NIGERIAN WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

1923-1960

BY

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **GABRIELLA EJEME AIKHEGBE** in the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin under my supervision.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late mother, Mrs. Aisha Bright-Aikhegbe.

Everything I have ever done has been for you.

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The journey to the completion of my Bachelors degree was not a lonely one. There are a number of persons whose support and counsel helped me scale through.

To the Author and Finisher of Gabriella's Faith, God Almighty, I am grateful.

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May God be with you all in Jesus name (Amen).

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The beginning of women's role in colonial politics In Nigeria can be traced back to women's role as the primary keeper of the household in the pre-colonial period. Beyond the household level, power was generally dominated by men but in a few areas, specific titles were given to women[1]. This goes to prove that women have contributed to the development of Nigeria and these contributions cannot be overemphasized in an advanced and emerging State such as Nigeria. But over the years, women have been relegated to the background in issues of the overall development especially in the developing Nations such as Nigeria.

In consideration of the role of women in Nigeria's struggle for self-determination, several arguments have cropped up about the place of women in politics over the years. Thus, while the conservative theorists- Arowolo and Aluko- argue that the actual role of women and in fact, female folks generally end up in the kitchen [2], the liberalists have variously opined that women's political process are just as those of their male counterparts, and hence, such responsibilities cannot be washed away in the societal scheme of things. Opinions are however divided on whether the role of women is predominantly in the home fronts or whether women can also

engage meaningfully in other socio-economic and political activities like their male counterparts, thereby contributing their own quotas in the sequence and development of the polity. This trend of high-level inequality on the potential role of women in shaping the direction of politics in the Nigerian society from time immemorial constitutes a broader gender question on which this research paper is built.

The role of women in the Nigerian political system is faced by gender bias which is often traced to the onset of colonialism in Nigeria. Thus, the western cultural notion of colonialism woven around male superiority reflected in their relations with Nigerians. Agbalajobi[3] and Yetunde[4] have agreed on the subjugation of women by colonialists when they wrote that the 1922 Sir Hugh Clifford Constitution, which was widely believed to have introduced the first elective principles in the pre-colonial Nigerian Society, disenfranchised women and limited the participation of adult male to the wealthy. This is not to say that there was no existing element of gender inequality in traditional state and stateless societies in Nigeria but the colonial order made gender discrimination more pronounced [5]. For example, in traditional Yoruba states, women held high political offices like the Iyalode, Iyaloja, Iyalaje and even the office of the Oba, and their political impacts in such societies were variously felt. But at the establishment of the colonial order, women became estranged to these rights

politically, but could however still perform their traditional roles as in the case of Yoruba Kingdom earlier mentioned.

After the introduction of the Clifford Constitution of 1922, Nigerian Nationalist, Herbert Macaulay (recognized as the Father of Nigerian Nationalism) founded the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in June,1923 out of the need to contest elections into the new Legislative Council. The party aimed to represent the interests of Lagosians and became dominant in Lagos politics during the 1920s and 1930s.The Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) as a nationalist organization demanded free and compulsory education, a university, the Africanization of the civil service, a municipal government for Lagos, and an overall end to racial discrimination [6]. NNDP won all the three Lagos seats in the elections of 1923, and repeated the feat in 1928 and 1933, continuing in its dominance until the emergence of a new Nationalist group comprising of younger nationalists of the 1930s such as Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Samuel Akinsanya. Women were not among the NNDP's initial participants or candidates in electoral politics. The Colonial period laid a foundation for the exclusion of women from the political environment and the Clifford Constitution of 1922 cemented said foundation. Of the three seats won by the NNDP in 1923, none of the winners were Women. Herbert Macaulay, James M. H. Randle and C. S. A. D. Akinwande were the winners of the

three seats. Even in the following years- 1928 and 1933- when NNDP emerged as victors in the Lagos elections, there was no woman included. [7]

The emergence of the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1934 still did not see to the participation of women. The second political party in Nigeria, Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), founded in 1949 by Sir Ahmadu Bello started as a cultural organization known as Jamiyya Mutaneh Arewa. The party was dominated by the Hausa/Fulani with Islam as the main focus and it successfully produced the first Prime Minister of Nigeria and ruled Northern Nigeria between 1951 and 1965[8]. The Northern Peoples Congress was overwhelmingly male-dominated and deeply conservative. Despite this, some women associated with the party, though their roles were limited due to the conservative and patriarchal nature of Northern Nigerian society at the time. While the NPC did not prominently feature women in leadership or elective positions, it did have some women involved at lower levels, particularly in mobilization efforts. One notable example is Laila Dogonyaro, who was involved in women's welfare organizations affiliated with the NPC [9].

`It would appear that women had never been influential in the realm of Nigerian politics. In the past, and even in the present democratic dispensation, there has been and there is still some fair share of recognition of the increasing role of women in the Nigerian society, be they social, economic or political. It is interesting

to note that the place of women in politics during the pre-colonial period is sufficiently familiar. Thus, the exploits of legendary women like Queen Amina of Zazau in Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Princess Moremi of Ife, Princess Inikpi of Igala, Nana of Itsekiri and Emotan of Benin readily comes to mind. During the colonial period, women asserted and expressed themselves politically. Some women who made political marks at that period- and who this paper will lay emphasis on- included Mrs. Margaret Ekpo of the famous Aba women riots of 1929, Elizabeth Adekogbe who established the Nigerian Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union of 1948 and Hajiya Sawaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU). It is however worthy of mention here that though women enjoyed a higher level of authority in Southern Nigeria, men have always been dominant in the political structure with women playing sedentary roles as inferior and subordinate partners[10].

Statement Of the Problem

Nigerian historiography has long emphasized the contributions of prominent male figures—Obas, Alaafins, warriors, nationalists, and intellectuals—across both pre-colonial and colonial periods. These narratives often celebrate male political leadership, military prowess, and nationalist activism, while significantly underrepresenting or overlooking the critical roles played by women. Despite the

active participation of women as traders, political leaders, activists, strategists, and journalists during pivotal moments in Nigeria's history, including the independence movement, their contributions have remained largely marginalized in mainstream historical discourse. This study seeks to address this imbalance by examining and foregrounding the roles women played in the struggle for Nigeria's self-determination. By doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive and representative understanding of the nation's path to independence.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The main aim of this study is to examine the role of women in Nigeria's struggle for self-determination (1923-1960), using Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba as case studies. The specific objectives can be stated as follows:

1. To examine the history of Nigerian women in politics and their involvement in the early phase of Nigerian Nationalism- The emergence of Political parties and Women's contributions to these parties.
2. To highlight the contributions of Nigerian Women in Anti-Colonial movements and their involvement in mass protests and riots.
3. To examine the contributions of different women to Nigeria's struggle for self-determination.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study will focus on the roles, contributions, and experiences of women to Nigeria's struggle for Self-determination, including: Women's participation in nationalist movements and organizations, Women's involvement in protests, demonstrations, and other forms of activism, Women's leadership and decision-making roles in the independence movement using Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba as case studies. This study will cover the period of 1923 to 1960 which signifies the period of Nigerian nationalist movement until Independence.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the historical methodology. In the course of writing this research work, relevant data will be obtained from two main sources. These will include primary and secondary sources. Consequently, the research work will critically analyze, interpret and cross-examine the materials with a view to sieving out the facts of history. The study will be based on the qualitative method of data analysis. However, where it is necessary, the research will employ the statistical method of data analysis and presentation. The method of referencing and citation that will be adopted in this study would be the Modern Language Association (MLA) style.

