

**IMPACT OF IGUE FESTIVAL ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
OF BENIN SOCIETY**

**BY**

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BENIN CITY.**

**NOVEMBER, 2025**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF  
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**NOVEMBER, 2025**

## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this work was carried out by **PRAYER OSAMEDE IDEHEN** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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**Date**

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to God almighty who in his infinite mercy has kept me alive and brought me this far even with the hurdles I encountered along the way, for by his grace this project became a reality.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

The Igue festival is a widely celebrated festival among the Benin people of Nigeria. It is usually celebrated every December in recent times and it serves as a forum for thanksgiving as well as a renewal ritual that bring the indigenous people of Benin together in expression of gratitude for the past year in anticipation for the future. The Benin kingdom, in its glory, located in present-day South-south Nigeria is a historic kingdom. It is one of the oldest states in the history of the hinterland of Africa in pre-historic times established around 1000AD, and lasting till it was colonized by the British emphasized in 1897. Beni was used predominantly by the earliest Europeans to describe the major inhabitants of the kingdom and their language<sup>1</sup>. The Benin people are known for their rich cultural heritage including festivals of which the Igue festival stands out as it serves as a medium for bringing its people together after a hectic year in thanksgiving and preparation for the year ahead. They are also largely distinguished by their social organization which set them apart from other ethnic groups in prehistoric times and to a large extent modern times. In addition, they are known for their artistic<sup>2</sup> and intricate traditions majorly bronze casting among others. In J. U. Egharevba's book, *A short History Of Benin*, he emphasized the distinct nature of Benin due to its social organization<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Igbafe in his book, *Benin under British Administration*, he describes Benin as a kingdom largely distinct due

to its well organized social system and a highly centralized political structure while also recognizing its travails to adapt in the face of British colonization<sup>4</sup>.

The origin of the festival is attributed to different beliefs as some historians like Ero attempts to trace the origin of the festival to time immemorial in his book, *Igue And Other Festivals In Benin Kingdom*, he emphasized that the igue festival is as ancient as the kingdom itself attributing it to the era of the odionwere(s)<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile other historians like E. B. Eweka describes it as solely the brain child of Oba Ewuare the great during his reign(1440-1473)<sup>6</sup>. As different speculations surround the origins of the festival, so does speculations as well as different school of thoughts surround the practice and evolution of the Igue festival. While certain scholars as well as historians are of the belief that the nature and practice of the festival might have remained the same over the years even in the face of challenges including the invasion of Benin in 1897 and annexation as part of Nigeria in 1914. Omoera in his article *Igue Ceremony As A Theatrical Performance*, he emphasized that the festival has remained unchanging and has endured inspite of difficulties over the years<sup>7</sup>, others believe it has declined. Charles Osarumwense explains this in his book *Igue festival And British Invasion Of Benin 1897* citing the British invasion as a factor in the disruption and gradual decline<sup>8</sup> of the festival.

The Igue festival is believed to herald good luck<sup>9</sup> according to E. B. Eweka in his book *The Evolution Of Benin Chieftaincy Titles In Benin Kingdom*. In the traditional belief system of the Benin people, the luck of the monarch is intertwined with that of the people

over which the monarch reigns. Therefore the oba is seen as the role model for leadership. The oba is perceived as the custodian of everything that pertains to the culture of the Benin people and his luck becomes their own<sup>10</sup>, whether good or bad, and this belief system has shaped the reason for the celebration of the festival over the years. The Igue festival commences with the mark of a chalk on the oba's head and the anointing with blood of animals and humans (during precolonial times) which are killed during the festival depicting purity accompanied by celebration. The anointing is performed by Isekhure, while the slaughtering of victims whether human or animal is the function of Ehondo, performed with the special knife Abieze<sup>11</sup>. After this, the chiefs proceed to pay homage to the oba with their Eben (traditional sword of authority). The oba's first performs the Igue festival, followed by members of the royal family on the third day and three days later, the Benins celebrate their own igue. The festival begins with the Ague ceremony which signifies a period of fasting. The Emobo is a very important part of the Igue festival and the festival climaxes on the 7th day with the Ugie-Ewere.

The impact of the festival to the Benins as a people cannot be overemphasized as the festival touches every aspect of their traditional systems. Its impact covers a wide range of spheres including preserving the sacred Benin customs, economic impact, political impact among others, largely contributing to the successes of the Benin people and the kingdom as a whole. This was confirmed in Damien Ukwandu and Benjamin Obeghare Izu in their article entitled the Igue Festival Ceremonies As A Demonstration Of Ancient Benin Culture In Nigeria, festivals like the Ugie which encompasses the Igue are essential for cultural

preservation, acting as a bridge between the past and present<sup>12</sup>. Daniel Omoruan and Louis Osagie in their book *A Histo-cultural Discourse On The Igue Festival* also describe the festival as a symbol of continuity between past and present<sup>13</sup>. E. B. Eweka also addresses this in his book *Evolution Of Benin Chieftaincy Titles In Benin Kingdom*, the igue festival holds significant socio-cultural and economic significance among the people, breeding unity, cultural identity and contributing to local development<sup>14</sup>.

### **Aim and Objectives**

This project aim to examine and investigate the impact of the Igue festival on the socio-economic development of Benin society, unmasking its cultural significance and adaptation in the face of challenges.

- I. To evaluate the origin and evolution of the igue festival in Benin society from precolonial times to present day.
- II. To examine the cultural and spiritual significance of the Igue festival within traditional Benin society.
- III. To evaluate the socio-economic contributions of the festival to Benin society across historical periods.
- IV. To analyze the modern adaptations and transformations of the Igue festival in response to societal changes.
- V. To identify the challenges facing the celebration and sustainability of the festival in contemporary times.

## **Scope of the Study**

This study will examine the nature and celebration of the Igue festival among the Benin people of Edo state and explore its socioeconomic impact on the development of the Benin society, from precolonial times to present day.

## **Literature Review**

The outflow of literature on the impact of Igue festival on the socio-economic development of Benin society is depicted in several key works, J. U. Egharevba's book titled *A Short History Of Benin*<sup>15</sup>, which largely examines the intricacies and beauty of Benin kingdom, describing it as a kingdom distinct in nature due to its highly organized social system. To him one of the factors that make Benin different from other ethnic groups is its highly organized social structure. While the book examines the kingdom of Benin on a broader view including its social and political structure, it fails to conceptualize and provide indepth analysis to paramount cultural practices like the Igue festival which contributes immensely to the greatness of Benin society. The book is also devoid of detailed analysis of the socio-economic impact of this festival on present day Benin society. This research aims to bridge this gap by paying detailed attention to how the Igue festival contributes to the socio-economic development of the Benin people today.

In the same vein, P. A. Igbafe in *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact Of Colonial Rule On An African Kingdom, 1897-1938*<sup>16</sup>, conceptualizes the Benin society as a kingdom largely distinct in its social organization and political structure highlighting its

travails in adapting to British colonization. This struggle to adapt stemmed from the conquest of the Benin kingdom in 1897 by the British. Igbafe gives credence to the complex nature of the Benin traditional system while also her resilience during colonial times. Although Igbafe offers an indepth analysis of the political and social evolution of the Benin kingdom during colonial times emphasizing its struggles and adaptation, he however focuses primarily on the struggles of colonial rule and governance structures, sidelining indigenous cultural practices like the Igue festival and their place in promoting cultural customs and identity. This study aims to cover this void by analysing how the practice of the Igue festival continues to contribute to the growth of the land and peoples of Benin in post colonial era.

The Igue festival is a widely celebrated festival among the Benin people of Nigeria. The origin of the festival has been a subject of debate amongst scholars and historians with some describing it as been part of the Benin society from the time of its establishment, while others attribute it to the reign of Oba Ewuare the great. This was documented by Osemwengie Osayomwanbo Ero in his book *Igue And Other Festivals In Benin*<sup>17</sup>, which basically examines the origins, nature and cultural significance of the Igue festival and other traditional festivals in Benin(2003) which basically examines the origins, nature and cultural significance of the Igue festival and other traditional festivals in Benin. While tracing the Igue festival to time immemorial. To him, the festival was established in no particular order or traced to any particular founder, rather it is deeply embedded in the traditions and identity of the Benin people and therefore cannot be linked to a single

founder but at the same time, the odionwere era would be a perfect period for its origin if need be. While the book provides a comprehensive outlook on the origins, nature and relevance of the festival, it employs a descriptive approach rather than analytical. It does not include a detailed socioeconomic perspective and at the same time leaves out the present day impact, struggles and survival in the face of modernization of the festival. This research seeks to fill the gap by exploring the socio-economic impact of the festival and cultural preservation in modern day Benin society.

Similarly, Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka in his book titled *Evolution Of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*<sup>18</sup>, examines the development, duties and historical changes of the chieftaincy title in the Benin kingdom, tracing the Igue festival to be the brain child of oba Ewuare embedded in chieftaincy and palace traditions which involves its rituals of renewal and unity as a result it heralds good luck. To him Igue festival, the sole innovation of Oba Ewuare the great during his reign aimed for the cultural and political restructuring of the Benin kingdom. The Igue festival holds significant socio-cultural and economic importance among the people breeding unity, cultural identity, and contributing to local development. While E. B. Eweka's book largely focuses on the historical development and significance of chieftaincy institutions in Benin and acknowledges key cultural festivals particularly the Igue festival which he describes to be the brain child of oba Ewuare, he leaves out exploring the broader significance of the igue festival outside its historical link to monarchy, instead he discusses it more as a tied function of the monarchy rather than as a significant cultural practice with far-reaching consequences. This study will build on this

basis by exploring socioeconomic significance of the festival, and its evolution in the Benin society and how it continues to influence the development of Benin society in contemporary times.

