perpetuated the myth that gender relations in pre-colonial Africa were static with women's widespread subordination and subjugation.<sup>vi</sup>. For centuries, the colonial education system and the Eurocentric narrative were able to establish that women in pre-colonial Africa held inferior status and limited agency.

The recent scholarship from Africa is shattering many myths and moving towards decolonising literature on women. The decolonisation of education attempts to dismantle this erroneous narrative by shedding light on African women's multifaceted roles, contributions, and agency in their societies. Recent research reveals that pre-colonial Africa contained complex, diverse communities where women often exercised considerable economic, political, and social power.<sup>vii</sup>.

One myth was that African women were relegated to a life of drudgery. In reality, women played multifaceted economic roles—as farmers, traders, inventors, and more. Africa is home to thousands of ethnic groups, each with distinct cultures and traditions surrounding gender roles and the status of women. During the pre-colonial period, the status of women across the continent varied widely, though some broad patterns can be identified. Women held important economic, political, and spiritual roles in many societies, challenging notions that pre-colonial Africa uniformly oppressed women. In the economic sphere, women made critical contributions to household and community subsistence.

Contrary to stereotypes perpetuated by Europeans, African women actively participated in the economy. In agriculture, women were crucial to the management and production of food. They also participated in the trade, which boosted the local and regional economy. Historical records indicate that women occupied essential roles in marketplaces, showcasing their economic independence and power.

## 2. Role of Women in The Economy: Agriculture and Trade

In the expansive continent of Africa, women did not have consistent economic roles across the regions. However, despite the regional variations, it can be safely said that women were major players in the economy of pre-colonial Africa. There were no strict gender stereotypes in the economic domain. Women specialised in some areas, but eventually, males and females complemented each other.<sup>viii</sup> The African economy revolved around agriculture, and women played a significant role in agriculture. They were responsible for planting, harvesting, and processing crops. They also raised livestock and gathered wild foods. Women's agricultural work was essential to the food security of their families and communities.

Women participated in trading as well. They were involved in exchanging items between their tribal groups and other tribal groups. They exchanged crafts, food, animals, and other things. Women were also involved in manufacturing and crafts. They made pottery, textiles, baskets, and other goods. They also processed food and made beer.

Among agricultural groups like the Igbo in present-day Nigeria, women did the majority of farming, providing sustenance for their families.<sup>ix</sup> Pastoralist groups like the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania also relied on women's labour, as women built homes, milked cows, and manufactured handicrafts<sup>x</sup>. African women played an active role in both local and long-distance trade. They dominated the marketplaces as traders and merchants, such as the wealthy Kente cloth traders of the Ashanti Empire. The Maasai tribe, residing in Tanzania and Kenya, depended on their women to trade dairy goods like butter and milk. Additionally, they exchanged handcrafted items like baskets and jewellery.

Women in pre-colonial Southern Africa cooperated with their male counterparts in labour domains such as subsistence farming, building houses, and fetching water and firewood. For example, in pre-colonial Botswana, wives were entitled to their pieces of land and could possess cattle; husbands had no control over them.<sup>xi</sup> Women were responsible for trading crops, livestock, and other goods within and with neighbouring communities in the Ndebele tribe of Zimbabwe. They also traded handmade goods, such as pottery and textiles.<sup>xii</sup>

In pre-colonial West Africa, the profit from selling surplus goods solely belonged to women.<sup>xiii</sup> In West Africa, women played a vital role in distribution and trading activities. Among the Igba and Iyede of Nigeria, women were their community's primary traders and merchants. Trading provided a source of income for these women, who engaged in local and long-distance trade as active members of the Hausa tribe in Nigeria. They traded animals, fabric, kola nuts, and other items, including salt, a valuable commodity in the region. The Yoruba people of Nigeria were also involved in local and international trade, exchanging animals, kola nuts, textiles, and agricultural goods such as cassava and yams. The women of Ghana's Ashanti tribe also traded kola nuts, textiles, and gold, among other commodities.<sup>xiv</sup>

One of the crucial sectors of the pre-colonial economy was cattle rearing. Women's participation in cattle rearing in pre-colonial Africa differed depending on the location. However, they typically played a big part in raising and tending to cattle. In some communities, women produced dairy products, processed milk, and milked cows. In addition, they helped care for sick cattle, protecting them from predators and herding them. Women were in charge of trading cattle in other communities in exchange for cash or other items.