Primary sources

The study will be based on fact findings on primary sources which include information from the internet and relevant Newspaper articles.

Secondary sources

Secondary sources which will be consulted include: Seminary Paper and dissertations as well as relevant government agencies, Media reports, books, journals, articles, magazines and some published materials from public libraries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Women Political Participation in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects"[11] R. Anifowose provides valuable insight into the complexities surrounding the role of women in Nigerian politics, addressing both the challenges and opportunities they encounter.His contribution to the edited volume presents an in-depth analysis of the political participation of women in Nigeria, focusing on the sociocultural, political, and economic factors that hinder or enable their involvement. The chapter addresses both historical and contemporary issues concerning women's representation and engagement in Nigerian politics, critically assessing the existing gender inequalities. A major theme in Anifowose's work is the influence of entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural barriers that hinder women's political participation in Nigeria. The author highlights the deeply rooted gender stereotypes and traditional beliefs about women's roles in Nigerian society, which position them as secondary to men in public affairs

limiting their access to political spaces and leadership positions. His work offers a detailed exploration of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities surrounding women's political participation in Nigeria. The work sheds light on the socio-cultural and political hurdles that impede women's involvement in political processes and provides constructive recommendations for improving gender equality in Nigerian politics. The analysis remains a crucial reference for understanding the dynamics of gender and politics in Nigeria and contributes significantly to the broader discourse on women's political empowerment in Africa.

Afigbo's (1967) study on *"The Warrant Chief System in Eastern Nigeria: Direct or Indirect Rule?"* critically examines the colonial administrative structure imposed by the British, focusing on the institution of warrant chiefs as intermediaries in governance. The article highlights how the system disrupted traditional power dynamics by empowering selected male figures, often sidelining indigenous authorities and social groups, including women. Although Afigbo's analysis centers on the political and administrative implications of colonial rule, it implicitly underscores how the warrant chief system marginalized women's roles in local governance and social organization. This marginalization contributed to women's mobilization during the Nigerian independence movement, as they sought to reclaim agency and challenge both colonial and patriarchal structures. Afigbo's work thus

provides a crucial contextual foundation for understanding the gendered dimensions of colonial rule that shaped women's activism and participation in Nigeria's struggle for independence[12].

In his article "Women and Political Participation in Nigeria" Arowolo Dare explores the status of women's involvement in Nigerian political processes, critically evaluating both the barriers to their participation and the prospects for greater gender equality in political life[13]. The article offers an analysis that blends historical, sociocultural, and political perspectives to provide a thorough assessment of the obstacles and potential solutions regarding women's political participation in Nigeria. One of the central arguments in Arowolo's work is the persistence of patriarchy as a key factor hindering women's political participation. He discusses how deeply ingrained patriarchal values in Nigerian society position women as secondary to men, limiting their roles in politics. This gender inequality is embedded in cultural practices and social norms, where leadership and decision-making positions are predominantly seen as male domains. He emphasizes that such cultural attitudes are difficult to change because they are rooted in long-standing traditions and values that regard women as inferior to men in political contexts[14]. Arowolo offers an insightful examination of the barriers to women's political involvement in Nigeria, providing both a historical and contemporary analysis of the challenges they face. The work

underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchy and institutional barriers while also highlighting the importance of education and economic empowerment as tools for enhancing women's political participation.

The study conducted by Amadiume Ifi, on Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, titled "Women in Nigerian politics" In "Women in African politics" provides valuable insights into the historical context of women's participation in Nigerian politics, which is essential for understanding their contributions to the independence movement. The study explores the various ways women engaged with the political process during the colonial era, including their involvement in nationalist movements, political parties, and women's organizations. By examining the experiences and strategies of Nigerian women in politics, this work sheds light on the ways they navigated the complexities of colonial rule and fought for independence. Moreover, "Women in Nigerian Politics" highlights the key issues and challenges which women faced during this period, such as gender-based discrimination, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and societal expectations that restricted their participation in public life. By analyzing these challenges, the work provides a nuanced understanding of the obstacles that women overcame to contribute to the independence movement. The study is a valuable resource for understanding the role of women in the Nigerian independence movement, as it provides historical context,

analyzes the experiences and strategies of women in politics, and highlights the challenges they faced during this period[15].

Adesina's 2013 Ph.D. thesis focuses on a specific time frame (1940-1960), which coincides with the critical second phase of the Nigerian struggle for Self-Determination. This allows for an in-depth examination of women's participation during this pivotal moment in Nigerian history. The thesis has a primary focus on women's participation in the independence movement, making it a valuable resource for understanding the specific roles, challenges, and experiences of women during this period. Adesina's work is based on original research, including primary sources, interviews, and archival materials. This provides a unique perspective on the topic of women's participation in the Nigerian Nationalist movements. It also contextualizes women's roles within the broader framework of the Nigerian struggle for self-determination, providing insights into how women's participation intersected with other social, economic, and political factors[16].

Panata, Sara, and Heloise Finch-Boyer`s work '*The Women Movement in the 1950s'*[17] presents a thorough analysis of the activities of Nigerian women in political parties and general nationalist activities in the 1950`s. The Authors successfully reviewed newspaper articles written by Elizabeth Adekogbe, who was a Journalist and the President of the Women Movement of Nigeria (WM)[18]. The work emphasizes

the activities and challenges of women in existing political parties such as Action Group (AG) and Northern Peoples congress (NPC). The article gives an insight into the many differences between politically inclined women in different political parties due to Ethnic disagreements as well as the fight for universal suffrage for all women spearheaded by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti. Panata, Sara and Heloise were able to paint a picture depicting the active involvements of Women in the Nationalist Movement, highlighting the challenges, achievements and contributions of Elizabeth Adekogbe and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti.

In her seminal work, *Women and the Nigerian Independence Movement*, published in *Women and Politics in Nigeria*[19], Kamene Okonjo explores the significant yet often overlooked role of women in the struggle for Nigeria's independence. Okonjo's analysis presents a nuanced examination of how Nigerian women, despite being largely marginalized in the political and social spheres, made crucial contributions to the nationalist movement. She delves into the historical context of Nigerian women's activism, particularly in relation to the economic, political, and cultural forces shaping the country in the early 20th century. She highlights key figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and other women leaders who mobilized masses for political action, challenging both colonial and indigenous patriarchal systems. The study emphasizes that women's roles were not merely

supportive but were central to the anti-colonial resistance, with their involvement ranging from protests, such as the famous Aba Women's Riot of 1929, to participating in organizing labor strikes and boycotts.

Okonjo critically evaluates the way women's political activism was both enabled and constrained by the cultural and social fabric of Nigerian society. Despite the numerous obstacles they faced, including gender-based discrimination and colonial policies that sought to sideline their political contributions, women were key players in influencing public discourse and advancing the cause of independence. Okonjo's work is a vital contribution to understanding the intersection of gender and nationalism in Nigerian history. By foregrounding the roles of women, she challenges dominant narratives that have historically centered male political leaders. Her research also provides insights into the broader dynamics of women's political participation in postcolonial contexts, suggesting that while women's roles in the independence movement were significant, their contributions were often undervalued or erased in historical accounts.