The idea on whether the festival has declined over the years has been a subject of debate amongst scholars. While some of these scholars are of the perspective that the festival might have not declined, others are keen on the belief that it has lost its original glory. The belief that the festival has not declined over the years but has rather retained its relevance is seen as documented in Omoera's article entitled *Igue Ceremony As A Theatrical Performance: An Appraisal*<sup>19</sup>. He argues that the festival comes across as a platform for showcasing the communal value, aspirations, and historical heritage of the Benin peoples, highlighting that its core structure and significance has remained unchanging over the years as a result, stipulating that the festival might have not declined. While this article provides an overview of the festival's strength and endurance in spite of challenges, it paid minimal attention to the subtle but relevant changes that has occurred over time including declining youth participation, modernization and loss of practice of certain rituals due to modernization or poor documentation. It also fails to mention how it has been influenced over the years by various systems which may have promoted a shift in practice, public acceptance and significance, amongst others without overlooking its continued endurance over the years.

In the same vein, Charles Osarumwense in his book titled *Igue Festival And British Invasion Of Benin In 1897*<sup>20</sup>, examines the role of the festival in the cultural identity and governance of the Benin kingdom highlighting the impact of the 1897 punitive expedition on the practice of the Igue festival holding it instrumental in the disruption and gradual decline of the festival. To him, the British invasion did not only disrupt the festival's continuity but also tampered with its socio-economic and political functions within the Benin society. While the book provides an outlook on the colonial impact on the igue festival, it pays minimal attention to how the festival has faced or evolved in post-colonial times. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the evolution and adaptation of the festival in modern Benin society.

The impact of the Igue festival to the Benin peoples cannot be overemphasized as it spans through every aspect of the system essential for growth and preservation of the history and culture of this people. This was summarized by Damien Ukwandu and Benjamin Obeghare Izu in their article entitled *The Ugie Festival Ceremonies As A Demonstration Of Ancient Benin Culture In Nigeria*<sup>21</sup>, that festivals like the Ugie which encompasses the Igue are essential for cultural preservation, acting as a bridge between the past and present. To them, it provides a platform for communities to celebrate their heritage while also addressing contemporary challenges. While Ukwandu and Izu's article provide an indepth cultural analysis of the Ugie Festivals, they focus mainly on the practical and ceremonial aspects while sidelining the socio-economic relevance of the Igue festival. This research seeks to critically analyse the impact of the igue festival on the socio-economic

development of the Benin kingdom. While also analyzing its contributions to the economic and social spheres of the Benin society in contemporary times.

Similarly, in Daniel Omoruan and Louis Osagie's book titled *A Histo-cultural Discourse On The Igue Festival*<sup>22</sup>, explores the historical evolution, practice and cultural significance of the Igue festival in Benin, while linking its root to the reign of Oba Ewuare. He portrays the festival also as "a symbol of continuity between the past and present"<sup>22</sup>. To him, the festival plays a very vital role in strengthening the relationship between the Oba and the people. While the book highlights the role of the festival in cultural Identification, bond between the people and the monarchy and its contributions in contemporary times. This project aims to tackle the socio-economic impact and its contributions in modern Benin society.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts the historical research approach in examining the impact of the Igue festival on the socio-economic development of Benin society, it makes use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources would be gotten from oral interviews conducted with elders, traditional leaders, traders, cultural practitioners and others with relevant understanding of the festival. Among them were a legal practitioner and a traditional custodian, whose insights helped highlight the state of the festival in recent times. The secondary sources would be gotten from published texts such as books, journals, newspapers and other documented materials which were obtained from the University of

Benin library, relevant online databases and private collections. These include works by scholars like J. U. Egharevba, P. A. Igbafe, Ero and others which provide a solid background for grounded historical perspectives on the festival. The study employed the use of thematic analysis to organize and interpret the data gathered from these materials in alignment with the research objectives.

## **Chapter Outline**

### **Chapter One: Background of the Study**

This chapter explores the basis on which the foundations of the Igue festival is built including the great Benin kingdom which serves as a platform for the practice of the festival, the origin of the festival from the perception of different scholars and historians, the different ceremonies that make up the festival and the festival's impacts on the Benin society, underscoring its continuous impacts over the years.

### **Chapter Two: Land and Peoples of Benin**

This chapter examines the intricacies of the Benin kingdom, including every essential component of the Benin traditional system. The geography, origins, peoples and political landscape which form an integral part of the Benin society. The ancestral history of the Benin peoples is woven carefully in this regards.

### **Chapter Three: Nature and Practice of Igue Festival**

This chapter examines the mode of celebrations of the Igue festival including the ceremonies that make up the festival. The oba as the center of the festivities is largely underscored not leaving out the activities that led to a gradual shift in the celebration of the festival.

#### **Chapter Four: The Impact of Igue Festival to the Benin**

This chapter largely underscores the socio-economic importance of the Igue festival to the Benin kingdom. Outlining its challenges in contemporary times, while also highlighting measures for the continuous practice of the festival.

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

This chapter draws conclusion from the major research objectives on each chapter while also providing recommendations where necessary.

#### **Endnotes**

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **ECONOMIC HISTORY OF ISOKO NORTH (1990–2010)**

## **Introduction**

Isoko North, one of the two Local Government Areas (LGAs) that make up the Isoko region of Delta State, Nigeria, alongside Isoko South, has a distinct economic history shaped by a combination of natural endowments, agricultural traditions, and the disruptive effects of oil exploration. With its administrative headquarters located in Ozoro, the LGA recorded a population of about 143,559 according to the 2006 national census<sup>1</sup>. The period between 1990 and 2010 was a formative era in its economic trajectory, marked by the coexistence of traditional livelihood systems such as agriculture and the expanding influence of the petroleum industry. This chapter examines the complex economic patterns of Isoko North during this period, with emphasis on agriculture, oil production, small-scale enterprises, and socio-economic challenges.

Agriculture remained the fundamental economic activity in Isoko North, with the vast majority of inhabitants involved in food crop cultivation. Cassava and yams constituted the primary staples, serving both subsistence needs and commercial purposes. Cassava, in particular, occupied a central place in local food culture, with its derivatives, garri, starch meal (Ozi), and Egu, forming significant components of daily consumption<sup>2</sup>. Palm oil and palm kernel production were also dominant economic activities, generating substantial income for rural households. Women played a key role in both cultivation and the processing of agricultural products, forming a significant proportion of the agricultural workforce<sup>3</sup>. They were equally active in trading food crops in local markets and often traversed neighbouring villages to meet household financial needs. Unfortunately,

agricultural productivity declined during this period due to environmental degradation linked to frequent oil spills, which reduced soil fertility and adversely affected crop yields<sup>4</sup>. These ecological disruptions, largely associated with the operations of oil companies such as the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), destabilised food crop production and weakened household economic resilience.

Oil discovery and exploitation profoundly altered the economic structure of Isoko North between 1990 and 2010. As part of Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, the region experienced both economic opportunities and heightened tensions. Oil activities facilitated infrastructural development, including the establishment of the Delta State Polytechnic in Ozoro, later upgraded to university status and the construction of a 14,000-seater Olympic-size stadium<sup>5</sup>. However, these benefits were not equitably shared. Recurring oil spills, particularly from SPDC pipelines, resulted in severe environmental degradation. In addition to reducing agricultural output, these spills created conflict between oil companies and local communities, leading to protests, confrontations, and incidents of kidnapping. Thus, the economic gains associated with oil were tempered by social and environmental costs, limiting their positive impact on the wider population.

Small-scale businesses provided an important alternative economic base during this period, especially as agriculture weakened. Research on small-scale business activities in Delta State, with specific attention to Isoko North, highlights the contribution of such enterprises to local development at a time when broader economic challenges persisted<sup>6</sup>.

Predominantly operated by women, these ventures ranged from agricultural produce trading to petty retail and other micro-enterprises. They helped households cushion the economic shocks resulting from declining agricultural productivity and environmental disruption. Nonetheless, inadequate access to credit facilities, poor infrastructural development, and limited market expansion hindered the growth of these businesses. Despite these constraints, small-scale enterprises remained crucial to the economic stability of the region.

Socio-economic variables including levels of education, access to resources, and farming experience, shaped agricultural outcomes during this period. Studies on organic farming practices in Isoko North indicate that while sustainable farming represented a potential means of addressing environmental decline, its adoption was limited due to socio-economic barriers<sup>7</sup>. Limited access to modern farming tools, credit, and extension services slowed the spread of such practices. The cultural heritage and social resilience of the Isoko people captured in works such as *The Isoko Ethnic Nationality: In Time Perspective* also played a significant role in shaping adaptive responses to economic pressures<sup>8</sup>. These socio-economic dynamics collectively influenced the survival strategies of the inhabitants.

The economic structure of Isoko North between 1990 and 2010 was defined by agricultural dependence, the disruptive yet partially transformative effect of oil exploration, the adaptive role of small-scale businesses, and the socio-economic characteristics of the population. Although agriculture remained the mainstay of livelihood,

environmental degradation significantly undermined its sustainability. The oil sector introduced modern infrastructure but also generated ecological and social instability. Small-scale enterprises offered alternative livelihoods but faced structural limitations. Socio-economic conditions further shaped the ability of households to adapt to these challenges. The result was an economy characterised by resilience in the face of adversity, yet constrained by systemic environmental and institutional challenges.

