

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF  
ETSAKO-EAST IN THE 21st CENTURY**

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BENIN CITY.**

**FEBURARY, 2025**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
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## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by Daniela Epueosi Barth-Salem with matriculation number ART2005848 in the Department of International Studies and Diplomacy, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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**Date**

**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for His infinite grace and mercy upon my life.

His loving kindness, protection and grace throughout my course of study.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
Title page - - - - -	i
Certification - - - - -	ii
Dedication - - - - -	iii
Acknowledgements - - - - -	iv
Table of contents - - - - -	v
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
Background to the Study - - - - -	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
A Brief History of Etsako-East Local Government Area - - - - -	17
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
Social Roles of Etsako-East Women in the 21st Century - - - - -	24
<b>CHAPTER FOUR:</b>	
Economic Roles of Women in Etsako-East in the 21st Century- - - - -	36
<b>CHAPTER FIVE:</b>	
Conclusion - - - - -	48
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY - - - - -</b>	<b>52</b>

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

The Chinese saying that “women hold up half the sky”<sup>1</sup> is not an over-exaggeration. Women are the bedrock of the development of any nation. Throughout human history, women played vital roles in their nation’s development. Women's economic empowerment is particularly important in developing countries, where women often face barriers to accessing financial resources, markets, and employment opportunities. When women are economically empowered, they are better able to support themselves and their families, bringing positive impacts on their communities and the economy as a whole. Another important aspect in which women’s participation has contributed immensely to the growth of a community or a nation is through their political representation<sup>2</sup>. Nigerian women are a diverse group of individuals who have a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. They are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, entrepreneurs, professionals, and activists. They played very vital roles in pre-colonial and colonial times and also contributed significantly towards the fight for Nigeria’s independence. They also helped in checking the excesses of the colonial administration in 1924 through the popularly known protest as the Aba Women's Riot where they protested against the forceful introduction of taxation in Eastern Nigeria<sup>3</sup>. Great women like Mrs. Ranson Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, and Elizabeth Adeyemi Adekogbe played prominent roles in the

independence of Nigeria. Not forgetting the fact that the famous Empire of Zauzzau (Zaria) flourished under Queen Amina, Ile-Ife under Molemi, and Benin under Emotan.

From pre-colonial times to the early 21st century, the role and status of women in Nigeria have continuously evolved. 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 pre-colonial times, women played a major role in social and economic activities. They controlled occupations such as food processing, mat weaving, pottery making, and cooking. Land was communally owned with women having access to it through their husbands or parents. Although the man was the head of the household in the patrilineal system, older women had control of the labor of younger family members. Facing numerous challenges like; gender inequality, poverty, and a lack of access to education. Women produce roughly over 60% of agricultural produce in the country<sup>4</sup>. This is visible in some rural societies mostly in the middle-belt and southern parts of Nigeria.

Women's empowerment is of importance to both the nation and the empowered. With women's empowerment, the future prosperity of the nation is secured because these are the people who are and will take care of many offices and functions in the country. They are also those who are going to manage top offices in the future following the popular statement "Women are the pillars of the good society". Empowerment of the women who form a certain percentage of Nigeria's population who are also at their productive age is crucial to economic performance. The main argument is that the

durability of the new leaders will depend, not only on their ideology but to a large extent on their economic performance<sup>5</sup>.

Etsako-East is one of the local government areas in Edo State, Nigeria, with a population that thrives on agriculture, trading, and other small-scale enterprises. Historically, the region has a rich cultural heritage, rooted in the customs and traditions of the Afemai people. Agriculture has been the backbone of the economy, with women traditionally playing a central role in food production and processing, as well as managing household chores and raising families. In pre-colonial times, women were involved in subsistence farming and petty trading, often supplementing the family income through small-scale businesses<sup>6</sup>. While having some degree of economic participation in this region, they were often overshadowed by patriarchal structures, limiting their access to land, capital, and decision-making platforms. Despite these limitations, they found ways to organize themselves into informal networks and cooperatives, pooling resources together to improve their livelihoods and contribute to community well-being. Although their roles have often been undervalued, they've remained critical to the survival and growth of communities in Etsako East.

The 21st century has witnessed a global shift towards acknowledging the crucial role women play in the socio-economic development of societies. In Etsako-East, this role is increasingly significant, as women contribute not only to household management but also to broader community and economic development. Etsako-East being a region rich in culture and agricultural heritage, women have become key participants in both formal

and informal economies of the community. Yet, for many years, their contributions were often overlooked, confined within the parameters of tradition and patriarchal societal structures. With the turn of the century, new opportunities have emerged for women, reshaping their participation in various sectors such as education, commerce, agriculture, and governance<sup>7</sup>. The rise in women's literacy rates, access to vocational training, and entrepreneurial activity involvement have marked a new era in the socio-economic landscape of Etsako-East. Female entrepreneurs in Etsako East have leveraged education and access to technology to engage in more diverse economic activities, from agriculture to manufacturing, hospitality, and commerce. They have also become crucial elements to the local economy, leading cooperative societies, setting up small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and engaging in politics and decision-making processes at local levels. The Nigerian government has also focused its attention on women's empowerment, especially through programs like the National Gender Policy which has opened doors for women's engagement in economic activities on a larger scale. This policy has provided an open door whereby women are given equal access to economic resources, gender-sensitivity budgeting, and support for women's decision-making roles in the economy<sup>8</sup>.

The economic empowerment of women in Etsako-east has also been influential in addressing poverty and community development. Through microfinance initiatives and government policies aimed at promoting gender equality, women are increasingly gaining access to capital and resources enabling them to enhance their businesses and contribute to the growth of the communities. Despite these gains, women continue to face

significant challenges such as; traditional cultural practices, gender discrimination, limited access to land, and political marginalization, which limits their full participation in development<sup>9</sup>. Looking forward, the socio-economic development of Etsako-East will depend significantly on how well the contributions of women are harnessed and supported. Empowering women through better access to education, healthcare, and economic resources will be crucial for sustainable development. Initiatives aimed at addressing gender inequality, enhancing access to finance, and providing training in modern agricultural techniques or business management will further increase the capacity of women to contribute to the region's development.