In the article "Women in Politics and Decision-Making in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects,"[20] Ngara, Ochanja, and Ayabam provide a comprehensive examination of the participation of Nigerian women in political decision-making processes, focusing on both the barriers they face and the opportunities that lie ahead. The

authors engage with a broad range of social, cultural, and political factors that have historically limited the full involvement of women in Nigeria's political landscape. The authors critically assess the systemic challenges that hinder women's participation, including cultural attitudes, inadequate access to education, lack of political will, and the underrepresentation of women in key political offices. They argue that these challenges are compounded by a gender-biased legal framework and socio-economic inequalities that restrict women's political agency. One of the article's key strengths lies in its nuanced exploration of both the challenges and prospects, presenting a balanced view of the situation. It underscores the necessity of continuous efforts to create an enabling environment for women in politics, calling for stronger policy measures, increased support for female candidates, and a shift in societal attitudes towards gender roles in governance.

CHAPTERIZATION

Chapter One: Background to the study

This chapter introduces the core issues of this study, highlighting the first political party in Nigeria and its inclusion of women (or the lack thereof). It also examines the role of women in subsequent political issues- in Nigeria, Africa and the world.

Chapter Two: Nigerian Women and Anti-Colonial Protests, 1923-1945

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of how Nigerian women contributed to anti-colonial activism during the early 20th century, particularly focusing on their involvement in protests against colonial policies- such as the Aba Women's riot of 1929 as well as other protest and mobilisation efforts between 1930 and 1940- and the ways they challenged both colonial and patriarchal systems.

Chapter Three: Nigerian Women and the struggle for self-determination, 1945-1960

This chapter critically looks at the background and contributions of Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba to the Nigerian independence movement.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This chapter concludes the entire work

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CHAPTER TWO

NIGERIAN WOMEN AND ANTI-COLONIAL PROTESTS, 1923-1945

Introduction

Throughout human history, protest actions have served as powerful instruments for initiating political, social, and economic change. Across civilizations, individuals and communities have mobilized to challenge injustice, resist oppressive governance, demand fair compensation, and protect fundamental rights. Colonial Nigeria was no exception.

Between 1923 and 1945, the Nigerian colony—home to a mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities—experienced an upsurge in organized resistance against British colonial rule. This wave of anti-colonial activism was driven by a shared aspiration: **self-determination**. Within this period, various protest actions unfolded, ranging from widespread labor strikes to localized uprisings against specific colonial policies.

While some of the most prominent demonstrations—such as the 1945 General Strike, the 1941 Enugu Coal Miners' Strike, the 1937 Nigerian Marine Transport Strike, and the 1938 Nigerian Union of Teachers' Protest—were led largely by male-dominated labor unions, women across different provinces also organized significant protest movements. Women-led actions such as the Calabar Market Toll Protest

(1924-1925), the Bonny/Opobo "Purity" (Nwaobiala) Protests of 1925, the Ezzi Women Protest in Ogoja (1928), and the Aba Women's Riot (1929–1930) not only challenged colonial economic exploitation but also redefined women's roles in nationalist politics.

The protest movements between 1923 and 1945 were pivotal in laying the groundwork for Nigeria's independence struggle. Labour strikes, particularly those culminating in the 1945 General Strike, exposed the exploitative fiscal and economic policies of the colonial regime and created organizational structures that nationalist leaders later leveraged to mobilize mass movements.[1] Similarly, women-led protests, most notably the 1929–1930 Aba Women's Riot, demonstrated the extraordinary capacity for grassroots mobilization beyond elite political circles, directly challenging colonial authority and prompting reforms such as the abolition of the warrant chief system and the appointment of women to Native Courts.[2] These actions also facilitated the growth of nationalist organizations such as the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), trade unions, and regional associations, creating networks of political consciousness that would later drive the formal independence campaigns of the late 1940s and 1950s.[3]

Calabar Market Toll Protest (1924-1925)

By the mid-1920s, colonial revenue policies in southern Nigeria increasingly targeted market spaces through the Markets Ordinance and new stall/toll fees. In

Calabar, where market trade was central to women's livelihoods and local governance, the sudden imposition of stall fees triggered organized resistance. A primary colonial source records that on 1 April 1925, "*riots broke out in the Calabar township as a result of the imposition of market stall fees*"; the Riot Act was read, police charged the crowd, and no shots were fired.[4] Some secondary scholarship, however, places the initial protest activity in 1924, noting "three thousand women 'riot' in Calabar when a market toll is required by the government".[5] Taken together, the evidence warrants dating the episode between 1924–1925.

The protest was organized primarily by market women, drawing on established networks of daily commerce and kinship—structures that had long enabled rapid mobilization among Efik- and Ibibio-speaking communities. Their repertoire combined collective refusals to pay, market shutdowns/boycotts, marches, and boycotts of European firms and property damage during 1925 actions in Calabar.[6] This repertoire foreshadowed later mass actions in the region (e.g., the 1929 "Women's War") and illustrates women's capacity to scale contention beyond purely local grievances.[7]

Officials treated the unrest as a public-order problem rather than a policy dispute. The 1925 Annual Report notes that the Riot Act was read and armed police charged the crowd to disperse it; subsequently, the Obong of Calabar was prosecuted under the Markets Ordinance. After high-level visits by the Officer Administering the

Government and the Acting Lieutenant-Governor in May 1925, the administration reported that "the people had returned to the market and paid their fees".[8] This sequence of police action, prosecution of local authorities, then negotiated return to trade fits a familiar colonial pattern of coercion followed by managed de-escalation.

In the short term, the protest did not overturn the stall-fee policy. Its longer-term significance, however, lies in consolidating women's political organization in the Cross River area; demonstrating the economic leverage of market shutdowns and boycotts and furnishing a tactical and ideological precursor to the 1929 Women's War in Owerri and Calabar Provinces.[9] The protest thus marks an early node in the gendered infrastructure of anticolonial resistance, linking everyday economic grievances to broader critiques of colonial extraction.

The Bonny/Opobo "Purity" (Nwaobiala) Protests of 1925

Scholars often treat the 1925 "Dancing Women's Movement," locally called Nwaobiala, as a precursor to the 1929 Women's War. Though narratives sometimes fix on Owerri and Calabar, contemporary and retrospective accounts indicate that one wave of the 1925 agitation began in the eastern Niger Delta (the old Opobo Division, today around Ikot Abasi and the Bonny–Opobo zone) and then radiated inland toward Okigwe.[10] In colonial shorthand the movement was also labeled a "Women's Purity

Campaign," a phrase that captures its idiom of moral and civic cleansing more than any single, narrow grievance.[11]

Nwaobiala drew on long-standing women's repertoires of collective sanction—chanting, converging on officials, and ritualized shaming—but reframed them to address the social dislocations of the 1920s: rising prices, monetization of market exchange, policing of women's mobility and sexuality, and the erosion of women's authority in local governance.[12] In Delta market towns tied to Bonny/Opobo trade circuits, complaints clustered around colonial and chiefly levies in markets; the spread of European coinage and price manipulation that disadvantaged women traders and the regulation of "morals" and sexuality that targeted young women while leaving male commercial and political power untouched.[13]

Participants mobilized through women's market networks and kinship lines and then "swept" public spaces (literally and symbolically) singing, drumming, and issuing injunctions to "clean" the town. The sweeping referenced annual earth-cleansing rites and publicly signaled a demand to restore right relations between community, authorities, and the land. Women also performed sit-ins at chiefs' compounds and courts, followed officials with derisive songs, and used the threat of ritual shame to compel hearings.[14]