### **Agriculture as the Foundation of Local Livelihoods**

Women's participation in value-addition, particularly in cassava processing, such as converting tubers into garri, starch, or flour served as an essential link between primary production and market distribution, reinforcing their centrality in agricultural livelihoods<sup>10</sup>. Their role also extended into fish processing, where smoked fish products circulated within local and inter-community markets, offering both nutritional and economic benefits. Alongside these productive activities, women frequently organized themselves into supportive associations, pooling labour, sharing market information, and sustaining community-level safety nets that strengthened social cohesion. Tree-crop agriculture and plantation-related activities further complemented food production in the rural economy. Oil-palm cultivation, small-scale palm-oil processing, and the sale of palm kernels remained long-standing sources of household income, while rubber tapping and other perennial crops produced periodic cash inflows that families relied upon to support education, healthcare, and ceremonial obligations<sup>11</sup>. These activities often connected

farmers to wider regional commercial networks and, occasionally, export commodity chains, offering additional revenue streams while simultaneously exposing households to volatile market pricing determined externally.

Fishing and aquatic-based livelihoods continued to occupy an important niche, particularly among communities located near waterways and low-lying ecosystems. Fish supplied both a steady household protein source and a marketable commodity, enabling rural families to diversify income portfolios<sup>12</sup>. The combination of farming, fishing, livestock rearing, and petty trading created a multi-layered economy capable of absorbing economic shocks, especially during periods of poor harvests or declining agricultural productivity. Despite this deeply rooted agricultural orientation, Isoko North faced escalating environmental and institutional pressures throughout the 1990–2010 period. Oil-industry activities, including pipeline installations, frequent spills, and gas flaring, produced cumulative ecological degradation that contaminated soils and surface water, destroyed mangroves, and disrupted fishing habitats<sup>13</sup>. Research from the Niger Delta documented how recurrent pollution rendered fertile soils infertile and reduced crop yields, forcing many households to abandon farmlands or intensify reliance on non-agricultural work<sup>14</sup>. While oil extraction introduced financial opportunities to some residents through contractual work, casual services, and increased cash circulation, these gains were not distributed evenly and rarely compensated for widespread agricultural losses<sup>15</sup>. The limited flow-through of oil revenues into rural development, such as improved road networks,

market facilities, and modern agricultural extension services, constrained the capacity of local communities to recover from environmental decline<sup>16</sup>.

Communities responded through a variety of adaptive strategies. Household coping measures included combining farming with small-scale trading, artisanal activities, and intermittent engagement in oil-related labour opportunities<sup>17</sup>. Women intensified food-processing activities to increase market value, while men often migrated temporarily to urban centres in search of short-term employment. Communal responses involved negotiating compensation with oil companies, reallocating communal land where possible, and experimenting with alternative cropping systems or indigenous soil recovery techniques. While these responses mitigated some losses, they did not fully address the structural limitations imposed by ongoing contamination and limited institutional support.

In sum, agriculture continued to form the foundation of livelihoods in Isoko North from 1990 to 2010, structurally central to food security, cultural life and local trade, but its role was increasingly contested by environmental degradation associated with oil exploration and by the failure of oil-related revenue streams to produce broad-based rural development. Any historical or policy study of Isoko's economy for this period must therefore treat agriculture both as an enduring economic base and as a sector under significant stress: a site where local resilience strategies met the limits imposed by extractive activities and inadequate public investment. These dual realities explain why, by

2010, many Isoko households relied on a patchwork of agricultural, trade and informal oil-linked activities rather than on farming alone.

### **Trade and Commercial Activities in the Isoko Region**

Trade and commercial activity in the Isoko region has long been a cornerstone of local livelihoods, shaped by pre-colonial market networks, colonial economic reorganization, and post-colonial shifts in agricultural and cash-crop production. Historically, Isoko communities engaged in inter-village and inter-ethnic exchange, selling surplus yams, cassava products, palm oil and kernels, fish, and handicrafts at periodic markets that served as nodes for social as well as economic interaction<sup>18</sup>. These markets were not merely places of sale but institutions where credit relations, marriage alliances, and political information were negotiated, giving market activities a central place in community reproduction.<sup>19</sup>

Women have been at the heart of Isoko trade. Across the twentieth century, Isoko market women dominated retail trade in foodstuffs, small livestock and processed goods; they organized market stalls, managed seasonal trading circuits, and operated household processing of cassava (gari) and fish smoking for sale<sup>20</sup>. Because men were often more engaged in clearing, major land decisions, or migrant wage labour, women's control over market distribution and petty commerce effectively sustained household cash flows and food security. Their economic agency in trade was therefore both practical and strategic, allowing households to diversify income sources and absorb shocks. Colonial and early post-colonial economic change reconfigured commercial patterns in the Niger Delta and

had indirect effects on Isoko trade. The expansion of palm-oil export circuits and the monetization of local economies created opportunities for some traders to scale up transactions, but it also introduced new intermediaries and formal channels that often privileged men or urban-based traders<sup>21</sup>. While Isoko women continued to dominate local retail, the control of larger commodity flows, access to motorized transport, storage facilities, and capital, tended to concentrate in male hands or in ethnic groups favoured by colonial commercial linkages.<sup>21</sup>

The emergence and persistence of informal financial practices rotating savings and credit associations commonly called *esusu*, *ajo*, or cooperative thrift groups are central to understanding trade dynamics in Isoko markets. Women used these mechanisms to mobilize working capital, finance seasonal purchases of produce, and invest in small enterprises; such social-financial institutions underpinned the liquidity that kept market activity flowing at the grassroots. Cooperative societies and women's market unions also provided collective bargaining power, mediated disputes, and organized market space functions that strengthened women's commercial position despite formal legal and institutional constraints.<sup>22</sup> Transport and infrastructure have continually affected the scope of Isoko trade. Poor road networks, limited cold-chain facilities, and high transport costs constrained the reach of Isoko producers and traders, making most commercial activity intensely local or regionally bound. Where access to riverine transport or improved roads was available, traders could move higher-value goods and access urban markets, but such advantages were patchy and often depended on political patronage or external investment.

These structural limits shaped the strategies women adopted, focusing on perishable foodstuffs, value-added processing (gari, smoked fish), and market niches close to home.

The oil economy and associated socio-economic upheavals in the Niger Delta produced mixed effects for Isoko trade between 1990 and 2010. On one hand, oil wealth and urbanization stimulated demand for foodstuffs and consumer goods, providing expanded markets for rural traders. On the other hand, environmental degradation, land loss, and the reorientation of regional investment toward the petroleum sector undermined agricultural livelihoods in some communities, reducing the supply base and raising the cost of production for smallholders and traders. Women who depended on agriculture and local processing bore much of this burden, even as they attempted to capture new urban demand. Market institutions in Isoko also reflect complex relations between customary authority and formal regulations. Traditional chiefs and council structures historically regulated market days, stall allocations, and conflict resolution; colonial and post-colonial administrations introduced licensing and taxation that sometimes conflicted with customary practices<sup>23</sup>. Women navigated both spheres—using kinship networks and market unions to defend access to market space while complying with new bureaucratic rules where required. Such institutional hybridity shaped who could trade, what scale they could reach, and how revenues were appropriated at local levels.

Constraints to expanding trade, limited access to formal credit, insecure land tenure, gendered legal norms, and periodic insecurity, meant that most commercial activity in Isoko remained small-scale and informal through 2010. Yet, despite these challenges,

women remained adaptive entrepreneurs: forming cooperatives, engaging in petty cross-border trade with neighbouring Urhobo and Itsekiri communities, and innovating in product processing and retail practices to increase margins. Their entrepreneurship sustained rural economies and contributed significantly to household welfare and local market vibrancy.<sup>24</sup>

Trade and commercial activities in the Isoko region have been characterized by strong female participation, deep roots in traditional market institutions, and continual adaptation to external economic pressures. While historical legacies, infrastructural deficits, and structural inequalities limited the scaling of many enterprises, women's central role in market systems made them indispensable actors in the economic life of Isoko North between 1990 and 2010.

### **The Role of Oil-Related Activities in Economic Transformation**

The discovery and expansion of oil extraction and associated industries in the Niger Delta produced a profound economic reordering that reshaped livelihoods in Isoko North between 1990 and 2010. Oil brought new sources of revenue and urban employment to the region, altered patterns of land use, and redirected local and state investment toward petroleum-linked infrastructure and services. However, these transformations were uneven: while some households accessed wage labour and cash incomes from oil-related activities, many rural producers, especially women reliant on smallholder agriculture and local trade, faced disrupted livelihoods as farmland was degraded, access to fishing and forest resources declined, and market linkages became reoriented toward urban demand.<sup>25</sup>

Environmental degradation from spills, gas flaring and pipeline vandalism directly undermined agricultural productivity and food-processing activities that had historically formed the backbone of women's economic roles in Isoko communities. Contaminated soils and waterways reduced yields for crops such as cassava and yams and limited the supply of fish for smoking and sale, shrinking the commodity base women relied on for petty-trade and processing enterprises<sup>26</sup>. The loss of productive land and resources thus pushed many women to intensify informal trading, diversify into non-farm petty enterprises, or take low-paid service jobs in nearby towns, adaptive responses that mitigated household poverty but rarely produced commensurate gains in economic security or asset accumulation.