### **Aim and Objectives**

This study aims to examine women's role in the socio-economic development of Etsako East Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. Seeking to understand the extent of women's contributions, the challenges faced, and the impact of their activities in the development of the region using the following objectives;

1. Analyze the economic contributions of women in Etsako East: This includes assessing their roles in agriculture, trade, small businesses, and other economic activities that support household incomes and contribute to the local economy.
2. Examine women's social impact in the contributions to community development: Explores how women have influenced education and cultural preservation within their communities.

3. Evaluate the government's effectiveness and non-governmental interventions in supporting women's roles: Assess the impact of policies, programs, and resources provided by the government and NGOs in empowering women and enhancing their contributions to socio-economic development.
4. Comparing the socio-economic roles of women across rural and urban areas within Etsako East: Examining the differences in opportunities, challenges, and impacts, giving insights into how geographic location influences women's socio-economic activities.

These objectives collectively aim to provide a detailed understanding of the multifaceted role of women in Etsako East's socio-economic landscape, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the potential for greater impact with supportive interventions.

### **Scope of Study**

This study covers an in-depth examination of the role of women in the socio-economic development of Etsako East Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. Encompassing significant social and economic changes that have influenced women's roles and opportunities in development. It focuses on various aspects of women's contributions, challenges, and their evolving impact on the region's socio-economic landscape in the modern era.

Analyzing women's contributions in crucial sectors such as agriculture, trade, and entrepreneurship, with particular attention to how advancements in technology, access to

micro-finance, and changing market dynamics have shaped women's economic activities. It also examines women's roles in agricultural production, value-added processing, local trade, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), highlighting their economic impact on household income, employment generation, and community resilience. It looks at how women in Etsako East contribute to the preservation of cultural practices, language, and traditional values while balancing with the influences of modernization.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts the qualitative methodology approach to explore the contributions of women to socio-economic development in Etsako East, focusing on the roles, challenges, and opportunities they face in the 21st century. The methodology is designed to incorporate both traditional research techniques and digital or online methods for enhanced data collection and analysis. Relevant secondary data will be analyzed providing historical and contextual background to the study. Also, the combination of both primary and secondary data sources provides a holistic view of women's socio-economic roles in Etsako East. Aiming to generate rich, meaningful insights into the contributions, challenges, and opportunities women face in the 21st century. It not only enhances understanding but also ensures that the research captures the complex dynamics shaping socio-economic development in the region.

### **Literature Review**

Some of the materials available have been written only from the consciousness of Western Euro-centric ideas, and Western feminist perspectives. In other words, some of

the writings appear biased about the true position of the African woman in Africa, and most of such writings do not appear to have considered the culture and traditions of Africa. While many of such writings and discussions claim that African women have always been excluded from political participation, we have very few begging to dissociate themselves from such unfounded and incorrect claims about African women in matters of political participation. For example; Nina Mba has done a major work on the subject to invalidate some of the biased claims made concerning the awareness and ability of the African woman. Her research covers pre-independence and post-independent periods (1900-1965) in Nigeria. Mba's contribution shows that African women in Southern Nigeria were heavily involved in political activities from 1900 to 1965. In her work, titled "Nigerian Women Mobilized", she broadly defined politics as the process by which resources and values (human, material, and spiritual) are allocated within a social unit (nation, region, town, or village) to meet the needs and desires of its members. Mba's study shows that in Benin society, women were not left out in the political arena, since there were women among the thirty-one Ogiso (kings) that are known through oral traditions to have reigned in the Edo kingdom. The Etsako people are in Edo State as it is known today in Nigeria<sup>10</sup>.

In "The African Woman Today", Ama Ata Aidoo explained that in most countries of Africa, the whole sectors of the economy, such as internal trade, agriculture, agrobusiness, and health care, are in the hands of women<sup>11</sup>. She went further to paint the image of the African woman of today as she is seen in the mind of the world as someone

who's breeding too many children that she can't take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. It has become a cliché of Western journalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; flies are buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand.

Most Africans will argue that African women or Etsako women have a God-given status in the society within which they command respect, with which they can function and perform tasks that men cannot dare. First of all, the status of the African woman was never in doubt before the Africans because they knew too well that the African woman's status was pre-ordained by nature through the virtue of motherhood. Every other thing, no matter what it may be would appear secondary. For example, in campaigning for the legalization of polyharmony<sup>12</sup> or polygyny (polygamy) in Cote d'Ivoire, Susanne Sango asked women in Cote d'Ivoire to think of the children first and forgive their husbands for the stupid things they may do. "That's love. That's what our parents did in the village". Sango says if polyharmony was legalized, husbands would not leave their wives for lovers and the family unit would remain intact. Susanne Sango is the President of the National Association of Single Women in Cote d'Ivoire. Secondly, to the Africans, in terms of the greater majority of the people, no other status will ever be more important than that of motherhood with all that it encompasses.

The work on "The Role of Women Empowerment in the Development of Women Entrepreneurship in Lagos State", argues that Women empowerment serves as the

foundation for growth and prosperity in any society. By empowering women economically, there is a huge opportunity for inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development. Globally, entrepreneurial-minded women have continued to display a firm determination to venture into and become a success in today's competitive business world<sup>13</sup>.

In 2021, Nigeria was ranked among the top ten African countries with a high percentage of female-owned businesses according to the MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2021, which gives insights into the enablers and constraints of female business owners globally. Policymakers in Nigeria are increasingly becoming conscious of the key role of women in the socio-economic development process, evidenced by the many women's intervention programs at national, state, and local levels. Women's contribution to economic activities with emphasis on job creation is quite significant. A survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) revealed that out of 59.6 million jobs created by MSME operators in the year 2017, female entrepreneurs were responsible for 26 million jobs equivalent to 43% contribution compared to 57% contribution by their male counterparts<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, a recent survey by the Lagos State Employment Trust Fund (LSETF) to understand the key factors and dynamics of job creation within the MSME eco-system revealed that female business owners contribute as much as 35% to employment generation in the MSME eco-system in Lagos State.