While some reports foreground Owerri heartlands, evidence places early outbreaks in the Opobo/Bonny area, with further escalation recorded at Ukan and Essene (old Opobo Division) before linked disturbances moved toward Okigwe where they became more confrontational. This coastal-to-hinterland arc maps onto trading corridors that women dominated, explaining the speed of rumor and coordination.[15]

Colonial officers minimized the protests as "dances" or "market disturbances," missing their political content and the critique of indirect rule's male-centric courts.[16] Policing ranged from warnings and arrests to dispersal, but authorities implemented few substantive reforms in 1925. Nonetheless, Nwaobiala built skills, networks, and confidence that would surface four years later in the more expansive Women's War: market communication chains were proven, repertoires of singing/sitting refined, and critiques of currency, levies, and chiefly corruption sharpened. As economic tensions deepened, women's objections to European coinage and pricing practices in 1925 foreshadowed later anti-monopoly and oil-mill protests.[17]

In the Bonny–Opobo theatre, Nwaobiala asserted women's authority over trade, morality, and local governance and re-politicized ritual performance as protest. It stitched coastal market women to inland counterparts, generating proto-national linkages that fed 1930s–1940s labor and women's campaigns. In this sense, the 1925

movement was not a local curiosity but an organizational rehearsal for mass anti-colonial action.

Ezzi (Ezza/Izzi) Women's Protest in Ogoja Province (1928)

In the late 1920s, Abakaliki Division, then within Ogoja Province, was a flashpoint of rural discontent against the expanding reach of colonial Native Administration (warrant chiefs, Native Courts, new taxes, and tolls). Women traders and cultivators in the Ezzi/Ezza/Izzi bloc were deeply entangled in palm produce and food markets; when rumors and preliminary steps toward direct taxation spread across Eastern Provinces in 1928, women's networks mobilized swiftly, echoing patterns that would culminate in the Women's War of 1929. [18]

One might wonder what triggered this protest movement. Well, the prospect (and early local experiments) of direct taxation in Igbo areas generated widespread rumor, grievance, and organized resistance before 1929. Secondary syntheses and archival-based work identify Abakaliki Division—and specifically Ezza and Izzi communities—as sites of women's "uprisings" in 1928 tied to tax fears. [19] Also, complaints about court fees, fines, and the behavior of court personnel (including intrusive census practices interpreted as tax assessments) fed mobilization among market women and lineage leaders, a pattern consistent across Eastern Provinces on

the eve of 1929.[20] Additionally, disputes over tolls and restrictions on produce trade, especially palm oil and garri, threatened women's incomes, sharpening the economic stakes of protest.

Women drew on established communicative tools, market networks, song, invective, and the Igbo practice often termed "sitting on" officials, to summon large, multi-village gatherings. Contemporary theses and regional syntheses describe 1928 actions by Ezza and Izzi women that disrupted official meetings, confronted Native Court personnel, and publicly shamed warrant chiefs for collaborating with revenue measures. These repertoires mirrored those later seen in Owerri and Calabar Provinces, underscoring that women's collective action predates and helps explain the rapid spread of the 1929 War. Exact headcounts are not preserved in a single colonial return for Abakaliki Division in 1928, and the literature notes variant clan spellings—Ezzi/Ezza/Izzi—reflecting the same cultural-linguistic bloc. Still, multiple sources agree that women's uprisings occurred in Ezza and Izzi areas in 1928, within Ogoja Province's administrative orbit and alongside other Eastern Province flashpoints. Authorities combined conciliation (promises of consultation) with coercion (police dispersals and arrests). While repression limited immediate concessions, women achieved two important effects: (i) they stalled or complicated local tax implementation in specific court areas; and (ii) they forged durable networks that

linked markets, courts, and villages—capacities that proved decisive in late-1929 mass actions.[21]

The Ezzi/Ezza/Izzi women's mobilization illustrates that anti-colonial praxis in the East was already women-led before 1929, rooted in market authority and community sanction. By targeting the quotidian instruments of indirect rule—tax, courts, chiefs—these protests politicized everyday economic life, widened participation beyond elite nationalist circles, and fed the organizational ecology (associations, unions, inter-market alliances) that later underpinned formal nationalist campaigns.

The Aba Women's Riot/"Women's War," 1929–1930

The Aba Women's War cannot be understood outside the institutional architecture of indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria. As Afigbo shows in his classic study, the British created or re-purposed the office of warrant chief in areas without centralized kingship, empowering selected men as judicial and administrative intermediaries and thereby disrupting precolonial balances in village republicanism and women's political institutions. The system centralized authority in male officeholders, enabled new forms of court fees, fines, and levies, and frequently insulated warrant chiefs from community accountability—conditions that generated

recurring conflicts through the 1910s–1920s and culminated in the mass women's mobilizations of 1929.[22]

The immediate spark occurred at Oloko (near Bende) when an enumerator, Mark Emeruwa, acting under the authority of Warrant Chief Okugo, attempted to count the household and livestock of Nwanyeruwa, a widow. Women interpreted the enumeration as a prelude to direct taxation of women, following men's taxation in 1928. The confrontation escalated; women convened and issued palm fronds, an established summons signal, to draw thousands to Oloko. The incident fused economic anxiety (prices, produce marketing) with a political critique of warrant chiefly power and the erosion of women's representation.

The uprising leveraged long-standing women's governance repertoires—market networks, kinship lines, and the sanction practice often called "sitting on" a man (public singing, drumming, and ridicule outside an offender's compound or office). Oral traditions and colonial testimony emphasize a leadership collective popularly remembered as the "Oloko trio"—Ikonnia, Nwannedia, and Nwugo—who coordinated early actions and communications across the Bende–Umuahia corridor. Rather than a single hierarchical command, the movement operated through federated clusters of market women and lineage heads, which explains both its rapid diffusion and resilience against arrests of individual figures.[23]

From Oloko, protests spread across Owerri and Calabar Provinces, targeting Native Courts, factories, and symbols of chiefly authority. Tactics included mass meetings, marches, court shutdowns, road pickets, and selective property attacks—with a consistent emphasis on compelling hearings, dismissals of abusive officials, and protection from new levies. Matera et al. detail the choreography of singing, strategic encirclement, and the use of palm fronds as summons, while the Aba Commission of Inquiry (1930) recorded the scale and coordination across districts. Officials initially misread the protests as "riots," deploying police and, at flashpoints, military detachments. The Aba Commission sat in early 1930 (thirty-eight public sittings; 485 witnesses) to determine causes and responsibilities after shootings by security forces. Depending on the source, at least thirty-two women were killed and thirty-one wounded (a conservative figure drawn from official tabulations); some later accounts put total fatalities near fifty-five when aggregating multiple incidents. The Commission criticized aspects of administrative practice, acknowledging women's political influence, yet recommended bans on mass meetings, a contradiction that reflected the state's struggle to recognize women's institutions. [24]

In administrative terms, the aftermath produced disciplinary actions against several warrant chiefs, reorganizations of Native Courts, and, crucially, the appointment of women assessors/members to some courts—incremental recognition

of women's authority in local governance. Importantly, following Afigbo, we should resist the oversimplified claim that the Women's War "abolished" warrant chieftaincy wholesale. Rather, the crisis delegitimized aspects of the system and forced structural modifications which was a turning point in the evolution (not instant termination) of indirect rule in the East. Beyond tax fears, the movement expressed wider economic grievances: declining produce prices in the late 1920s, price manipulation by firms, and court-levy extractions that squeezed women traders. Korieh's regional study highlights how these pressures were felt in everyday market life and how women's mobilization defended household provisioning against colonial revenue drives and commercial monopolies. By politicizing the everyday economy, the Women's War linked domestic subsistence, market agency, and constitutional demands—an insight that reappears in 1930s–1940s women's protests (oil-mill strikes, market toll actions). [25]

Colonial sources dubbed the events "riots," a label that obscured the intentional political organization rooted in women's institutions. Subsequent scholarship, beginning with feminist reinterpretations in the 1970s and consolidated by Matera, Bastian, and Kent, prefers "Women's War" (Igbo: Ogu Umunwanyi; Ibibio/Annang: Ekong Iban), centering women's agency, strategy, and aims. This shift aligns with Afigbo's analysis of the warrant-chief system as historically

contingent and contested rather than "traditional," foregrounding the women's revolt as a rational constitutional intervention, not "hysteria".