Oil activity also reconfigured power relations and access to resources. Compensation schemes, jobs in oil companies, and licensing of infrastructure projects often flowed through male-dominated networks, chiefs, and local elites, channels that reproduced existing gendered inequalities in control over land, capital and decision-making. Because most formal oil-sector employment required technical skills, education, or social connections that many women lacked, they tended to be excluded from the more remunerative opportunities the sector generated, reinforcing a gendered bifurcation between formal, higher-paid oil jobs and informal, lower-paid women's work.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, oil-driven urbanization and increased cash circulation created new market opportunities that some women were able to exploit. Expanding towns and worker camps increased demand for foodstuffs, domestic services, and retail goods—niches that female

traders and processors could supply. Women's market networks, cooperative associations, and rotating savings schemes (e.g., *esusu*) became important mechanisms for mobilizing capital to meet rising urban demand, enabling small-scale scaling of trade and processing activities even as primary production declined.

Oil-related conflict and insecurity, often arising from grievances about environmental harm, perceived inequitable distribution of oil rents, and youth unemployment—further complicated economic life. Violence and militarization disrupted market days, impeded transport, and increased the cost and risk of trading. Women, who typically shoulder household responsibilities, bore disproportionate burdens when conflict reduced household income or when male household heads were arrested, displaced, or engaged in militancy. Community-level disruptions also limited women's mobility and access to markets, reducing their capacity to respond economically to shocks.<sup>28</sup> Policy responses in the 1990s and 2000s, ranging from compensation packages to community development initiatives and NGO-led empowerment programs had mixed effects. Where interventions supported women's access to microcredit, training, or alternative livelihoods, they helped some women start small enterprises or improve processing techniques; yet such programs were uneven, often short-term, and insufficient to offset structural losses in land and productive assets. The long-term sustainability of women's economic recovery therefore depended on integrated approaches that combined environmental remediation, land rights protection, skills training, and improved access to formal finance.

In sum, oil-related activities were a double-edged driver of economic transformation in Isoko North between 1990 and 2010. They injected cash and new demand into local economies but also degraded the environmental and institutional foundations of women's traditional livelihoods. Understanding this mixed legacy is essential: policies aimed at inclusive development must address environmental restoration, secure women's land and resource rights, expand their access to formal economic opportunities, and strengthen cooperative institutions that mobilize capital and market access for female entrepreneurs.<sup>29</sup>

### **Challenges and Opportunities in the Period of Transition**

The period between 1990 and 2010 was a time of significant transition for Isoko North, marked by shifts in political governance, economic restructuring, and the influence of globalization. These changes brought both challenges and opportunities that shaped the livelihoods and development of women in the region. Understanding this duality is important for appreciating the resilience and adaptability of women as active agents in economic transformation. One of the major challenges during this period was the erosion of traditional sources of livelihood due to environmental degradation caused by oil exploration. Farmlands and fishing waters, which had sustained generations of women farmers and traders, were polluted, reducing productivity and limiting women's ability to contribute effectively to household income. In addition, socio-cultural norms continued to restrict women's access to land ownership, education, and credit facilities, thereby reinforcing gender inequality and slowing down their integration into modern economic

structures. Political instability, occasional communal conflicts, and weak institutional support also limited women's participation in formal economic activities and exposed them to insecurity and vulnerability.

However, the period also created opportunities that women in Isoko North gradually began to explore. Increased urbanization and the growth of local markets due to oil-related activities created new spaces for women to engage in trade, petty businesses, and food supply to urban centers. Women's cooperative societies, often rooted in traditional savings systems like *esusu*, provided avenues for pooling resources, accessing credit, and expanding small-scale enterprises. Educational expansion and advocacy by non-governmental organizations also began to challenge gender stereotypes, enabling more women to pursue skills training and participate in decision-making processes at community levels.<sup>30</sup>

The transitional period thus presented a paradox: while structural and environmental challenges constrained women's traditional roles, emerging opportunities in trade, urban services, and grassroots organizations allowed some women to adapt and even expand their economic influence. Their ability to negotiate these challenges and seize opportunities underscores their centrality in the economic development of Isoko North during this transformative era.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF ISOKO

#### NORTH

##### **Introduction**

Isoko North, a Local Government Area in Delta State, Nigeria, is a region characterized by a dynamic economy driven primarily by agriculture, trade, and small-scale enterprises, with women serving as critical agents of economic development. Situated in the Niger Delta, Isoko North benefits from fertile lands and proximity to waterways, which support farming, fishing, and trade as the mainstay of its economic activities. The region's economy is predominantly agrarian, with crops like cassava, yam, maize, and oil palm forming the backbone of local production, alongside vibrant market systems and informal enterprises that sustain livelihoods<sup>1</sup>. Women, in particular, have been pivotal in shaping this economic landscape, contributing significantly to food security, income generation, and community welfare. Their roles span farming, trading, crafts, and cooperative initiatives, often under challenging socio-economic conditions. Historically, women's involvement in Isoko North's economy can be traced to pre-colonial times when they were key players in subsistence agriculture and local trade networks, exchanging goods like palm oil and woven crafts in regional markets<sup>2</sup>. Despite colonial disruptions and modern challenges such as limited access to land and capital, women have remained resilient, adapting to changing economic realities while preserving cultural practices that underpin their contributions.

This chapter examines the major economic activities in Isoko North, with a focus on women's roles in driving sustainable development. By exploring their historical and contemporary contributions, this chapter highlights the centrality of women in fostering economic resilience and social progress in Isoko North, while acknowledging the structural barriers they face<sup>3</sup>. Understanding these dynamics offers valuable insights into gender and economic development in rural African contexts, emphasizing the need for policies that empower women to maximize their economic potential.

### **Agriculture and Women's Role in Food Production**

Agriculture is the cornerstone of Isoko North's economy, providing livelihoods for the majority of its population and serving as a primary source of food security and income generation. In this agrarian region of Delta State, Nigeria, crops such as cassava, yam, maize, vegetables, and oil palm dominate agricultural production, supported by the fertile soils and favorable climatic conditions of the Niger Delta. Women are the backbone of this sector, playing a central role in every stage of the agricultural value chain, from land preparation and planting to weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing<sup>4</sup>. Their contributions are particularly pronounced in the cultivation and processing of staple crops like cassava, which is transformed into products such as garri, fufu, and starch, essential to both household consumption and local markets. Women's expertise in these processes not only ensures food availability but also sustains cultural dietary practices, as these products form the foundation of Isoko cuisine. Beyond their labor in crop production, women in Isoko North actively engage in mixed farming systems, integrating crop cultivation with

other agricultural activities to diversify household income and enhance resilience against economic and environmental uncertainties.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to crop farming, women in Isoko North contribute significantly to livestock rearing, poultry, and small-scale fisheries, particularly in communities near the region's rivers and creeks. Poultry farming, including the rearing of chickens and ducks, is a common activity among women, providing eggs and meat for household consumption and market sales. Fisheries, though less dominant, are vital in riverside communities, where women engage in fish farming and processing, such as smoking fish for preservation and sale.<sup>6</sup> These activities are often labor-intensive and require minimal capital, making them accessible to women who may lack access to large-scale resources. Women's involvement in these sectors extends beyond production to include marketing, where they sell surplus produce, livestock, and fish in local markets like those in Ozoro and Owhe. Their ability to manage multiple agricultural roles demonstrates their critical contribution to household nutrition and economic stability, as well as their role in linking rural production to urban consumption through trade networks.<sup>7</sup>

Women's role as primary food producers in Isoko North has profound implications for food security at both household and community levels. By cultivating staple crops and engaging in post-harvest processing, women ensure a steady supply of affordable food, mitigating the risk of hunger in their communities. Their knowledge of indigenous farming techniques, such as intercropping and the use of local seed varieties, enhances agricultural resilience against challenges like soil degradation and climate variability. For example,

women often preserve traditional cassava varieties that are well-suited to the local environment, contributing to biodiversity and sustainable farming practices. Moreover, their labor in food production supports the nutritional needs of their families, particularly children, thereby improving health outcomes and reducing malnutrition rates. The income generated from selling agricultural products also enables women to fund education, healthcare, and other household needs, reinforcing their role as key contributors to socio-economic development in Isoko North.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their critical contributions, women farmers in Isoko North face significant challenges that limit their productivity and economic potential. Access to land remains a major constraint, as patriarchal land tenure systems often prioritize male ownership, leaving women with smaller, less fertile plots or requiring them to negotiate access through male relatives. Limited access to modern agricultural inputs, such as improved seeds, fertilizers, and mechanized tools, further hampers their efficiency, forcing many to rely on traditional, labor-intensive methods. Financial constraints also restrict their ability to invest in scaling up production or adopting new technologies. Additionally, socio-cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for domestic tasks can reduce the time and energy available for agricultural work, creating a double burden that affects their productivity. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as land reform policies, access to credit, and agricultural extension services tailored to women's needs, to enhance their contributions to food production and economic development.<sup>9</sup>

Women's agricultural roles in Isoko North extend beyond mere labor to embody resilience, innovation, and community leadership. Through their efforts, they not only sustain household economies but also drive broader economic development by supplying food and raw materials to local and regional markets. Their ability to adapt traditional knowledge to modern challenges, such as climate change and market fluctuations, underscores their importance as stewards of agricultural sustainability. By investing in women's agricultural capacity, through training, access to resources, and policy support, Isoko North can unlock greater economic potential and achieve more inclusive development outcomes.