According to the workings of the Women and ICT Frontier Initiative (Women's Empowerment, SDGs and ICT), In 2015, the member states of the United Nations collectively agreed to pursue the vision of sustainable development and set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to guide development efforts. One of the fundamental principles adopted to achieve sustainability is that of inclusiveness, which means society must leave no one behind in the processes and opportunities for development. Women in particular should benefit from the opportunities for learning, for business, and for connecting to social and economic networks. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now deeply embedded as the platform through which opportunities are shared, skills training is delivered, and information is gathered<sup>15</sup>. The SDGs are universally applicable goals that balance the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development. The SDGs replaced the MDGs that had first brought united global action around a 15-year agenda to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and saw progress in several important areas such as reduced poverty, access to water, increased primary school enrollment, and reduced child mortality. Still, many gaps exist in multiple sectors. For example, a reduction in income poverty has not led to a reduction in inequality. According to The Global Gender Gap Report 2015, since 2006, an additional quarter of a billion women have entered the labor force but the annual pay for women only now equals the amount men were earning ten years ago<sup>16</sup>. The SDGs continue the fight with the mandate to address the issues of poverty and the sustainability of a more inclusive development so that no one is left behind.

A dedicated focus on gender equality and empowerment is needed because many changes have to be made in legislation, social and cultural norms, and economic and political practices. The targets are intended to guide the actions of nations and provide starting points that promote women's empowerment and gender equality by the year 2030. At the same time, the global agreement on the SDGs adopts inclusivity as a principle applicable to all goals, and therefore women's empowerment is considered both as one of the key objectives and as a major part of the overall solution<sup>17</sup>.

The growing concerns about the impacts of women's empowerment on sustainable development have generated lots of interest in enhancing the political and economic capacity of the local women in developing countries like Nigeria, where vulnerability to low political and economic capacity is high because they are the marginalized group in the society. Thus, women's empowerment is a vehicle for ensuring effective sustainable development. Therefore, analyzing women's empowerment is germane to finding ways to help the poor rural women in both the rural and urban areas of Nigeria on a sustainable basis. The important role of women in Nigerian development cannot be overemphasized. Women are a source of labor inputs as well as human capital in production, which improves productivity in most developed and developing countries. In addition, employed women could be a reliable source of demand for the economy through their consumption activities and a new class of entrepreneurs in Nigeria<sup>18</sup>. There is a direct relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development; that is why in the world we live in today, it is practically impossible to avoid the issue and discourse of

women's empowerment in the development context. For instance, the issue is discussed among political scientists, civil society groups, politicians, economists, feminists, philosophers, teachers, environmentalists, journalists, scientists, and technologists, among others. At different periods, there is a persistent reference to women's empowerment in the form of affirmative action, gender rights, gender equality, and balance, women's political participation, the socio-economic construct of women, rural-urban women's lifestyle, and the like<sup>19</sup>.

### **Chapter Outline**

This research will include a total of five chapters, each of which will explain individually the roles that women have played in the socioeconomic development of Etsako East.

#### **Chapter One: Background to The Study**

This chapter gives an overview of the entire work. It provides the foundational framework upon which the research work is built. The chapter covers the introduction, aims and objectives of the study, scope of the study, research methodology, and literature review.

#### **Chapter Two: A Brief History of Etsako-East Local Government Area**

This chapter focuses on the historical background of Etsako East, providing a comprehensive look at the origins, development, and sociopolitical evolution of the region of Etsako East.

#### **Chapter Three: Social Role of the Etsako-East Women in the 21st Century**

This chapter focuses on the social roles of women in the development of Etsako East. Focusing on their contributions to agriculture, trade, education, and community leadership. Their engagement in entrepreneurial activities supports family welfare, and participation in local governance, shaping socio-economic progress while navigating cultural and societal challenges.

#### **Chapter Four: The Economic Role of Women in Etsako-East in the 21st Century**

This chapter focuses on how women contribute to local economies through agriculture, trade, and entrepreneurship. Their involvement in farming, small businesses, and market activities is central to sustaining household incomes and driving regional economic growth.

#### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This chapter presents the overall summary of the entire research work.

## Endnotes

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ETSAKO-EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA**

Etsako East Local Government Area (LGA) is situated in the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria. Its headquarters is in Agenebode, a historically significant town located on the eastern bank of the River Niger. The historical background of Etsako East is closely tied to the migration and settlement of the Edo-speaking people, trade networks, colonial experiences, and post-independence developments.

The Etsako people, including those in Etsako East, are part of the larger Edo ethnic group who trace their origins to the ancient Benin Kingdom. Oral histories and scholarly accounts indicate that many Etsako communities were established by migrants fleeing political instability in Benin City, particularly during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the 15th century<sup>1</sup>. These migrations led to the formation of independent communities in the

Etsako region, although the people retained strong linguistic and cultural ties to their Benin roots.

Agenebode, the administrative center of Etsako East, gained prominence as a major trading post along the River Niger. Its strategic location allowed it to thrive during the trans-Saharan trade era, facilitating the exchange of goods such as kolanuts, salt, and agricultural produce with traders from the northern regions of Nigeria<sup>2</sup>. This trade also brought cultural influences, including the spread of Islam, which has left a lasting imprint on the area. The area is predominantly inhabited by the Afemai (or Afenmai) ethnic group, who trace their origins to migrations from the ancient Benin Kingdom during the 15th and 16th centuries. These migrations were spurred by internal conflicts and the expansionist policies of Oba Ewuare the Great. Settling in the northern parts of Edo State, the Afemai people established communities that eventually formed Etsako East.

### **Historical Background**

One of the strongest challenges ever faced by any open-minded historian concerned with the origin and historical development of the Etsako people, is situating the starting point, i.e. telling exactly when, where and how it all started, that evolutionary process has brought about the Etsako people as they are today. At the time of its earliest unfolding, there were no written records, and as such, there is no real authoritative source that can point to the ‘factum realisimum’ (most authentic fact) of the whence of the Etsako people.

According to historical accounts, the Bini people came all the way from Egypt and eventually found a more secure shelter in their present abode after a short stay in the

Sudan and at Ile-Ife, which the Bini people call Uhe<sup>3</sup>. Before coming to their present settlement, a band of hunters were sent from Ife to inspect the land and the report they brought back was favourable. Tradition says that they met some people who were in the land before their arrival. These aboriginals were said to have originally come from Nupe and the Sudan in waves. For over a century, the management of the affairs of the kingdom was carried out under different leaders. The Benin Empire of the first period whose rulers or kings were commonly known as “Ogiso” was founded about 900 A.D. At that time, the kingdom was known as “Igodomigodo”. Misrule and internal squabbles led to the banishment of the last Ogiso, by name Owodo.