The Women's War prefigured later anti-colonial mobilizations by demonstrating how non-elite, gendered networks could scale from local to provincial action; it trained cadres, refined repertoires, and produced institutional memory that fed labor strikes and regional associations in the 1930s–1940s. While elite nationalist parties (e.g., the Nigerian Youth Movement) would later dominate formal politics, their rise rested on a public sphere transformed by women's mass politics and the crisis of indirect rule.[26]

Conclusion

The period between 1923 and 1945 stands as a transformative era in Nigeria's anti-colonial history, marked by diverse protest actions that laid the groundwork for organized nationalist agitation in the decades that followed. Labor-led movements such as the 1945 General Strike and earlier coal miners' and teachers' protests revealed the exploitative nature of colonial economic structures, while women's resistance in Calabar, Bonny, Ogoja, and most significantly in Aba, highlighted the depth of grassroots mobilization against political and social injustices.

What emerges from these struggles is a clearer understanding that resistance to colonialism was not the sole preserve of elite nationalists or urban male workers, but rather a multi-vocal and gender-inclusive movement. Women, often overlooked in historical narratives, were central actors in defending communal economic rights, challenging the abuses of warrant chiefs, and resisting the imposition of taxes that threatened their social and economic autonomy. As Afigbo (1972) demonstrates in his analysis of the warrant chief system, it was precisely these localized abuses and disruptions of indigenous authority that ignited some of the most explosive protests, particularly the Aba Women's War.

Colonial responses, characterized by repression on the one hand and piecemeal reforms on the other, did little to extinguish the momentum of resistance. Instead, they sharpened political consciousness and deepened networks of organization among trade unions, market women's associations, and regional political movements. By the mid-1940s, these protest traditions had coalesced into a more coherent nationalist front, embodied in organizations such as the Nigerian Youth Movement.

Therefore, the protest movements of 1923–1945 were not isolated or spontaneous outbreaks but rather critical antecedents to the structured campaigns for self-determination that culminated in Nigeria's independence. They demonstrate that

independence was won not only in the constitutional conferences of the 1950s but also in the markets, mines, and streets where ordinary Nigerians, especially women, contested the legitimacy of colonial rule.

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CHAPTER THREE
NIGERIAN WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION, 1945-1960

Introduction

Nigeria's struggle for independence was not only shaped by male nationalists and political elites but also by women whose activism significantly influenced the trajectory of the movement. Among these women, certain figures stand out for their enduring contributions to political mobilization, legislative advocacy, socio-cultural transformation, and media engagement. For the purpose of this study, attention will be focused on four of such prominent women: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe, and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba.

These women have been selected as case studies because their activism collectively demonstrates the breadth of women's engagement in the nationalist struggle. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti distinguished herself as a pioneering voice in political organization and education; Margaret Ekpo became a symbol of women's inclusion in nationalist politics and legislative participation; Elizabeth Adekogbe advanced the cause of gender equality through organizational leadership; while Hajiya Gambo Sawaba emerged as a fearless advocate for social justice and the political empowerment of northern women.

This chapter, therefore, provides a critical analysis of their backgrounds and contributions, highlighting the multiple ways in which Nigerian women shaped the independence movement between 1945 and 1960. By examining their lives and activism, the chapter underscores not only the agency of women within nationalist struggles but also the necessity of situating them as central actors in Nigeria's road to self-determination.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti: Political Leadership, Grassroots Mobilization, and Anti-Colonial Advocacy

Background and Early Life

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, born Francis Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas in Abeokuta in 1900, emerged from a milieu that combined Yoruba traditional structures, Christianity, and colonial modernity. According to Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba, her early upbringing positioned her at the intersection of multiple cultural forces that would later shape her political consciousness and activism. Raised in a prominent Christian family, she was afforded opportunities for formal education that were exceptional for girls of her generation. Her admission to the Abeokuta Grammar School made her one of the very first female students in a previously male-only institution—a barrier-breaking moment that foreshadowed her later role as a pioneer in women's public life.[1]

Her intellectual curiosity and determination led her abroad to England in 1919, where she studied at Wincham Hall School for Girls in Cheshire. The experience in Britain broadened her worldview, exposing her to the politics of empire, suffrage, and gender equality, even as she remained conscious of the racial prejudices and colonial hierarchies that shaped the lives of African students. Johnson-Odim and Mba argue that these formative encounters with both inclusion and exclusion deepened her awareness of the need for women, African women in particular, to demand recognition and rights in both social and political spheres.[2]

On her return to Nigeria in the early 1920s, Ransome-Kuti married Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, a progressive Anglican minister and educator who shared her passion for reform and social justice. Together, they cultivated an environment in which education, faith, and civic responsibility were fused, and Ransome-Kuti herself began her career as a teacher at Abeokuta Grammar School. Teaching not only gave her influence among the educated elite but also underscored her lifelong commitment to expanding access to education, especially for girls.

By the 1930s, she was already building networks among educated women in Abeokuta, culminating in the formation of the Abeokuta Ladies Club in 1932. Johnson-Odim and Mba emphasize that this phase of her life illustrates a gradual but deliberate evolution: from the privilege of elite educational attainment, she began to

translate her status into organizing platforms that addressed the socio-economic marginalization of women, particularly market women whose grievances under colonial taxation would later catalyze some of Nigeria's most remarkable women's protests.

Thus, Ransome-Kuti's early life was not simply a story of personal advancement, but rather the making of a nationalist feminist leader. Her upbringing, education at home and abroad, and marriage to a like-minded reformer collectively forged the foundations for her later activism, where she positioned herself as a bridge between elite circles and grassroots women.

The Abeokuta Women's Union and Tax Resistance

In 1946 the ALC was reorganized as the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), explicitly linking middle-class reformers with thousands of market women. The immediate catalyst was the flat-rate tax on women imposed through the Egba Native Authority under the "sole native authority" (SNA) model, which concentrated power in the Alake and his council. Women protested both the fiscal burden and the principle of taxation without representation, since women had been excluded from the restructured local administration. [3]

Between late 1946 and 1948, Ransome-Kuti and the AWU pursued a calibrated strategy that moved from petitions and delegations to sustained mass demonstrations. Their petitions demanded abolition of the women's flat tax, reform of the SNA into a representative council including women, and protections for market women against police harassment and arbitrary fees. When negotiation stalled and taxation was increased, the AWU orchestrated rolling protests around the Alake's palace—mobilizing, at peak, tens of thousands of women. Tactics included disciplined pickets, stay-aways from markets, and the famously biting repertoire of Yoruba political song and satire, which publicly shamed office-holders and undercut chiefly legitimacy.[4] Colonial authorities initially responded with arrests, beatings and tear gas, but the movement's breadth and stamina forced concessions. By mid-1948 the women's tax was suspended; on 3 January 1949 the Alake, Oba Ladapo Ademola II, abdicated under pressure; and the reconstituted Egba council included four women which stands as historic recognitions of women's political authority in a chiefly domain.