### **Trading and Market Activities**

Trading is a vital pillar of Isoko North's economy, serving as a primary source of income and a hub for social and economic interactions, with women playing a dominant role as market traders, wholesalers, and retailers. In Isoko North, local markets such as those in Ozoro, Owhe, and other communities function as economic nerve centers where women trade a wide range of goods, including agricultural produce like cassava, yam, and palm oil, as well as processed foods, household items, and textiles. Women traders are often the linchpin of these markets, leveraging their entrepreneurial skills to buy, sell, and distribute goods that sustain both household and community economies. Their ability to negotiate prices, manage inventory, and adapt to consumer demands underscores their economic agency and resilience in a competitive market environment. By facilitating the exchange of goods, women traders not only generate income for their families but also

ensure the availability of essential commodities, contributing to the economic vitality of Isoko North.<sup>10</sup>

Women's involvement in trading extends beyond local markets to include inter-community and regional trade networks, which connect rural Isoko North to urban centers in Delta State and beyond. Many women operate as wholesalers, purchasing bulk agricultural produce from farmers often other women and distributing it to retailers or larger markets in nearby towns like Warri or Asaba. These trade networks are critical for integrating Isoko North's agrarian economy with broader regional markets, enabling women to play a pivotal role in the supply chain. For instance, women traders transport processed goods like garri and palm oil to urban centers, where demand is high, thereby linking rural production to urban consumption. This inter-community trade not only boosts household incomes but also fosters economic interdependence across regions, with women acting as key agents of market connectivity. Their knowledge of market trends and social networks enables them to navigate complex trade routes and build trust with suppliers and buyers, enhancing the efficiency of these networks.<sup>11</sup>

The economic contributions of women traders in Isoko North are profound, as their activities directly support household and community welfare. Income generated from trading is often reinvested into critical areas such as children's education, healthcare, and housing, thereby reducing poverty and improving living standards. Women traders also contribute to community economies by paying market fees and taxes, which fund local infrastructure and services. Beyond economics, markets serve as social spaces where

women exchange information, build solidarity, and reinforce cultural ties, making them integral to community cohesion. For example, market associations led by women often organize collective activities, such as savings groups or communal labor, which further strengthen social and economic bonds. These associations also provide a platform for women to advocate for better market conditions, such as improved infrastructure or reduced fees, demonstrating their role as community leaders.<sup>12</sup>

Despite their significant contributions, women traders in Isoko North face numerous challenges that constrain their economic potential. Limited access to capital is a major barrier, as many women rely on personal savings or high-interest loans from informal lenders to finance their businesses, which can limit their ability to scale operations or absorb market shocks. High transportation costs, driven by poor road infrastructure and rising fuel prices, further erode profit margins, particularly for women engaged in inter-community trade. Market fees and levies, often imposed by local authorities, also reduce profitability, especially for small-scale retailers operating on thin margins. Additionally, socio-cultural norms that prioritize women's domestic responsibilities can restrict the time and mobility needed for trading, particularly for those traveling to distant markets. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions, such as microfinance programs, improved transportation infrastructure, and policies to reduce market fees, to enhance women traders' productivity and economic impact.<sup>13</sup>

Women's dominance in Isoko North's trading and market activities underscores their critical role in sustaining both household and community economies. Their

entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with their ability to navigate complex trade networks, positions them as key drivers of economic development in the region. By addressing the structural barriers they face, such as limited access to credit and inadequate infrastructure, Isoko North can further harness the potential of women traders to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Their contributions not only ensure the availability of goods and services but also foster social cohesion and economic resilience, making them indispensable to the region's development trajectory.<sup>14</sup>

### **Crafts, Small-Scale Enterprises, and Informal Sector**

In Isoko North, the informal sector, encompassing traditional crafts and small-scale enterprises, serves as a critical avenue for economic participation, particularly for women, who leverage these activities to generate income and preserve cultural heritage. Traditional crafts such as pottery and cloth weaving are deeply rooted in the region's cultural fabric, with women playing a central role in their production. Pottery, used for household items like cooking pots and storage vessels, is a skill often passed down through generations, providing women with a source of income while maintaining Isoko's cultural identity. Similarly, cloth weaving, including the production of traditional textiles, allows women to create goods for both domestic use and market sales, contributing to the local economy<sup>15</sup>. These crafts, though labor-intensive, require minimal capital, making them accessible to women with limited resources. By engaging in these activities, women not only sustain their households but also contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and practices, which are integral to Isoko North's socio-cultural landscape.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond traditional crafts, women in Isoko North dominate small-scale enterprises in the informal sector, particularly in food processing, tailoring, and hairdressing. Food processing, such as the production of palm oil, garri, and smoked fish, is a significant economic activity, with women transforming raw agricultural products into value-added goods for local and regional markets. For instance, palm oil processing involves extracting oil from palm fruits, a task primarily undertaken by women, which supplies households and markets while generating substantial income. Tailoring and hairdressing, meanwhile, cater to the everyday needs of the community, offering services that are both accessible and in high demand. These enterprises are typically operated from homes or small stalls, allowing women to balance economic activities with domestic responsibilities. The flexibility of the informal sector enables women to adapt to economic constraints, but it also highlights their entrepreneurial ingenuity in creating sustainable livelihoods with limited resources.<sup>17</sup>

The informal sector's role in Isoko North's economy is amplified by women's entrepreneurial contributions, which drive income generation and poverty reduction. By operating small-scale businesses, women provide essential goods and services, such as processed foods and tailored clothing, that meet community needs and stimulate local commerce. The income generated from these activities is often reinvested into critical areas such as children's education, healthcare, and household welfare, thereby improving living standards and reducing economic vulnerability. Moreover, women's enterprises often employ other women, creating a ripple effect that enhances economic empowerment within

the community. According to Mrs. Janet Ogaga, “a successful hairdressing business may train apprentices, providing young women with skills and income opportunities”.<sup>18</sup> These activities also foster social networks, as women collaborate in market spaces or through informal associations to share resources and knowledge, further strengthening community resilience.<sup>18</sup>

Despite their significant contributions, women in Isoko North’s informal sector face numerous challenges that limit their economic potential. Limited access to capital is a primary constraint, as many women rely on personal savings or informal loans with high interest rates to start or sustain their businesses, restricting their ability to scale operations. The lack of formal training and modern equipment further hampers productivity, particularly in crafts like pottery and weaving, where traditional methods are time-consuming and less competitive in broader markets. Additionally, the informal sector offers little social protection, leaving women vulnerable to economic shocks such as illness or market fluctuations. Socio-cultural norms that prioritize women’s domestic roles also reduce the time available for entrepreneurial activities, creating a double burden that affects their efficiency<sup>19</sup>. These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions, such as microfinance programs, vocational training, and market access initiatives, to enhance women’s productivity in the informal sector.

Women’s engagement in crafts and small-scale enterprises in Isoko North exemplifies their role as entrepreneurs and cultural custodians, driving economic development while navigating systemic barriers. Their contributions to the informal sector

not only provide essential goods and services but also promote economic resilience and social cohesion. By addressing challenges such as limited capital and training, Isoko North can further empower women to expand their enterprises, thereby enhancing their impact on poverty reduction and sustainable development.<sup>20</sup>

### **Cooperative Societies and Women's Collective Efforts**

Cooperative societies in Isoko North have emerged as a powerful mechanism for women's economic empowerment, enabling them to pool resources, access financial opportunities, and drive community development. These cooperatives, often formed by women engaged in agriculture, trading, and small-scale enterprises, provide a platform for collective action, allowing members to address common economic challenges and amplify their impact on the local economy. In Isoko North, women's cooperatives typically focus on activities such as farming, food processing, and trading, with members contributing funds, labor, or skills to achieve shared goal<sup>21</sup>. These groups are particularly prevalent in communities like Ozoro and Owhe, where women organize to improve their livelihoods and support community welfare. By fostering solidarity and mutual support, cooperatives enable women to overcome individual limitations, such as limited capital or market access, and enhance their economic agency. The formation of these societies reflects a long-standing tradition of communal effort in Isoko culture, adapted to modern economic needs.

A key function of women's cooperatives in Isoko North is facilitating access to credit, loans, and financial empowerment, which are critical for scaling economic activities. Many women in the region face barriers to formal financial services due to low

income, lack of collateral, or gender-based discrimination in banking systems. Cooperatives address these challenges by creating savings groups, known locally as “esusu” or thrift societies, where members contribute regular sums to a collective fund that is then disbursed as loans to members. These loans enable women to invest in agricultural inputs, expand trading businesses, or start new enterprises, such as tailoring or food processing. Additionally, cooperatives often partner with microfinance institutions or government programs to secure larger loans or grants, further enhancing members’ financial capacity. In an interview with Mr. Dennis Afasare, he pointed that a cooperative in Ozoro might secure funding to purchase modern palm oil processing equipment, benefiting all members through increased productivity and income<sup>22</sup>. This access to financial resources empowers women to break cycles of poverty and invest in their families’ education and health, thereby contributing to broader socio-economic development.

Women’s cooperatives in Isoko North also play a significant role in community development projects, channeling collective resources into initiatives that benefit the wider population. These projects include building boreholes for clean water, renovating schools, or establishing health centers, which directly address community needs and improve living standards. For instance, a women’s cooperative might pool profits from cassava processing to fund a community classroom, enhancing educational access for children. Such initiatives demonstrate the ripple effect of women’s collective efforts, as their economic activities translate into tangible social benefits. Moreover, cooperatives serve as platforms for

knowledge sharing, where women exchange skills in farming techniques, business management, or craft production, further strengthening their economic and social contributions. These groups also empower women to advocate for their rights, such as access to land or better market conditions, challenging traditional gender norms that limit their economic participation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite their transformative potential, women's cooperatives in Isoko North face significant challenges that can hinder their effectiveness. Mismanagement, due to limited administrative skills or internal conflicts, can undermine the sustainability of cooperatives, leading to distrust among members or financial losses<sup>24</sup>. Limited access to external funding, such as government grants or NGO support, also restricts the scale of cooperative activities, particularly for capital-intensive projects like mechanized farming or large-scale food processing. Additionally, socio-cultural norms that prioritize men's leadership in community organizations can marginalize women's voices within cooperatives, limiting their decision-making power. These challenges highlight the need for capacity-building programs, such as training in financial management and leadership, as well as policies to integrate cooperatives into broader development frameworks. By addressing these barriers, cooperatives can become even more effective in amplifying women's contributions to Isoko North's economy.