Benin’s history highlights a transformative period marked by leadership struggles, migrations, and the rise of the Etsako people. Prince Oranmiyan from Ife established the monarchy in the 12th century, and his son, Eweka I, became the first Oba. The kingdom flourished but faced internal conflicts, such as during Oba Ewuare the Great’s reign (1440–1473), when his harsh mourning laws after the death of his sons led to widespread emigrations<sup>4</sup>. After a brief republican experiment failed, Oba Ozolua ascended the throne, grappling with rebellion, inter-tribal wars, and social unrest. These challenges intensified migrations, known as the “migration plague,” as people fled the empire seeking autonomy<sup>5</sup>. Among them were the ancestors of the Etsako people, who left Benin and settled in their present region between the 14th and 18th centuries. This migration gave rise to distinct clans like Agbede, Auchi, Ekperi, Okpella, and Weppa-Wanno, forming

the Etsako nation. The era reflects both the resilience of the Benin Kingdom and the determination of its migrating people to establish new identities<sup>6</sup>.

### **Migration and Settlement**

The migration and settlement history of the Etsako East people, is deeply intertwined with the broader history of the Afemai people, a subgroup of the Edo-speaking ethnic group. Their migration from Benin is drawn from the oral sources of people who hail from the Etsako-East subdivision of Etsako land. A resumé of this story is to be found in the written evidence of two historians cum authors who both hail from the Etsako-East subdivision: Rev. A. O. Anaemhomhe of Ovaio and Jane Onuku Itseuwa of Ivioghe<sup>7</sup>.

Migrating from Edo (Benin) a very long time ago, at about the 13th and the 14th Century. During this time in Edo, the powers of the Oba of Benin were invoked at random in passing laws and bringing about living conditions that were unbearable for the people. Sometimes, the sons and daughters of the citizens were even seized as a penalty or fine for any contravention of the word of the Oba. One day, a terrible news was proclaimed in the Kingdom of Edo that the Oba had ordered that no other person in the kingdom was allowed to pound anything like yam or cocoyam, except only in the household of the Oba. Earlier, before that time, there had been many other obnoxious laws which were very difficult to keep, yet anyone who dared to contravene the law of the Oba was either executed, or tortured or sent on exile into the unknown wild or forests. Seeing the constant abuse of power displayed by the Oba, many people became fed up

with the daily experience of hardship and bondage in the land of Benin. With this disenchantment, many inhabitants took a strong decision to depart from the kingdom. As the situation grew worse each day, the ancestors of the Ishan kindred and of Ika-Ibo emigrated from Edo<sup>8</sup>.

One of the Generals of the Oba named “Adaobi” called all his brethren together and told them to prepare for a departure within five days. On the fifth day, very early before the appearance of daylight, a group of people led by Gen. Adaobi migrated from Benin and made their way towards the northern part of the kingdom, but out of the reach of the Oba. After a day’s journey, the people settled at a place named Obada and Okpiaghamhe, twenty-three miles away from Benin. The Oba on hearing about the departure of General Adaobi and his brothers and about their settlement at Obada Okpiaghamhe, decided to hold out a strong hand against them. When General Adaobi and his brothers heard the news, they felt they were still under the umbrella of the Oba, so they decided to take a longer step further. Early the next day, they continued their journey towards the north for several days until when they reached a place they named “AYERE” shortened from “Mha khe ye re ana” meaning “we have settled here”. The Ayere settlement later turned to a town called Avhiele today. Records show that all those people that Gen. Adaobi led away from Benin are the Etsako of today and some of the other Afemai tribes. After several months, General Adaobi and his men felt they were free from the invasion of the Oba, so he allowed some of the men to extend their farm and family camps wider and far around the Ayere settlements but not too far away. General Adaobi then made his shrine-

hut in a place known today as “Ukwe Adaobi” in Ivbiaro village. That very position of his shrine-hut at Ivbiaro is believed to be a habitation for the ghosts of the dead in Afemai till date<sup>9</sup>.

In reference to another version which had it that a man named OLUKU had to flee from Benin with his five children namely Uzairue, Ibie, Weppa-Wanno, Avianwu and Ekperi because they were being persecuted by Adenomo – a giant and powerful Benin warrior. They settled in a land between Orle valley and Ibie hills and had to part ways shortly because of the quarrel that ensued among them. Those that left with Weppa-Wanno moved towards the River Niger and settled at a place which they called “Age n’egbode” (now Agenebode) meaning “we will not overtake each other again”<sup>10</sup>.

Though historian had not been able to really come up with the exact dates of the migrations from Benin Kingdom, but pieces of records put together pointed to the period of the reign of Oba Ewuare popularly known as Erua-Nokemeji (c.1440) and that of Oba Ozolua (c. 1481), which were characterized by turbulence, oppression, unrest, incessant wars, rebellions and mass movement from Benin. Those that migrated first were the ancestors of Akoko-Edo, followed by Owan and Etsako. Ishan were the last to migrate. These groups – Akoko Edo, Etsako and Owan became Afemai. It was strongly noted that, “Amidst all these views, there is, in spite of claims to Benin ancestry, the possibility of initial aboriginals and/or migrants from other places to whom the descent of the people of Etsako could be traced”<sup>11</sup>.

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### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **SOCIAL ROLES OF THE ETSAKO-EAST WOMEN IN THE 21st CENTURY**

The responsibilities of women in Etsako East were mostly found in the home, family, and immediate accommodating environment. This includes the "caretaker" role that is similar to the traditional role of women globally. However, men are traditionally occupied with more physical "things-oriented, competitive occupations"<sup>1</sup>. An outline of some of the hypotheses and gender stereotypes regarding women's context includes the feminist theory, standpoint theory, structural functionalism, and intersectional theory.

The Feminist Theory analyzes inequalities in gender-related issues, using the dispute approach to examine the maintenance of gender roles and inequalities. The Structural Functionalism perspective argues that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era, when men typically took up responsibilities outside the home, such as hunting, while women typically took care of domestic responsibilities in and around the home due to their biological makeup of caring for children. The Standpoint Theory explains women's gender roles from the viewpoint and realities of their lived experiences in everyday life's immediate local settings. Imperatively, the Intersectionality Theory argues that there are multiple overlapping identities, such as religion, ability, gender, race, ethnicity, and occupation, among other variables that can oppress a person or group of people. These identities are considered together in the context of women in society. This is because they overlap or interconnect when it comes to oppression and power. However, this theory or perspective seems to be loaded with variables and, based on identity markers, stereotype people (women) into categories, not considering each individual's peculiarities regarding their unique experiences<sup>2</sup>.