Women in various African communities, like the Maasai in East Africa, protected their castles from predators and managed daily cattle-related tasks. The Yoruba community in West Africa had women playing a major role in cattle trading, often travelling long distances to trade cattle for other goods or money. In the Ndebele community of Southern Africa, women were responsible for the care of livestock. The crucial role of women in cattle rearing in pre-colonial Africa contributed significantly to their communities' economic and social well-being. By managing and caring for livestock, women ensured the production of goods, exchange of resources, and food supply. Additionally, they played a vital role in passing on knowledge and skills related to cattle rearing, making them an integral part of their communities.

## 3. Women as Artisans and Craftsmen

Skilled women who excelled in crafts such as pottery, weaving, beadwork, and metalwork played a crucial role in supporting the local economy. These crafts were essential for everyday life and trade, providing necessary objects such as cooking, storage, and transportation vessels. Moreover, women's ability to create tools and trade items contributed to the economic interdependence among communities. In summary, the expertise of women in crafting played a vital role in sustaining the local economy.

In pre-colonial African communities, women's handicrafts expressed their culture and went beyond utilitarianism. The stories, customs, and symbols that women conveyed through beadwork, textiles, and other crafts served to uphold the cultural identity of their communities. In addition, these crafts served as a means of transferring spiritual beliefs and historical accounts from one generation to the next. Intricate patterns and motifs created by women enhanced the aesthetic appeal of goods and highlighted the unique cultural history of their societies.

In several pre-colonial African civilisations, traditional gender norms were altered and redefined thanks to women's important role as craftsmen. Women gained economic independence and decision-making power in their communities as skilled artisans. Their contributions as wage earners and traders gave them a more equal standing in society, with their voices being given more weight in the power structure.<sup>xv</sup> Thanks to their economic strength, they could influence social norms and expectations by asserting themselves in both public and domestic arenas.

Women's skilful work showcased their talents and facilitated the formation of networks and partnerships within their communities. They often engaged in sharing their knowledge, expertise, and handcrafted items, establishing social connections beyond their immediate surroundings. These connections played a crucial role in promoting commerce, knowledge exchange between different regions, and cultural diversity.<sup>xvi</sup> Black cultures living before colonisation were more resilient and adaptable due to women's involvement in these networks.

The role of women in crafting in pre-colonial Africa was crucial in connecting practicality and symbolism. Their creations showed the intricate relationship between daily life, artistic expression, and cultural heritage. Acknowledging the contributions of women

artisans emphasises the importance of understanding gender roles and how they shape societies. In pre-colonial Africa, women artisans were crucial in forming the social, cultural, and economic environments. In addition to supporting regional businesses, their skill enhanced cultural legacy and promoted more gender parity.

#### 4. The Decline of The Status of Women in Colonial Africa: Focus on Economic Role

Once colonial powers arrived in Africa, women's status started to deteriorate. The gender roles that European colonists brought with them frequently placed women in submissive roles. There were several detrimental effects of colonialism on African women's standing. There were many colonial legislations which marginalised women. Customs protected the role of women; now, the colonial powers abolished the customs. Even the imposition of Christianity was instrumental in encouraging a more patriarchal conception of society. In the economic sphere, there were multifaceted ways in which colonialism affected the status and participation of women in economic activities.

The colonial economic systems imposed by colonial governments sometimes hindered women from important industries. Women's participation in traditional subsistence agriculture and other informal economic activities has become less significant due to the imposition of wage labour models and cash-crop economies, which prioritise male employment.<sup>xvii</sup> Wage labour attracted men, leaving women with less power and influence over financial decisions. Colonial governments often discriminated against women in the workplace, denying them access to specific jobs or paying them lower wages than men. This made it difficult for women to support themselves and their families.

During European colonialism, legal and administrative structures were established that marginalised women. Their opportunities were limited to domestic roles, and their economic power was restricted. For instance, land ownership and property rights were typically vested in male heads of households, further eroding women's economic autonomy.

Colonial interventions disrupted the economic practices of Indigenous communities, where women held prominent positions. The preference for male-dominated sectors in agriculture and extractive industries led to the undermining of traditional women's crafts and trading networks. Colonial powers controlled trade routes and established markets, sidelining local economic practices where women excelled.