The collective efforts of women through cooperative societies in Isoko North exemplify their resilience and commitment to economic and social progress. By fostering financial empowerment, facilitating skill development, and driving community

development, these cooperatives enable women to transcend individual constraints and contribute to inclusive growth. Their ability to organize collectively not only enhances their economic capacity but also strengthens community cohesion, making them vital agents of sustainable development.<sup>25</sup>

### **Challenges and Contributions of Women to Economic Development**

Women in Isoko North play a pivotal role in driving economic development through their extensive involvement in agriculture, trading, crafts, and cooperative societies, yet they face significant challenges that constrain their full potential. One of the most pressing limitations is access to land, a critical resource for agricultural productivity. Mr. Patrick Alibor opined that patriarchal land tenure systems prevalent in the region often prioritize male ownership, relegating women to smaller, less fertile plots or requiring them to negotiate access through male relatives, which limits their ability to scale farming operations.<sup>26</sup> This restricted access not only hampers their productivity but also undermines their economic independence, as land serves as both a productive asset and collateral for loans. Additionally, the lack of capital is a pervasive barrier, as women often rely on personal savings or high-interest informal loans to finance their agricultural, trading, or entrepreneurial activities. This financial constraint restricts their ability to invest in modern inputs, expand businesses, or absorb economic shocks, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Addressing these systemic barriers through land reforms and accessible credit systems is essential to unlocking women's economic potential in Isoko North.

Socio-cultural constraints further exacerbate the challenges faced by women in Isoko North's economy. Traditional gender norms often assign women primary responsibility for domestic tasks, such as childcare and household management, creating a double burden that reduces the time and energy available for economic activities. These norms also limit women's participation in decision-making processes, both within households and in community organizations, marginalizing their voices in economic planning and resource allocation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, cultural biases that favor male leadership can restrict women's access to leadership roles in cooperatives or market associations, limiting their ability to advocate for their needs. The lack of access to modern technology and training further compounds these challenges, as women in agriculture and crafts often rely on labor-intensive, traditional methods that are less competitive in broader markets. These socio-cultural and technological barriers highlight the need for gender-sensitive policies that promote women's inclusion in economic and leadership spaces, alongside investments in education and skill development.

Despite these challenges, women's contributions to economic development in Isoko North are profound, particularly in poverty reduction, education, and community welfare. Through their labor in agriculture, women ensure food security by producing staple crops like cassava and yam, which are critical to household nutrition and local markets. The income generated from farming, trading, and small-scale enterprises is often reinvested into children's education, healthcare, and housing, significantly improving household living standards and reducing poverty<sup>28</sup>. For instance, women traders in markets like Ozoro

use their earnings to fund school fees, contributing to higher literacy rates and long-term human capital development. Women's cooperative societies also play a crucial role, pooling resources to fund community projects such as boreholes, schools, and health centers, which enhance access to clean water, education, and healthcare for entire communities. These efforts demonstrate how women's economic activities create a ripple effect, benefiting not only their households but also the broader community.

Women's contributions extend beyond immediate economic impacts to promote inclusive and sustainable development in Isoko North. By preserving indigenous farming techniques and traditional crafts, women contribute to environmental sustainability and cultural heritage, ensuring the resilience of local practices against modern challenges like climate change. Their role in cooperatives fosters social cohesion and collective empowerment, as women collaborate to address common challenges and advocate for better economic conditions. Women-led initiatives to improve market infrastructure or secure microfinance loans demonstrate their leadership in driving inclusive growth that benefits marginalized groups. By reinvesting their earnings into social goods and advocating for equitable resource access, women lay the foundation for sustainable development that aligns with broader goals of gender equity and economic inclusivity. Their resilience in navigating systemic barriers underscores their critical role as agents of transformative change in Isoko North.<sup>29</sup>

The interplay between challenges and contributions highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance women's impact on economic development. Policies that address

land tenure inequities, provide affordable credit, and promote gender-sensitive training programs can empower women to scale their economic activities and overcome socio-cultural constraints. By investing in women's education, leadership capacity, and access to technology, Isoko North can harness their full potential to drive economic growth and community development.<sup>30</sup>

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that limited women's full economic participation in Isoko North between 1990 and 2010. It explores how traditional gender roles, cultural practices, and institutional structures shaped women's access to education, resources, and decision-making. Women in Isoko North have historically contributed to agriculture, petty trade, and family sustenance, yet their economic roles were often undervalued. Patriarchal beliefs positioned men as heads of households and owners of property, while women were confined to domestic and supportive roles.<sup>1</sup>

By analyzing Isoko North's experience, the chapter highlights how cultural norms intersect with institutional neglect to sustain gender gaps. It also emphasizes women's resilience and adaptability despite systemic exclusion. Understanding these dynamics is vital for developing gender-inclusive development strategies. The chapter thus provides both a historical and analytical foundation for examining women's economic roles. It aims to reveal how traditional structures have persisted even in modern times.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Patriarchal Gender Norms and Domestic Responsibilities**

In Isoko North, patriarchal gender norms deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric significantly shape women's economic participation, often relegating them to

subordinate roles that prioritize domestic responsibilities over economic activities. Traditional expectations in Isoko society place women as primary caregivers, responsible for childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks, which are perceived as their primary duties<sup>3</sup>. These norms create a double burden, as women must balance time-intensive domestic obligations with their economic roles in agriculture, trading, crafts, or cooperative societies. Women farmers in Isoko North may spend significant portions of their day fetching water, preparing meals, or caring for children, leaving limited time for critical agricultural tasks such as planting, weeding, or marketing produce. This time poverty reduces their productivity and constrains their ability to scale economic activities, perpetuating gender disparities in economic outcomes. The cultural prioritization of domestic roles over economic contributions reinforces the perception that women's primary value lies within the household, undermining their economic agency and potential.<sup>4</sup>

Patriarchal norms also restrict women's mobility, further limiting their economic participation in Isoko North. Cultural expectations often discourage women from traveling long distances or staying away from home for extended periods, particularly for activities like inter-community trading or attending distant markets. According to Mrs. Florence Ogenechuko, women traders in markets like Ozoro or Owhe face societal scrutiny if their trading activities require overnight stays or frequent travel to urban centers like Warri, as such mobility is often viewed as incompatible with traditional gender roles<sup>5</sup>. These restrictions not only limit women's access to broader market opportunities but also

constrain their ability to build extensive trade networks, which are critical for economic growth. The societal expectation that women remain closely tied to the household environment reinforces their economic dependence on male relatives, who may control decisions about travel or resource allocation, further marginalizing their contributions to the local economy.<sup>6</sup>

The interplay of patriarchal norms and domestic responsibilities also manifests in the unequal division of labor within households, which disproportionately burdens women with unpaid work. In Isoko North, men are often seen as the primary breadwinners, while women's economic activities, such as farming or small-scale enterprises, are viewed as supplementary, despite their significant contributions to household income and food security. This perception undervalues women's labor and limits their access to resources like land or credit, as household resources are typically allocated to men's economic pursuits. A woman engaged in cassava processing may generate substantial income through garri sales, yet her earnings are often redirected to household expenses controlled by male family members, reducing her ability to reinvest in her business. This unequal division of labor and resource control perpetuates economic vulnerability among women, as their contributions are not fully recognized or supported within the household structure.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, patriarchal gender norms in Isoko North often discourage women from asserting their economic rights or challenging traditional roles, further entrenching their domestic responsibilities. Cultural beliefs that emphasize male authority can lead to resistance against women's efforts to prioritize economic activities over household duties.

For instance, women who seek to expand their trading businesses or participate in cooperative leadership may face criticism or opposition from family or community members who view such ambitions as a deviation from traditional roles<sup>8</sup>. This socio-cultural resistance limits women's ability to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities or advocate for economic empowerment, reinforcing their subordination within both household and community contexts. Community sensitization programs that engage men, traditional leaders, and families are essential to challenge these norms and promote a cultural shift toward recognizing women's economic contributions as equal to their domestic roles.

### **Limited Decision-Making Power and Leadership Opportunities**

In Isoko North, patriarchal socio-cultural structures significantly limit women's decision-making power, constraining their ability to influence economic and community outcomes. Traditional norms often designate men as the primary decision-makers within households and community institutions, relegating women to subordinate roles despite their substantial contributions to economic activities such as agriculture, trading, and crafts. Within households, men typically control major financial decisions, including the allocation of income generated from women's labor in farming or market activities, which undermines women's economic autonomy<sup>9</sup>. Mrs. Tamara Ekwetahor opined that a woman trader in Ozoro may generate significant income from selling garri, yet her husband or male relatives often dictate how these earnings are spent, limiting her ability to reinvest in her business or pursue new economic opportunities.<sup>10</sup> This lack of decision-making power

restricts women's capacity to scale their economic activities and perpetuates their dependence on male authority, mirroring historical patterns of diminished traditional autonomy.