Traditionally, women in Etsako East were mainly considered inferiors in varying degrees, to their men counterparts. They were also seen and regarded as keepers of their environment, feeders, and family custodians<sup>3</sup>. They were also regarded as cooks for both the young and old since they prepared domestic and public consumption meals. Women's role as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and friends, among other deliberations, placed them on a high pedestal as comforters of their offspring and their male counterparts

within the patriarchal society. Women as sisters and daughters to the men consistently imply that with regards to the existing bonds of kinship, they should be given the necessary protection and required respect, as they performed home chores that were enabling and mutually beneficial to the family in particular, and society in general. Regarding their maternal instinct, women as mothers were regarded as comforters and protectors (Iyo) to their husbands and children<sup>4</sup>, playing crucial roles in education, health care, community leadership, and cultural preservation, all of which contribute to the overall social development of the area.

### **Traditional Roles Of Women**

A woman derives her societal status from two major roles - the role of a mother and a wife. As a mother, the woman is the primary custodian of the cherished value of the society of preserving the activities of procreation. Being the channel through which children come into the world and the procreation of the human race is sustained. Thus, a woman has as many children as possible, while she equally enjoys her higher social status and a sense of fulfillment if she can deliver male children<sup>5</sup>. Evaluating the status and standing position of women in the traditional society. Women's role in traditional society is *sine qua non* to societal development. The impacts of women were felt in every aspect of life in the society. They had extensive knowledge of the natural environment; they were gatherers. They complement men's efforts in tiling the soil to provide and supply both crop and food production for survival. To a reasonable extent, their communities depended on them to provide nourishment or they would face starvation.

Traditional women held vital knowledge of herbs and medicines that also ensured the survival of their communities. What women do and are expected to do is different as regards economy, politics, religion, ideology, culture, etc. but there is a common task which women despite race, color, or any other variations throughout the world are expected to perform. These roles include cooking, sweeping, general cleaning of the house, rearing children, caring for the sick, caring for elders, and so on. In most societies, also in Etsako-east, cooking has always been seen as one of the traditional roles a lady is expected to have hence in the girl-child's upbringing, the act of cooking is incorporated into her training while the boy-child is kept away from the kitchen. In the case of men, whenever they feel like lending a helping hand to share in the work undertaken by women, their tasks do not involve domestic work. Once men return from work, they retire to leisure pursuits like eating, gaming, drinking, and so on. Oftentimes, men's domestic tasks, where they do any, tend to be communal- house building or thatching<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the production of a significant proportion of the household economic resources, whether this is the production of food crops, care of herbs, or work in storage and processing of crops; both for food and seed, or whether it is the production of cash crops and/or craft products for sale, it is often said that rural women must bear a double burden-long hour in the farms or the craft production and then equally long hours in child-care, food preparation, cooking, washing and cleaning.

### **Women's Cultural and Social Roles in Community Development and Transformation in Etsako East**

Women play a significant role in shaping the social fabric of their communities through communication and culture. Their contributions are deeply intertwined with oral traditions, cultural practices, and social norms, which serve as vital tools for community building and cultural preservation. This integration into women's social roles highlights their indispensable place in fostering development and unity within Etsako East. They utilize communication as a means to achieve social responsibilities. Oral traditions such as proverbs, folktales, and storytelling are central to how women educate their children and younger generations. Through storytelling, women teach moral values, societal expectations, and life lessons, ensuring that cultural knowledge is passed down<sup>7</sup>. This form of communication is not just a medium for entertainment but also a powerful tool for instilling discipline, respect, and a sense of identity in children. Additionally, women play a pivotal role in resolving conflicts and mediating disputes within families and communities. Their ability to communicate effectively, often using metaphors and proverbs, helps to foster harmony and understanding among members of their communities. This role underscores their position as custodians of peace and unity in Etsako East.

Culture in Etsako East encompasses various elements such as clothing, food preparation, religious rituals, marriage ceremonies, and traditional music. Women are central to these cultural practices, serving as custodians of traditions and values that define the community. During marriage ceremonies, for example, women play crucial roles in preparing traditional meals, guiding brides on cultural expectations, and

organizing events that reflect the community's heritage. Some cultural practices that exist in Etsako East include; The Okhe and the Akhe cultural celebration popularly called cooking title. This is a cultural practice among the Weppa Wanno people, which bestows upon the title holders, a sense of value and status that makes them higher than the common men and women. Not only that Akhe and Okhe raise one's social status, but they also serve the measure of judging men and women's excellence, and success in life, this is why for instance, a woman who has taken her cooking title, is seen as a member of the women of excellence, and she is given a special place among all other women in any celebration or meeting in the Weppa Wanno kingdom. Thus, it is a cultural activity that every Weppa Wanno indigene looks up to, and long to carry out, as a result of the cultural benefits and privileges attached to title holders. Moreover, Okhe and Akhe are not just means by which the people express their cultural beliefs, but they define the people's identity, and through which they express their natural sociability<sup>8</sup>.

Okhe is the cultural cooking title ceremony carried out by the male indigenes of Weppa-Wanno alone, without this, a man cannot join other men in the discussion of issues and making of policies that affect the Weppa-Wanno kingdom. This indicates that he is not acknowledged as a man in the Kingdom, since the celebration gives one a social status or value among the people. In taking this cooking title (other) in ancient times, the man who is taking the title, together with his relatives, friends, and all the people involved will go to a stony mountain called "Igodo" carrying with them the necessary food items needed like yams, melon, fresh fish, etc. The yams will be pounded there, and

soup will be cooked at the same spot. After preparing the food at “Igodo” the cooked food will be taken to the village, the pounded yam will be packed into different native pots, and the food will be called “Osami egbebo.” After all the elders have gathered, the man taking the title will present seven native pots of pounded yam, for them to verify if the food was well cooked or prepared. After the confirmation, the celebration will be made to go and announced to all the people by dancing round the entire village, the man will be dressed in a cloth called “Afia” and he will be accompanied by two drummers and the man will be meant to be chanting the words “ikilobo ikhakiobidane okaighoyomugwa usomiodumhe dodo.” By chanting and dancing around the community, all the villages will know that the man has done his cooking title, and they will begin to chant “Obo makhona, onakilobo ukhakiobidane.”.