The achievements of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) were grounded in a series of organizational innovations that Ransome-Kuti was instrumental in institutionalizing. Among these were the introduction of a dues-based system of mass membership which, according to contemporary reports, reached into the tens of

thousands ensuring both financial autonomy and a strong participatory base. Equally significant was the establishment of elected committees and a culture of meticulous minute-keeping, practices that not only enhanced accountability but also mirrored the formal organizational structures of modern political associations. Furthermore, the AWU developed a deliberate publicity strategy, making effective use of both the indigenous press and sympathetic nationalist figures to amplify its grievances and broaden its influence beyond Abeokuta. Perhaps most remarkable, however, was the Union's ability to forge a cross-class coalition, uniting elite women with market traders and other working-class constituencies. This alliance gave the AWU a unique dual legitimacy: on the one hand, it was capable of negotiating effectively with state authorities, traditional rulers, and colonial administrators; on the other, it retained credibility and resonance among grassroots women whose economic and social conditions were most directly impacted by colonial policies. In this way, the AWU not only advanced the cause of women in Abeokuta but also provided an organizational model that bridged social divides and demonstrated the political potency of collective female activism in colonial Nigeria.[5]

Nationalist Politics and International Activism

The Abeokuta struggle not only consolidated Ransome-Kuti's leadership within her immediate environment but also propelled her onto the national and

international stage of anti-colonial politics. As Johnson-Odim and Mba argue, the AWU campaigns "served as a political apprenticeship for Ransome-Kuti, providing her with both the legitimacy and the organizational experience that would shape her subsequent nationalist interventions".[6] By the mid-1940s, she had emerged as an early supporter of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the most significant nationalist party of the era. In 1947, she broke new ground as the only woman included in the NCNC delegation to London to protest the Richards Constitution. Johnson-Odim and Mba underscore the symbolic importance of this event, noting that "her presence in London dramatized that Nigerian women, long subject to colonial taxation and disenfranchisement, also had a stake and a voice in the evolving political order".[7] Her inclusion in such a mission, which was remarkable in a political culture still overwhelmingly dominated by men, underscored both her stature and her ability to articulate women's grievances within the broader nationalist framework.

The innovations of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) also reverberated far beyond Abeokuta. Its federated model inspired the creation of broader women's organizations, beginning with the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) in 1949 and culminating in the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS) in 1953, with Ransome-Kuti as one of its central organizers. As Johnson-Odim and Mba observe,

the FNWS became “the most important women’s organization in Nigeria in the 1950s,” pressing for reforms that directly mapped onto nationalist demands: the expansion of suffrage, reform of discriminatory taxation, greater access to education, and women’s representation in governance. Ransome-Kuti’s insistence that women’s issues were not separate but integral to the national cause ensured that, as the authors put it, “the emancipation of women and the liberation of Nigeria were two sides of the same coin”.[8]

At the international level, Ransome-Kuti distinguished herself as one of the first African women to systematically connect local struggles for gender justice and decolonization with global anti-imperialist networks. She cultivated ties with the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), where she later served as vice-president. Through travel and conference diplomacy, she placed Nigerian women’s struggles into global conversations about labor, race, and rights. Her work demonstrated a conscious internationalism, one that placed Nigerian women squarely within the world community of oppressed peoples seeking justice. It is also worthy of note that Ransome-Kuti was part of a pioneering cohort of African women whose activism transcended national boundaries, who believed that the liberation of women in Nigeria was inseparable from the liberation of women everywhere.

Thus, Ransome-Kuti's trajectory from Abeokuta campaigns to national and international activism illustrates the profound ways in which women's mobilization shaped the independence struggle. Her work reveals the indivisibility of gender justice and political sovereignty in mid-20th-century Nigeria, making clear that "to talk about nationalism in Nigeria without including the work of women like Ransome-Kuti is to tell only half the story".[9]

Legacy and Influence

Ransome-Kuti's political legacy can be understood along three interrelated dimensions. First, she succeeded in transforming the everyday grievances of women, particularly market women and other working-class constituencies, into constitutional and political claims about representation, taxation, and accountable governance. The campaigns of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), rooted in protests against police harassment, exploitative fees, and inequitable flat taxes, opened a new space in which African women could press for citizenship rights.[10] These victories demonstrated that mass, non-violent, women-led action could compel reform of Native Authority structures—institutions nationalist parties had long decried but rarely been able to decisively reform. The AWU provided a locally grounded but nationally significant model of democratic accountability, which nationalist parties later drew upon in their own grassroots campaigns.

Second, Ransome-Kuti developed an organizational architecture that proved to be both durable and portable across different political contexts. Her strategies—federated unions linking local branches to regional and national structures, democratically elected committees, dues-paying membership bases, meticulously recorded minutes, disciplined demonstrations, integrated petitioning, and an astute use of the press—became hallmarks of women's political organization in Nigeria during the 1950s. These methods were replicated in the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) and later the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS), and they informed broader campaigns on women's suffrage, consumer protection, and local governance reform across the Western Region and beyond. As Byfield notes, this systematic approach to organization represented "nothing less than a women's political toolkit for modern Nigeria." [11]

Finally, Ransome-Kuti's career redefined the meaning of nationalist citizenship itself. By insisting that the independence project must include the voices and needs of women, particularly market women who were the economic backbone of many urban centers, she challenged the tendency of male-dominated nationalist organizations to replicate colonial hierarchies under the guise of self-rule. In her political thought and practice, independence without women's substantive inclusion was a hollow aspiration, one that would merely reproduce domination in a new idiom.

Through her municipal campaigns in Abeokuta, her participation in constitutional debates, and her international connections with feminist and anticolonial networks, she bridged local, national, and global spheres of activism. This capacious vision of freedom, as scholars have argued, left a "durable imprint not only on the Nigerian independence movement but on the political imagination of subsequent generations of African activists."[12]

Margaret Ekpo: Women's Representation in Nationalist Politics and the Legislature

Background and Early Life

Margaret Affiong Ekpo was born in 1914 in Creek Town (present-day Cross River State) into a family of mixed heritage: her father, Okoroafor Obiasulor, was Igbo, originally from Agulu-Uzo in Anambra State, while her mother, Inyang Eyo Aniemewue, came from Creek Town and was Efik. According to Ukpokolo, Ekpo's paternal lineage had strong ties to Igbo rural trade, whereas her maternal family was part of Creek Town's socially and economically influential coastal commerce network. This dual heritage provided her with a perspective that bridged rural Igbo and coastal Efik social worlds, which later informed her ability to work across ethnic and class lines in her activism.[13]

Ekpo's early education took place in Creek Town and other mission-elementary schools. She completed the Standard Six "school-leaving certificate" by 1934. However, that same year, the death of her father cut short her ambition to proceed to teacher training college. Instead, she became a "pupil-teacher" in elementary schools, a common path for educated women of her time who were denied further formal training. Her work as a teacher exposed her to the educational deficits faced by girls in both rural and town settings, and honed her skills in public speaking and mentorship, laying an early foundation for her political voice.[14]

In 1938, she married Dr. John Udo Ekpo, a medical officer of the Ibibio ethnic group. The union brought her to Aba (in what is now Abia State), which would become the center of her political and social work. During the 1940s, while her husband underwent medical treatment abroad, Ekpo seized the opportunity to further her education. In 1948, she obtained a diploma in Domestic Science at Rathmines School of Domestic Economics, Dublin (now part of Dublin Institute of Technology). Ukpokolo notes that this education equipped her with technical skills valued in colonial society—dressmaking, home economics, and institutional knowledge of domestic science—which she later leveraged to establish a school when she returned to Nigeria.