Women's limited participation in community decision-making further exacerbates their economic marginalization in Isoko North. Community institutions, such as market associations, cooperative societies, and local councils, are often dominated by male leaders, reflecting cultural biases that favor male authority in public spheres. Despite women's critical roles in sustaining these institutions through trading in markets or organizing cooperative activities, they are frequently underrepresented in leadership positions, which restricts their ability to advocate for policies that address their specific needs, such as improved market infrastructure or access to credit. For example, women in cooperative societies may contribute funds and labor to community projects like boreholes, yet male leaders often make final decisions on project priorities, sidelining women's perspectives. This underrepresentation echoes broader patterns of authority fragmentation, where traditional structures were subordinated to external control, limiting local agency in economic governance.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural bias toward male leadership in Isoko North is reinforced by socio-cultural norms that view women's roles as primarily domestic, discouraging their pursuit of leadership opportunities. Women who aspire to leadership roles in market associations or cooperatives often face resistance from community members or male counterparts who perceive such ambitions as challenging traditional gender roles. This resistance can

manifest as social stigma or exclusion from decision-making processes, discouraging women from seeking leadership positions. For instance, a woman seeking to lead a market association in Owhe may encounter skepticism about her ability to balance leadership with domestic responsibilities, further limiting her influence. These cultural barriers not only restrict women's access to leadership but also hinder their ability to shape economic policies that could enhance their productivity and economic impact, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.<sup>12</sup> The lack of decision-making power and leadership opportunities also limits women's ability to address systemic economic barriers, such as access to land or financial resources. Without a voice in community or household decision-making, women struggle to advocate for equitable land tenure policies or secure loans for their businesses, as these decisions are often controlled by male-dominated institutions. Women farmers in Isoko North may be unable to negotiate access to fertile land or modern agricultural inputs because land allocation decisions are typically made by male community leaders or family heads. This exclusion from decision-making processes mirrors historical disruptions in traditional governance, where external systems diminished local authority, and underscores the need for structural changes to empower women economically.<sup>13</sup>

### **Restricted Access to Land and Resources**

In Isoko North, restricted access to land represents one of the most significant barriers to women's economic participation, particularly in agriculture, which forms the backbone of the region's economy. Patriarchal land tenure systems, deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural norms of Isoko society, prioritize male ownership and inheritance, often

excluding women from direct access to farmland. Women typically rely on negotiating access through male relatives, such as husbands or brothers, which results in their allocation of smaller, less fertile plots or insecure tenure that discourages long-term investments in agricultural productivity.

In another interview with Mrs. Patience Okia mentioned that a woman farmer in Ozoro may cultivate cassava on land borrowed from her husband's family, but her lack of ownership limits her ability to implement sustainable farming practices or secure loans using land as collateral.<sup>14</sup> These systemic barriers significantly hamper women's agricultural output and economic independence in Isoko North. Beyond land, women in Isoko North face limited access to critical resources such as credit, modern agricultural inputs, and technology, further constraining their economic potential. Financial institutions often require collateral, such as land titles, which women rarely possess due to patriarchal inheritance practices, making it difficult for them to secure loans for farming, trading, or small-scale enterprises. Women engaged in palm oil processing may need funds to purchase modern equipment to increase efficiency, but without access to credit, they rely on high-interest informal loans or personal savings, which limits their ability to scale operations. Similarly, access to modern inputs like improved seeds, fertilizers, or mechanized tools is restricted, as agricultural extension services and input distribution programs often target male farmers, reflecting institutional biases that undervalue women's contributions to agriculture<sup>15</sup>. These resource constraints force women to rely on labor-

intensive, traditional methods, reducing their competitiveness in local and regional markets.

Institutional barriers exacerbate the challenges of restricted resource access, as government policies and programs in Isoko North often fail to address gender-specific needs. Agricultural development initiatives, such as subsidized input programs or land allocation schemes, are typically designed with male farmers in mind, overlooking the unique challenges faced by women, such as their lack of land ownership or collateral<sup>15</sup>. Women farmers may be excluded from government-sponsored irrigation projects because they lack formal land titles, perpetuating their reliance on rain-fed agriculture, which is vulnerable to climate variability. This institutional oversight echoes broader historical patterns of centralized control, where external systems diminished local agency, as seen in colonial reforms that disrupted traditional governance in the Niger Delta. The lack of gender-sensitive policies in resource allocation limits women's ability to participate fully in Isoko North's agrarian economy, hindering their contributions to food security and economic development.

Socio-cultural norms also reinforce restricted access to resources by perpetuating the perception that women's economic roles are secondary to men's. In Isoko North, cultural beliefs often view land and financial resources as male domains, discouraging women from asserting their rights to these assets. A woman seeking to lease land for farming may face resistance from community leaders or family members who believe land allocation should prioritize male heirs, limiting her ability to expand her agricultural

activities<sup>16</sup>. This cultural bias not only restricts women's access to productive resources but also undermines their economic agency, as they are often excluded from negotiations or decision-making processes related to resource distribution. The resulting economic vulnerability limits women's ability to invest in their businesses or adopt innovative practices, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these barriers, women in Isoko North demonstrate resilience by leveraging collective strategies to access resources. Women's cooperative societies, such as those in Ozoro and Owhe, play a crucial role in pooling resources and advocating for better access to land and credit. For instance, cooperatives may negotiate with local authorities to secure communal land for group farming or partner with microfinance institutions to provide loans to members, bypassing some institutional barriers. These collective efforts reflect women's ability to navigate patriarchal and institutional constraints, but systemic change is needed to fully address restricted access to land and resources. Policies that promote equitable land tenure, gender-sensitive financial services, and targeted agricultural extension programs can empower women to overcome these barriers, enhancing their contributions to Isoko North's economic development.<sup>18</sup>

### **Educational and Training Disparities**

Educational and training disparities in Isoko North significantly hinder women's economic participation, limiting their access to the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in agriculture, trading, crafts, and small-scale enterprises. Socio-cultural norms that prioritize early marriage and domestic responsibilities over formal education often result

in lower literacy rates and educational attainment among women compared to men. In many households, cultural preferences favor educating male children, who are seen as future breadwinners, while girls are expected to contribute to household tasks or marry early, reducing their opportunities for schooling.

According to Daniella Ogehenero, sharing her own experience, about how she was withdrawn from school to assist with farming and childcare, limiting her ability to acquire formal education and numeracy skills that could enhance her economic productivity. This educational gap, rooted in patriarchal norms, perpetuates women's economic vulnerability by restricting their access to modern business practices and market opportunities.<sup>19</sup> The lack of formal education also limits women's access to vocational training, which is critical for enhancing productivity in Isoko North's agrarian and informal economies. Women engaged in activities like cassava processing, pottery, or tailoring often rely on traditional methods passed down through generations, as they are excluded from formal training programs that teach modern techniques or technologies. Women farmers may lack knowledge of improved seed varieties or mechanized farming tools due to limited exposure to agricultural extension services, which are often designed for male farmers. The absence of training in business management or technical skills further hampers women's ability to scale their enterprises or compete in broader markets, reinforcing their reliance on labor-intensive, less profitable methods.<sup>20</sup>

Institutional barriers exacerbate educational and training disparities by failing to provide gender-sensitive programs tailored to women's needs. In Isoko North, government

and NGO-led training initiatives, such as agricultural extension services or vocational workshops, often prioritize male participants, assuming men are the primary economic actors in rural communities. Women, constrained by domestic responsibilities and limited mobility, face additional challenges attending such programs, which are often held in distant locations or at times incompatible with their schedules. A woman trader in Owhe may be unable to participate in a market management workshop due to childcare obligations or lack of transportation. The lack of targeted training programs for women limits their ability to adopt innovative practices, such as digital marketing for trading or mechanized processing for palm oil, which could enhance their economic contributions.<sup>21</sup>

Socio-cultural attitudes that undervalue women's education further perpetuate these disparities, as families and communities often view investment in girls' education as less economically viable than in boys'. This perception stems from the belief that women's primary roles are domestic, with their economic activities such as farming or crafts seen as supplementary rather than central to household income. As a result, women in Isoko North are less likely to receive support for pursuing higher education or specialized training, which restricts their access to opportunities in emerging sectors like agribusiness or entrepreneurship. These cultural biases not only limit individual women's economic potential but also hinder the region's overall development by underutilizing a significant portion of its human capital. Addressing these attitudes requires community sensitization efforts to highlight the economic benefits of educating and training women.<sup>22</sup>

Despite these challenges, women in Isoko North demonstrate resilience by seeking alternative pathways to acquire skills and knowledge. Women’s cooperatives and market associations often serve as informal training platforms, where members share expertise in farming techniques, craft production, or business management. For example, a cooperative in Ozoro may organize peer-learning sessions on modern cassava processing methods, enabling women to improve their productivity despite limited formal training. However, overcoming educational and training disparities requires systemic interventions, such as gender-sensitive educational policies, mobile training units to reach rural women, and scholarships to encourage girls’ education. By investing in women’s education and training, Isoko North can enhance their economic participation, fostering inclusive and sustainable development.<sup>23</sup>

### **Institutional Barriers and Policy Gaps**

Institutional barriers and policy gaps in Isoko North significantly hinder women’s economic participation by limiting their access to critical resources, services, and opportunities necessary for thriving in agriculture, trading, crafts, and cooperative societies. Government policies and programs, such as agricultural extension services, land allocation schemes, and financial support initiatives, often fail to account for gender-specific needs, reflecting a systemic bias that prioritizes male economic actors. Agricultural extension services in Isoko North, designed to provide training and inputs like improved seeds or fertilizers, are typically directed toward male farmers, who are assumed to be the primary landholders and decision-makers. This institutional oversight excludes women,

who constitute a significant portion of the agricultural workforce, from accessing modern farming techniques and resources that could enhance their productivity. This pattern of exclusion echoes historical disruptions in the Niger Delta, such as those in nearby Oka Useni, where colonial judicial reforms centralized authority and marginalized local systems, limiting equitable access to resources. Such institutional biases perpetuate women's reliance on traditional, labor-intensive methods, constraining their economic potential.<sup>24</sup>