On the other hand, the Akhe which literally means “cooking,” in the traditional dialect of the Weppa-Wanno people, is the cooking title done yearly by the female indigenes of the Weppa-Wanno kingdom, a woman can only celebrate it once in her lifetime. Often according to Weppa-Wanno tradition, the cooking title celebration is usually celebrated for the women by their husbands, or children in the case of a widow, while at times the woman can finance the celebration by herself<sup>9</sup>. When a woman has decided to celebrate the cooking title with the approval of her husband, she will go to her father’s house and inform the “Obotu” (this means the woman who has done her cooking title in her father’s family) that she wants to do her cooking title, then the Obotu will gather the entire family and formally inform them about their daughter’s cooking title

ceremony, and also approve the proposed date provided by the woman. After informing her family and all the necessary persons in their clan, the woman (celebrant) will return to her husband's home, and also inform all her friends and well-wishers. Afterward, she begins procuring and preparing the necessary items needed for the ceremony to be successful according to the custom and tradition of the Weppa-Wanno people<sup>10</sup>.

Another notable festival in Etsako was The Festival of Adaobi (also known as Adaoni) is a significant traditional event within the Weppa-Wanno community, celebrated every three years in the Akioli area. This festival is dedicated to honoring the men who have completed their age grade, an important social milestone in the community. It serves as a rite of passage for these men, marking their transition into a new social and political status, and is a celebration of their contribution to the community. One of the notable customs of the Adaobi festival involves the participation of unmarried girls, who are expected to be naked, decorated with camwood (a red paste made from the camwood tree), and adorned with beads<sup>11</sup>. The primary reason for this practice was to signify the purity and virginity of the girls. It was believed that the virginity of a girl was an important symbol of honor, not only for the girl herself but also for her family. A girl who did not participate in this ritual, or who failed to meet the standards of purity, was presumed to have been defiled or had a defect, which could negatively affect her reputation and that of her family. In the traditional mindset of the community, virginity was highly valued, and it was considered a significant part of a girl's identity and social worth. By participating in the festival, the girls affirmed their virginity and their family's

honor. This practice, however, placed immense pressure on young women, as their worth and social standing were often tied to their perceived purity. However, this practice was abolished by Chief Francis Omoh, the Okumabge of Weppa-Wanno, who recognized the harmful effects of such a tradition on women and their dignity. Under his leadership, the practice of parading girls in this manner was discontinued, as it was seen as a violation of women's rights and a perpetuation of harmful gender norms. Chief Omoh's decision to abolish this practice was a progressive step towards ensuring the protection of women's autonomy, self-respect, and freedom from societal pressures regarding virginity. The Adaobi festival, while still a time for community celebration and honoring the achievements of men, has thus evolved. It is no longer a platform for enforcing gendered expectations but remains an important cultural and social gathering, reflecting both the traditional values and the changing perspectives on gender roles within the Weppa-Wanno community.

Having played a critical role in shaping both the social and cultural development of their community. These women, through various social roles and cultural functions, have been key agents in passing on traditions, resolving conflicts, and driving economic and social progress. The intertwining of communication and culture within women's roles underscores their importance in the holistic development of the region. Storytelling, folktales, proverbs, and songs are all used as tools to educate younger generations about moral values, societal expectations, and the importance of maintaining the integrity of cultural identity. Women, often seen as the primary educators in families, use these forms

of communication to impart essential life lessons to children, particularly in rural areas where formal education systems might be limited. By maintaining and transmitting these cultural narratives, women play a crucial role in preserving the collective memory and heritage of the community. They also help instill discipline, respect, and a sense of identity in the younger generation, ensuring the continuity of both cultural values and social norms. Beyond education, women in Etsako East also contribute to the development of social cohesion and conflict resolution. As mediators within families and the broader community, women utilize communication to bridge divides, resolve disputes, and foster harmony. Their ability to listen, empathize, and communicate effectively, often using metaphors and proverbs, makes them natural conflict resolution agents. This role reinforces their position as peacekeepers in their community, creating a sense of unity among the people and mitigating potential social unrest. Women, through these activities, ensure that the social fabric remains strong, enabling the community to thrive and progress without losing sight of its cultural roots. Cultural practices such as the Okhe and Akhe ceremonies highlight the central role women play in defining the social structure of Etsako East. In terms of marriage promotion, Okhe and Akhe are exclusive to married couples, widows, and widowers, emphasizing the importance of family structure. The Akhe title, in particular, is a way for a man to honor his wife, highlighting the interdependence of husband and wife in the celebration. This practice discourages divorce, as women aspire to attain the prestigious title by enduring marital challenges. Additionally, Akhe can be posthumously celebrated for women who could not do so

during their lifetime due to financial or religious reasons<sup>12</sup>. Women's role in the Festival of Adaobi further emphasizes their importance in community development. Traditionally, the festival honored men who had completed their age-grade rites of passage, but it also involved the participation of young unmarried girls. Chief Omoh recognized the importance of preserving the dignity and autonomy of women, and his reforms marked a significant shift in how women were perceived within the cultural framework. This change reflects the evolving gender roles within Etsako East, where women are increasingly recognized as agents of change and development, rather than simply upholding traditional practices.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN ETSAKO-EAST IN THE 21st CENTURY**

In the present world of millennium developmental goals, economic community development can never be achieved without rural women's efforts<sup>1</sup>. Etsako East, a region characterized by its rich cultural heritage and diverse economic activities. Women in this area, play a vital role in driving economic growth and sustaining their communities through various contributions across different sectors. Their involvement in agriculture,

trade, and entrepreneurship not only supports their families but also significantly contributes to the broader economic landscape of Etsako East. Rural women's role in economic contribution in every community is an indicator of the modernization of the national economy. The entire community development process should be more on the active participation of rural women in economic activities. Women are less able than their counterparts in economic and developmental opportunities because they are faced with many burdens of household work that includes; childbearing activities, domestic chores, and also rearing of small livestock<sup>2</sup>. Studies were conducted regarding the economic contribution rural women made to community development that involves their participation in different forms of economic activities for their family and societal development. Such economic activities involve; agriculture, trade transactions, food processing, hairdressing and weaving, sewing and knitting, handcrafting, and creative art. Rural women have few benefits regarding education, employment opportunities, personal income, assets, and land tenure. Over 45.72% of women living in the rural community of Etsako East, draw their livelihood and struggle for survival, making them engage in peasant farming and house gardening as their major occupation<sup>3</sup>.