Upon her return to Aba, Ekpo founded a Domestic Science and Sewing Institute, teaching home economics, sewing, and related vocational skills to young women. Her intention was not merely vocational training, but empowerment: she often emphasized that economic self-reliance was essential for political participation. This early institution served dual functions: meeting immediate economic needs of women and acting as a site for consciousness raising. Because vocational trade skills were among the few paths open to women under colonial constraints, Ekpo's Institute became a node through which she cultivated relationships with market women, young girls, and mothers, an important base for her entering politics. [15]

Ukpokolo also points out that Ekpo's family background, though not wealthy, was socially prominent. Her maternal lineage had ties with Creek Town's social elites and her father had once expressed hopes for her educational uplift. These social expectations, combined with her early exposure to colonial administration (through her husband and teachers), gave her a consciousness of both the institutional obstacles and the possibilities for women under colonial rule. She observed, even as a young student and teacher, the limitations placed upon women, not only in education but in public voice, and this observation sharpened her awareness of gendered inequality early on.

Thus, Margaret Ekpo's early life was shaped by intersecting forces: mixed ethnic identity, missionary education, truncated formal schooling, early vocational training abroad, and exposure to the economic and social conditions of women traders and rural pupils. These experiences laid the foundation for her later activism: she emerged equipped with a sense of educational purpose, economic pragmatism, and a cross-ethnic social base—all of which would define her style of grassroots mobilization and political engagement.

Grassroots Mobilization and Women's Organizing Strategies

Ekpo became famous for ingenious grassroots tactics that united Eastern Nigerian women behind anti-colonial causes. In 1954 she founded the Aba Township Women's Association (ATWA) to rally market women as a political force. To induce membership, Ekpo famously cornered the local salt market: she bought all bags of salt in Aba and sold them only to ATWA members. Since salt was essential for cooking, this "salt strategy" compelled thousands of women to register with ATWA (and thus enter the nationalist movement). ATWA and allied market associations then spread anti-colonial messages across Eastern Nigeria and turned women's economic grievances into votes for nationalist parties. By 1955 Ekpo's organizing produced concrete gains: in one Aba municipal election "women in Aba outnumbered male

voters". In short, through ATWA and related leagues Ekpo transformed rural and market networks into a formidable women's voting bloc. One scholar notes that her mobilization "brought more political awakening" to the South-East and was integral to preparing Nigeria for independence.[16]

These tactics worked: Aba women elected their own candidates to the Urban District Council, breaking the men's local monopoly. Under Ekpo's leadership, the "new market" women's group became a unified political force channeling its strength into the NCNC and other parties. In summary, Ekpo built regional support by linking everyday economic concerns (market conditions, taxes, education) with the larger struggle for self-rule. Her salt-market campaign and district council victories exemplify how Eastern women under Ekpo's guidance leveraged collective action to challenge colonial policies.[17]

Legislative Engagement and Political Representation

From the mid-1950s Ekpo began turning grassroots strength into formal political roles. In January 1959 she became one of the first female Special Members of the Eastern Region's House of Chiefs – a body that had previously excluded women. In her inaugural speech she pointedly reminded the chiefs that "the Northern House of Chiefs and the Western House of Chiefs…have no women representation".

She then assured them that “the women of the Eastern Region, with two of us here representing their interests, will be solidly behind you and the Government of the Eastern Region”. Declaring “we will not want to take your feathers or your crowns or your caps; and we will only cooperate with you,” Ekpo deftly framed her presence as loyal yet empowered.[18]

Once in the Eastern legislature, Ekpo used her platform to press for gender equity. Debating regional bills in 1960, she emphasized women’s rights to education and fair representation. She demanded that scholarships be awarded “equally to boys and girls,” arguing that independent Nigeria must no longer privilege male students. On a broadcasting bill, Ekpo insisted the future Eastern television board must include women: “when…[it] is created, there should be no discrimination. Men and women should serve on that Board,” she urged, even proposing that women form a majority so that their voices could be heard on the air. Her firmness also showed on tax issues – when other chiefs tried to misrepresent her earlier support for taxing women, she angrily warned that any attempt “to incite the women” to rebel against her would be met with “very strong resistance”. [19]

Beyond the Eastern Region, Ekpo represented Nigerian women on the national stage. In 1959–60 she was the sole female delegate from the East at Nigeria’s constitutional conferences in London and Lagos, ensuring that women’s perspectives

were included in the country's founding documents. Despite her record, party elders resisted nominating her for a federal seat: according to contemporaries, they warned that the 1959 elections were "too crucial to take the additional risk of presenting a woman candidate". Ekpo set aside electoral ambitions, but she continued to wield influence. In fact, when Nnamdi Azikiwe became president in October 1960, Ekpo took over as president of the NCNC women's wing, harnessing the support she had built for the party's national agenda. [20]

Legacy and National Impact

By independence (October 1, 1960) Margaret Ekpo had become one of Nigeria's foremost female leaders. Scholars and historians now celebrate her as a *pioneering* women's activist who bridged ethnic divides. For example, the Nigerian ZODML library project calls Ekpo "a pioneering politician… and a leading member of a group of female Nigerian activists who rallied women beyond the borders of ethnic solidarity."[21] In the Eastern Region she is still remembered for mobilizing market women and winning them voting power; nationally she is cited as an exemplar of women's roles in anti-colonialism. Ekpo's impact is also seen in later honors and institutions. The Margaret Ekpo International Airport in Calabar (Cross River State) was named after her in 2001, and university halls and public buildings across Nigeria

bear her name. Until her death in 2006 at age 92, she remained a life patron of the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS). As one review notes, Ekpo's legacy "remains a colossus" in Nigeria's political history – a symbol of how women's grassroots activism helped win the nation's independence. In sum, Ekpo's regional leadership in Aba and her national constitutional work made her an indispensable figure in the 1945–1960 struggle: by organizing women at the market, shaping party politics, and speaking for women in the legislature, she ensured that women's rights and voices were part of Nigeria's birth as an independent nation.[22]

Elizabeth Adekogbe: Organizational Leadership and the Struggle for Gender Equality.

Background and Early Life

Elizabeth Adekogbe stands out as one of the most consequential yet under-studied women leaders of Nigeria's decolonization era. Born in the early decades of the twentieth century in Ibadan, a major political and commercial hub of the Western Region, Adekogbe came of age at a time when colonial economic policies and indirect rule were reshaping women's livelihoods and civic status. Despite limited opportunities for girls in formal education under colonial administration, she trained as a teacher, a profession that not only offered a rare avenue for female employment but also cultivated the literacy, public-speaking skills, and administrative discipline

that later characterised her political work. Her early professional life thus prepared her to navigate both the bureaucratic world of government and the informal networks of market women and local associations.[23]

Adekogbe's first significant engagements occurred within the vibrant associational life of Ibadan and Lagos. Women's groups in these cities were experimenting with new forms of collective action on issues such as public health, sanitation, maternal welfare, and girls' schooling—issues often dismissed by male nationalists as "social" rather than "political" but which were, in fact, deeply intertwined with colonial governance. According to Panata and Finch-Boyer, the 1950s women's movement did not emerge ex nihilo but "grew out of earlier patterns of collective mobilization around taxation, health services, and education".[24] Adekogbe's activism is emblematic of this trajectory. Long before these concerns were incorporated into mainstream nationalist platforms, she was already advocating for expanded educational access for girls, better municipal services, and women's participation in local governance through grassroots associations in both Ibadan and Lagos.