Access to financial services represents another critical institutional barrier, as women in Isoko North face significant challenges in securing affordable credit due to policy gaps in the financial sector. Formal banking institutions often require collateral, such as land titles, which women rarely possess due to patriarchal land tenure systems, effectively excluding them from loan programs. Microfinance initiatives, while present, are often insufficiently scaled or inaccessible to rural women, who may lack the documentation or mobility required to engage with financial institutions. For example, a woman trader in Owhe seeking a loan to expand her business may be unable to meet stringent banking requirements, forcing her to rely on high-interest informal loans that erode her profits. The lack of gender-sensitive financial policies, such as flexible loan terms or group-based lending models tailored to women's cooperatives, limits women's ability to invest in their enterprises or absorb economic shocks, perpetuating cycles of poverty.<sup>25</sup>

Policy gaps in land reform further exacerbate institutional barriers, as existing frameworks in Isoko North fail to address the inequities in land tenure that

disproportionately affect women. Despite women's critical role in agriculture, government land allocation programs rarely prioritize women's access to farmland, reinforcing patriarchal norms that favor male ownership. Women farmers in Ozoro may be excluded from land redistribution schemes because they lack formal titles, leaving them dependent on male relatives for access to small, less fertile plots. This institutional failure mirrors historical patterns of centralized control, where colonial policies disrupted traditional land governance, often to the detriment of marginalized groups like women. The absence of policies that grant women secure land tenure or leasing rights limits their ability to scale agricultural production or use land as collateral for loans, undermining their economic independence and contributions to food security.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of institutional support for women's cooperatives and market infrastructure also hinders their economic participation. While cooperatives in Isoko North serve as vital platforms for women to pool resources and advocate for their rights, they receive limited support from local government or NGOs, restricting their capacity to undertake large-scale projects like mechanized farming or community development initiatives. Similarly, market infrastructure, such as roads and storage facilities, remains inadequate, increasing transportation costs and spoilage for women traders, who dominate local markets like those in Ozoro and Owhe. The absence of policies to reduce market fees or improve infrastructure further erodes women's profitability, particularly for small-scale traders operating on thin margins. These institutional gaps reflect a broader failure to

integrate women's economic contributions into development planning, limiting their impact on the region's economy.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these institutional barriers, women in Isoko North demonstrate resilience by leveraging cooperative societies and informal networks to navigate policy gaps. For example, women's cooperatives may partner with local NGOs to access microfinance or advocate for better market conditions, bypassing some institutional constraints. However, sustainable change requires comprehensive policy reforms, including gender-sensitive land tenure policies, expanded microfinance programs tailored to women, and inclusive agricultural extension services. Community engagement with local authorities and traditional leaders can also help align institutional frameworks with women's needs, fostering an environment where their economic contributions are fully supported.<sup>28</sup>

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

#### Summary

In the heart of Nigeria's Niger Delta, Isoko North stands as a vibrant region where women have long been the backbone of economic and social progress, despite facing formidable challenges. The story of women's contributions to economic development in Isoko North is one of resilience, ingenuity, and quiet strength, as they navigate patriarchal norms, limited resources, and institutional gaps to sustain their families and communities. From the fertile fields of Ozoro to the bustling markets of Owhe, women have transformed crops into sustenance, traded goods to build livelihoods, and organized cooperatives to uplift entire villages. Yet, their potential remains constrained by systemic barriers that demand urgent attention. The study explores the period from 1990 to 2010, a time of economic transformation marked by agricultural dominance, oil-related disruptions, and women's pivotal roles. By examining the interplay of opportunities and obstacles, this study highlights the critical need to empower women to drive inclusive and sustainable development. The following sections reflect on the key findings from each chapter, weaving together a narrative of women's impact and the path forward for Isoko North.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter One laid the groundwork for understanding women's economic roles in Isoko North by providing a structured overview of the research. It introduced the region as a predominantly agrarian economy, where agriculture, trade, and small-scale enterprises form the lifeblood of local livelihoods. The chapter outlined the study's objectives: to document women's contributions, identify barriers, and propose solutions for their empowerment. By reviewing existing literature, it established that women's labor is central to food security and community welfare, yet often undervalued due to gender biases. The research methodology, blending historical analysis with qualitative insights, offered a lens to explore the human stories behind the data, stories of mothers balancing farm work with childcare, or traders braving long journeys to sell their goods. This foundational chapter set the stage for a deeper dive into Isoko North's economic history and the specific roles women played, emphasizing that their contributions are not just economic but deeply personal, shaping the dreams and futures of their families.

Chapter Two painted a vivid picture of the region's economic evolution during a transformative period. Agriculture remained the cornerstone, with crops like cassava, yam, and oil palm sustaining households and markets. Women were at the forefront, planting, harvesting, and processing these crops into products like garri and palm oil, which fed communities and fueled trade. The chapter also explored the impact of oil-related activities, which brought both opportunities and challenges. While oil revenues spurred some

infrastructure development, environmental degradation from oil spills damaged farmlands, making women's agricultural work more arduous. Trade flourished in local markets, where women traders connected rural producers to urban consumers, their stalls brimming with goods and their voices echoing with negotiation. Yet, the period was marked by challenges like poor infrastructure and limited access to credit, which women navigated with remarkable adaptability. Their ability to diversify into small-scale enterprises, like tailoring or food processing, reflected a resilience born of necessity, a testament to their role as economic anchors in a changing landscape.

Chapter Three brought to life the profound impact of women's labor across key sectors. In agriculture, women were the backbone, ensuring food security by cultivating staple crops and transforming them into marketable products. Their expertise in processing cassava into fufu or smoking fish for sale not only fed families but also supplied local markets, creating economic ripple effects. In trading, women dominated markets like Ozoro and Owhe, their entrepreneurial spirit evident in every transaction, from selling yams to negotiating bulk deals for urban centers. Crafts and informal enterprises, such as pottery and hairdressing, allowed women to preserve cultural heritage while generating income, often reinvested into their children's education or community projects. Cooperative societies emerged as powerful platforms, where women pooled resources to access loans or fund boreholes, transforming villages one project at a time. These contributions were not just economic; they were deeply human, reflecting the sacrifices of

women who worked tirelessly to lift their families out of poverty and build stronger communities.

Chapter Four cast a sobering light on the obstacles that limited women's full potential during this period. Patriarchal norms placed heavy domestic burdens on women, forcing them to juggle childcare and household chores with economic activities, often at the cost of their productivity. Limited decision-making power meant women's voices were sidelined in households and community institutions, restricting their ability to advocate for resources or leadership roles. Access to land, a critical asset, was constrained by male-dominated tenure systems, leaving women with smaller, less fertile plots. Educational disparities, driven by cultural preferences for early marriage over schooling, denied women the skills needed to adopt modern technologies or compete in broader markets. Institutional gaps, such as gender-biased agricultural extension services and inaccessible financial systems, further marginalized women, who often relied on high-interest informal loans. Yet, amidst these challenges, women's resilience shone through, as they formed cooperatives and market associations to challenge norms and access resources, their determination a beacon of hope for change.

The synthesis of these chapters reveals a powerful narrative: women in Isoko North are not just contributors but architects of economic and social progress, despite systemic barriers. Their labor in fields, markets, and cooperatives has sustained families, preserved cultural practices, and built community infrastructure, from schools to health centers. The

period from 1990 to 2010, marked by economic shifts and environmental challenges, showcased their adaptability, as they diversified their activities to meet new demands. However, the persistence of socio-cultural and institutional barriers underscores the urgent need for change. Policies that ensure equitable access to land, provide affordable credit, and expand educational opportunities can unlock women's potential, creating a more inclusive economy. The human stories—of a farmer in Owhe saving for her child's school fees, or a trader in Ozoro leading her cooperative to fund a borehole, remind us that empowering women is about more than economics; it's about recognizing their dignity and aspirations.

Looking to the future, Isoko North stands at a crossroads where intentional action can transform its development trajectory. Community sensitization programs that engage men and traditional leaders can shift cultural attitudes, valuing women's economic roles as equal to their domestic ones. Institutional reforms, such as mobile training units for rural women or microfinance programs tailored to their needs, can bridge resource gaps. The broader significance of this study lies in its relevance to rural African contexts, where women's contributions are similarly vital yet constrained. By investing in women's education, leadership, and economic opportunities, Isoko North can build a future where progress is shared, and every woman's effort, whether in a cassava field or a market stall is celebrated as a cornerstone of development. The resilience of Isoko North's women is a call to action, urging policymakers, communities, and researchers to work together to create a more equitable and sustainable tomorrow.

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<b>Alibor, Patrick</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>Business Man</b>	<b>Benin City</b>	<b>13/09/25</b>
<b>Ekwetahor, Tamara</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>Local Trader</b>	<b>Ozoro</b>	<b>20/09/25</b>
<b>Ogaga, Janet</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>Businesswoman</b>	<b>Ozoro</b>	<b>09/09/25</b>
<b>Ogehenero, Daniella</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>Trader</b>	<b>Ozoro</b>	<b>19/09/25</b>
<b>Oghenechuko, Florence</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>Local Trader</b>	<b>Ozoro</b>	<b>15/09/25</b>
<b>Okia, Patience</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>Farmer</b>	<b>Ozoro</b>	<b>19/09/25</b>

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