### **Women in Agriculture**

Agricultural development is an integral part of national development. It is that aspect of development that is related to agrarian reforms and their contribution to the socio-economic development of many countries<sup>4</sup>. Over 70% of the Nigerian population reside and earn their living in rural areas and the majority of these rural dwellers are

actively involved in agriculture and agricultural-related enterprises, especially women, youths, and children<sup>5</sup>. In most parts of Africa, women have traditionally been responsible for producing food for the family on land to which they gain access upon marriage but do not necessarily control. Their fundamental role is to secure food for the family making their role in national food security stressed. While men have generally been responsible for bush clearing and land preparation<sup>6</sup>. The farming activities of male and female farmers are equal and complement each other even though they are being designated as gender-specific. Women are involved in informal and limited wage employment activities even though they carry out other maternal responsibilities such as giving birth, child upbringing, and home upkeep<sup>7</sup>. In any part of the African continent, most of the foods that families consume are yielded from the labor of female farmers<sup>8</sup>. Women play a significant role in key stages of crop growing, farm produce harvesting, and processing of crops. They are the main producers of food produce, poultry, and farm animals raised in Etsako East. Their contribution to agricultural development is tremendous. They are traditionally engaged in different ways of food processing and selling agricultural commodities extensively. Playing the role of supervision in attending to all types of livestock farming, cultivation that feeds their immediate family alone, buying and selling merchandise or farm products regularly, handling and being in control of tending crop and animal husbandry, and putting up for sale their products at grassroots and regional level<sup>9</sup>.

Women farmers in Etsako East engage in various agricultural activities, including crop production and livestock rearing. They are primarily responsible for the cultivation of crops such as yam, cassava, maize, and vegetables, as well as the care of poultry and small livestock like goats and sheep. These women often manage their farms alongside other domestic duties, demonstrating their resilience and work ethic. Their agricultural activities directly contribute to household food security and income generation. By producing food for consumption and selling surplus crops in local markets, they play a key role in sustaining both their families and the broader economy. Their control of agricultural production and household food supplies, results in them being more likely to prioritize nutritious food for their families. By generating income through these activities, they contribute to their families' financial stability. Women in Etsako East often participate in the marketing of poultry products, such as eggs and broiler meat, and contribute to the processing of poultry feeds. By running small-scale poultry farms or assisting in the marketing and distribution of poultry products, women help generate income and create employment opportunities. Additionally, women's roles in family nutrition, care, and education are crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and improving the quality of life in the region. Moreover, women's involvement in agricultural enterprises, including poultry farming, supports food security in the community. As they manage the feeding and care of poultry, they contribute to the production of eggs and chicken, which are staple foods in the region. This not only enhances local food

production but also stimulates demand for poultry feed, thereby benefiting the broader agricultural sector<sup>10</sup>.

Women's participation in agriculture in Etsako-East has led to significant financial independence, allowing them to make crucial decisions regarding household expenses, healthcare, and their children's education. This independence allows women to make essential decisions regarding household expenditures, education for their children, and healthcare, thereby improving the overall quality of life within their families<sup>11</sup>. It also enhances their bargaining power within the household and community, shifting power dynamics traditionally dominated by men. However, women face challenges such as limited access to resources like land, credit, and agricultural inputs. Limited access to finance restricts women in Etsako-East from fully participating in agriculture. Women often face difficulties accessing credit, agricultural inputs, and resources like land, which are essential for investing in farming activities and long-term development. Without financial support, they struggle to expand their farms, improve productivity, or invest in necessary tools and technology, hampering their economic potential and limiting their ability to generate sustainable income. Findings indicate that 58% of small-scale farmers in Etsako-East are women, showing that they are at the forefront of food production and local economic growth<sup>11</sup>. Despite their active participation in farming, women encounter severe financial limitations, which restrict their ability to improve productivity, invest in better farming techniques, and contribute to the economic sustainability of their households and communities. This lack of access to adequate funding affects not only

their prosperity but also the overall development of the community, as women reinvest a significant portion of their income into their families and local businesses. Since a large proportion of small-scale farmers are women, their agricultural activities directly affect the availability and affordability of food in the community. However, financial constraints, including limited access to bank loans and high interest rates, have prevented them from expanding their farming activities. Studies show that only 7% of farmers had access to bank loans, while the remaining 93% relied on alternative sources such as cooperative societies and personal savings<sup>12</sup>. Without sufficient financial backing, women farmers struggle to increase food production, which in turn affects the overall economic stability of their communities. This underlines the importance of implementing policies that facilitate better access to agricultural credit for women, as increased investment in women's farming activities leads to greater food supply, job creation, and improved economic conditions in Etsako East.

### **Women in Small Scale Businesses and Entrepreneurship**

Traditionally, women in Etsako East, like in many other parts of Nigeria, were primarily seen as caretakers of the home, responsible for nurturing families and managing household duties. This aligns with the early 19th century Western notion that a woman's place was in the home, where she could contribute to society through her role as a homemaker. However, as the global landscape began to shift, particularly in the 1970's with women's liberation movements, women started to seek opportunities outside the home. In Nigeria, this shift was influenced by various factors, including economic

necessity, education, and the increasing availability of jobs in urban areas. Women began to enter the workforce in various sectors, challenging traditional gender roles and asserting their independence<sup>13</sup>. The emergence of women entrepreneurs has been driven by a desire for alignment between personal values and professional endeavors, allowing for greater freedom and flexibility in their careers. This shift marks a significant departure from the traditional barriers, often referred to as the "glass ceiling," that previously constrained women's career advancement<sup>14</sup>.