Colonial education systems often favoured male education, limiting women's access to formal education and vocational training.<sup>xviii</sup> Colonial officials often believed that women were not as intellectually capable as men and that their primary role was in the home. Colonial governments were often reluctant to invest in female education, seeing it less beneficial to the economy. They believed that educating men would be more productive, as they could work in jobs requiring higher levels of education and training. The disparity in education opportunities perpetuated gender-based economic inequalities. Women had limited access to modern economic activities due to their lack of education, which hindered their ability to take advantage of new economic opportunities introduced by colonial industries.

The impact of colonialism on women's participation in the African economy was significant. The economic structure changes, policies implemented during colonialism, loss of traditional practices, and unequal education opportunities all led to women's exclusion from formal economic activities. These historical factors have continued influencing gender roles and economic participation in present-day Africa. Therefore, it is crucial to make ongoing efforts to correct these inequalities.

#### 5. Conclusion

It is important to recognise that there were distinctions among the many African cultures. The problem with the Eurocentric perspectives of knowledge is its obscure subtleties by mistakenly linking customs such as polygyny and bride-wealth to oppression. As a component of more extensive familial networks, these customs offered some advantages. The pre-colonial Africa was not a society based on the modern understanding of equal rights for women. At the same time, it was not at all, however, a repressive, male-dominated dystopia that colonists and the colonial education system portray. The lifestyles of African women defied stereotypes held by the West and demonstrated dynamism, authority, and respect. In general, the African women had greater access to the public space. In their economic roles, they were not limited to the house's four walls. Instead, they were active in agricultural fields, markets, places and in the production of daily used items through arts and crafts.

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the complexity and diversity of women's roles in pre-colonial Africa. It reveals the influential positions held by women in economic realms. While simultaneously identifying the perpetuating stereotypical narratives that hinder a comprehensive understating of this issue. A richer understanding of the historical dynamics without the baggage of distorted colonial knowledge will help in the greater empowerment of women at present times in Africa. The process of decolonising education in Africa is still ongoing, and a lot of work needs to be done to ensure that all girls and women have access to quality education. However, gaining a clear understanding of the historical role of women in pre-colonial times can aid in these efforts and empower women.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Moagi, A. L., & Mtombeni, B. (2020). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: Southern Africa. In O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola (Eds.), *\*The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies\**, Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Coombes, A. E. (1994). *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*. Yale University Press.
3. Lugones, M., & Spelman, E. V. (1983). Have We Got a Theory for You? Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'. *\*Women's Studies International Forum\**, 6\*(6), 573-581.
4. Smith, M. G. (1957). *Government in Zazzau, 1800-1950*. Oxford University Press.

5. Nnaemeka, O. (2005). Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way. *\*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30\*(4), 1-18.
6. Amoah-Boampong, C., & Agyeiwaa, C. (2019). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: West Africa. In O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola (Eds.), *\*The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies\**, Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Nwando Achebe. (2022). Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and King. In K. Sheldon (Ed.), *\*Women in African History\**, Indiana University Press.
8. Moagi, A. L., & Mtombeni, B. (2020). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: Southern Africa. In O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola (Eds.), *\*The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies\**. Palgrave Macmillan.
9. Sylvia Leith-Ross. (1939). African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria (pp. 76-79). Faber and Faber.
10. Janet Bujara & Sarita Chopra. (2018). Women and Work in Pre-colonial Africa. In K. Sheldon (Ed.), *\*Women in Sub-Saharan Africa\** (pp. 37-39). Indiana University Press.
11. Moagi, A. L., & Mtombeni, B. (2020). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: Southern Africa. In O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola (Eds.), *\*The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies\**. Palgrave Macmillan.
12. Elizabeth Schmidt. (2004). Debunking the Myth of African 'Traditional' Female Subordination. *\*Journal of African History*, 45\*, 323-336.
13. Amoah-Boampong, C., & Agyeiwaa, C. (2019). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: West Africa. In O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola (Eds.), *\*The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies\**. Palgrave Macmillan.
14. Margaret Priestley. (1976). The Ashanti Queen Mothers: A Study of Women's Political Power. In N. J. Hafkin & E. G. Bay (Eds.), *\*Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change\** (pp. 195-216). Stanford University Press.
15. Cott, N. F. (1987). *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. Yale University Press.
16. Shinnie, P. L. (1965). *Trade in Ancient West Africa*. Oxford University Press.
17. Hopkins, A. G. (1973). *An Economic History of West Africa*. Columbia University Press.
18. Mba, N. O. (2001). Education and Colonial Transition: Women in Eastern Nigeria. *\*Gender & History*, 13\*(1), 67-88.