Women entrepreneurs in this area engage in various enterprises, including food production, trade, and crafts, contributing significantly to the local economy. Their involvement is not merely a means of survival; it reflects a growing recognition of women's potential as key players in the economic landscape. One of the primary motivators for women in Etsako to engage in small-scale businesses is the need for financial independence and economic freedom. Small-scale businesses significantly contribute to the generation of employment opportunities, providing essential goods and services at local levels, stimulating economic growth in rural areas, fostering entrepreneurship, and contributing to poverty reduction, making them a critical pillar of the economy. Many women are driven by push factors, such as insufficient family income or dissatisfaction with traditional roles. For instance, a mother of three may choose to start a canteen business to provide for her family while balancing domestic responsibilities. This entrepreneurial spirit not only helps them escape poverty but also allows them to contribute to household income, thereby enhancing their families'

standards of living. The ability to generate income empowers these women, allowing them to make decisions and invest in their children's education and health. Moreover, women's businesses in Etsako-East serve as critical sources of employment within the community. By establishing small enterprises, women create job opportunities not only for themselves but also for other members of the community. For example, a woman running a small textile shop may employ local seamstresses, thus providing them with a source of income. This ripple effect extends beyond individual families, fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and collaboration among women. Such informal networks of support can lead to collective growth, where women share resources, knowledge, and skills, further enhancing their business capacities and economic contributions<sup>15</sup>.

Women in Etsako East being actively engaged in various small-scale businesses, such as food processing, textiles, soap making, and trading, not only provide income for their families but also contribute to the local economy by creating employment opportunities. The dynamism of small enterprises allows women entrepreneurs in Etsako East to quickly adapt to market changes, integrate production with local demand, and maintain strong customer relationships. The significance of SMEs in Etsako East cannot be overlooked, as they promote rural development, encourage entrepreneurship, and drive socio-economic transformation<sup>16</sup>. Some of these significance include;

1. Women's involvement in small businesses such as farming, trading, textiles, food processing, and soap making, helps them gain financial independence. This independence enables them to support their families, pay for their children's

education, and improve their overall standard of living. As they engage in productive economic activities, jobs are created, not only for themselves but also for others within their communities, which helps reduce unemployment and bridge the income gap between urban and rural areas.

2. In Etsako East, many women-owned businesses rely on locally sourced raw materials such as agricultural produce, leather, and wood to create products for sale. This promotes industrial growth by ensuring that indigenous resources are fully utilized for economic development.
3. Many women start their businesses out of necessity or creativity, turning their skills and talents into profitable ventures. As they gain experience and knowledge, they inspire others in their communities to take up business initiatives. This culture of entrepreneurship fosters economic self-reliance and reduces dependence on government jobs or foreign products.
4. Economic diversification is another major benefit of SMEs. Instead of relying solely on large-scale industries or government jobs, SMEs introduce a variety of business activities that contribute to national income.
5. Women-led SMEs like; The Edo State Investment Pro-motion Office (ESIPO)-Ease of Doing Business Secretariat, in collaboration with the Etsako East Local Government Council, Edo State Skills Development Agency (Edojobs), NIRSAL Microfinance Bank, the Bank of Industry (BOI), and LAPO Microfinance Bank in Agenebode<sup>17</sup>, contribute to financial inclusion by bringing more people into the

banking and financial system. As women engage in businesses, they open bank accounts, seek loans, and participate in cooperative societies. This increases access to financial services, allowing small businesses to grow and expand.

Despite their significance, SMEs face multiple challenges, including financial constraints, marketing difficulties, and technological limitations and they are particularly pronounced among women entrepreneurs in Etsako East, who play a vital role in the socio-economic development of their communities. Some of these challenges include;

1. **Limited Access to Finance:** Many women struggle to secure loans due to a lack of collateral and high interest rates. To address this, financial institutions should introduce flexible loan schemes targeted at women entrepreneurs.
2. **Market Competition:** Women-owned businesses often compete with larger companies that have better resources. Government policies supporting local businesses through subsidies or preferential contracts can help small businesses survive.
3. **Poor Infrastructure:** Inadequate roads, lack of electricity, and poor internet access affect business operations. Investments in rural infrastructure will make it easier for women to conduct business efficiently.
4. **Limited Business Knowledge:** Many women lack the technical and managerial skills needed to grow their businesses. Providing training in business management, marketing, and financial literacy will help them become more competitive.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

Etsako East Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria, with Agenebode as its administrative center. The region's history is intertwined with the migration and settlement of the Edo-speaking people, specifically the Etsako people, who are part of the larger Edo ethnic group. These migrations, which occurred between the 14th and 18th centuries, were influenced by internal conflicts and leadership struggles within the Benin Kingdom, particularly during the reigns of Oba Ewuare and Oba Ozolua. The Etsako people, including those in Etsako East, trace their origins to migrations from Benin, where dissatisfaction with oppressive laws, such as those prohibiting the pounding of yam, led to mass emigrations<sup>1</sup>. These migrations led to the establishment of distinct clans, such as Agbede, Auchi, Ekperi, and Okpella, in the Etsako region. Agenebode, situated along the River Niger, became a significant trading post, facilitating commerce during the trans-Saharan trade era. The area also witnessed the spread of Islam through these trade networks. Despite the lack of written records, oral histories and scholarly accounts reveal that the Etsako people's history is marked by their resilience, their establishment of new identities, and their contributions to the formation of the Afemai ethnic group.

The traditional roles of women in Etsako East have been deeply intertwined with family and community responsibilities. Women were seen primarily as caretakers, responsible for domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and caring for the elderly. Their roles as mothers and wives elevated their social status, while their duties were essential to the survival and prosperity of the community. Women also held

crucial knowledge about herbs and medicines and contributed to agriculture alongside men, ensuring food security. In addition to their domestic roles, women played a significant part in preserving culture and fostering social cohesion. Through storytelling, proverbs, and cultural practices like the Okhe and Akhe ceremonies, women passed down traditions, taught moral values, and mediated conflicts within the community. These roles contributed to the overall development and unity of Etsako East. Cultural practices such as the Okhe and Akhe ceremonies<sup>2</sup>, which celebrate women's culinary prowess and elevate their social status, emphasize their importance in the community. Similarly, the Adaobi festival, originally centered around honoring men, has evolved to reflect changing gender roles, with reforms ensuring the dignity of women. Despite historical gender inequalities, women in Etsako East have always been agents of cultural preservation, conflict resolution, and social progress, contributing significantly to the development of their communities.

Women in Etsako East play a vital role in economic development through farming, trade, and small businesses. They engage in agriculture by growing crops like yam, cassava, and maize while also raising livestock. Their efforts ensure food security and provide income for their families. Additionally, many women run small businesses such as tailoring, food processing, and trading, creating jobs and stimulating the local economy. However, they face challenges like lack of access to loans, limited business knowledge, poor infrastructure, and competition from larger businesses. To support them, financial institutions should provide easier access to credit, the government should invest

in better infrastructure, and training programs should be introduced to improve their business skills.

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