By the early 1950s she had acquired a reputation as a gifted orator, capable of addressing large gatherings in clear, forceful language, and as an organisational strategist who could bridge elite women, teachers, clerks, and professionals, and the

far larger population of market traders and artisans. This ability to "negotiate between middle-class reformist women and the everyday economic grievances of working-class women" became the hallmark of her leadership style. It also positioned her to play a central role in the transition from local welfare groups to the explicitly political women's unions of the 1950s, giving her both credibility and legitimacy among Nigeria's increasingly diverse female constituencies.

Political Awakening and Organizational Leadership

Adekogbe's transition into full-time activism coincided with a broader resurgence of women's political movements in Nigeria. As Sara Panata and Heloise Finch-Boyer show, the 1950s witnessed "a wave of campaign activism" in which women's movements sought to insert claims for political rights into the national constitutional agenda. Recognising that moment, Adekogbe founded the **Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN)** in 1953, positioning it not as a charity group but as a political organisation demanding inclusion. The WMN adopted the same core objectives as the broader women's campaigns described by Panata and Finch-Boyer: "universal adult suffrage, the removal of tax barriers to women's voting, and equal opportunities for women to run for office".[25] Adekogbe regularly reminded members that "we shall not be satisfied until men and women are equally able to serve their

country," demonstrating her insistence that the movement was not simply for better conditions but for equal civic standing.[26]

Her organisational model mirrored the new federal structures of women's politics in the 1950s. Panata and Finch-Boyer note that women's groups began experimenting with "local units, regional coordination, and national conferences" to amplify their reach. In line with this, Adekogbe created WMN branches in Ibadan, Lagos, and mid-western districts. These branches held joint conferences where they adopted position papers on suffrage, education, public health, and legal reform, signalling that Adekogbe's leadership aimed for a pan-regional impact rather than a narrow local scope.

Women's Rights Advocacy and Pan-Regional Strategies

Adekogbe distinguished herself by her use of trained women cadres and public education campaigns. She recruited market women, teachers, and clerks, conducted lecture tours, and used print media to penetrate communities. According to Panata and Finch-Boyer, by the mid-1950s, women's organisations in Nigeria had begun to publish their own "bulletins, leaflets, and newsletters to disseminate constitutional critiques and mobilise rural women". Under Adekogbe's direction the WMN

participated in this trend, issuing public statements and letters to colonial officials challenging discriminatory laws and demanding institutional reform.

In 1957, for example, the WMN joined a national petition to the Western Regional Government demanding the removal of legal obstacles to women's voting. Panata and Finch-Boyer argue that such petitions were effective not necessarily because they were always accepted, but because they "formalised women's presence in constitutional debates" and made the colonial state and nationalist parties account for women's demands (184). Adekogbe also aligned the WMN's platform with demands from women in Eastern Nigeria who were resisting indirect taxes and warrant-chiefs, forging a coalition that transcended ethnic divides. Panata and Finch-Boyer cite several 1950s examples in which regional women's associations "met and exchanged position papers on enfranchisement, legal equality, and public services". Under Adekogbe's vision, the WMN thus became part of a broader "women's movement of the '50s" seeking to unify women's voices in constitutional politics across Nigeria.[27]

Legacy and Impact

While her name is less frequently cited than Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's or Margaret Ekpo's, Adekogbe left an enduring imprint on the architecture of Nigerian

women's political activism. She helped establish a template for federated, dues-funded, women-led organisations with elected committees, disciplined demonstrations, and integrated petitioning and press work—an organisational model that later informed campaigns on franchise, consumer rights, and local governance reform throughout the Western Region and beyond. At the same time, she insisted on organisational autonomy, sometimes bringing her into conflict with male party leaders who sought to subsume the WMN into their party's women's wings. As Panata and Finch-Boyer caution, women's organisations in the 1950s were vulnerable to co-optation, internal splits, or being sidelined by party apparatuses. Adekogbe confronted those constraints but remained committed to an independent women's political voice.f[28]

By reframing nationalist citizenship to include market women and other working-class constituencies, Adekogbe demonstrated that independence without women's substantive inclusion would risk reproducing colonial hierarchies in a new idiom. Her career thus bridged municipal struggles, constitutional debates, and pan-regional organising, leaving a durable imprint on Nigeria's independence movement and on the political imagination of subsequent generations of Nigerian women leaders.

Background and Early Life

Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, born Hajaratu Amarteifio on 15 February 1933 in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, grew up at the crossroads of multiple identities and migrations. Her father, Isa Amarteifio, a Ghanaian immigrant who had converted to Islam after settling in Zaria, worked as a skilled craftsman, while her mother, Fatima, came from Nupe stock in Lavun (in present-day Niger State). As John P. Barnard observes in his discussion of Rima Shawulu's *The Story of Gambo Sawaba*, this bicultural parentage and life in Zaria's Sabon Gari district exposed her from an early age to the plural urban society of colonial Northern Nigeria, where "the rigid hierarchies of race, religion and gender were always under negotiation". [29]

Sawaba began schooling at the Native Authority Primary School in Tudun Wada but, like many girls in colonial Northern Nigeria, her formal education was precarious. Her father died in 1943 when she was about ten, and the loss of her mother three years later forced her out of school into informal labour and domestic responsibilities. Barnard notes that Shawulu frames these early experiences not simply as personal misfortunes but as formative events that produced in Sawaba "a precocious sense of injustice" and a determination to resist the constraints placed on women and the poor .

At the age of thirteen, Hajaratu was married off to Abubakar Bello, a veteran of the Second World War. This union, however, soon collapsed: Bello abandoned her while she was pregnant with their first child. According to Barnard's account, Shawulu treats this episode as emblematic of the "double marginalisation" of Northern Nigerian women—subject to both colonial structures and patriarchal customs—which would later animate Sawaba's campaigns for women's rights. By her mid-teens she was already a single mother and wage earner, experiences that sharpened her empathy for market women, widows and child brides who formed the base of her political support in later years.

Thus, even before her entry into organised politics, the contours of Sawaba's activism were being etched by her lived reality: bicultural roots, truncated schooling, early widowhood and economic precarity. This period was "a crucible in which her political consciousness was forged". This resilience and social awareness would propel her into the radical opposition politics of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and make her one of the most recognisable female figures of Nigeria's independence movement.[30]

Political Awakening and Organizational Leadership

Sawaba's political awakening came early: despite her limited schooling, she joined the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) at age 17, becoming one of its youngest female members and soon president of its women's wing. The NEPU was a radical opposition party in northern Nigeria, led by Aminu Kano, advocating for the rights of the *talakawa* (ordinary people) against the conservative Northern People's Congress and the colonial Native Authority system. Her leadership within NEPU's women's wing gave her an institutional platform from which to challenge oppressive norms—particularly those limiting women's educational opportunities, political participation, forced labour, underage marriages, and unfair taxation.[31]

Her organising style was bold and direct. She frequently went into communities where women were in *purdah* (social seclusion) and visited them in their homes to talk about political rights. She also addressed political rallies, public lectures, and gatherings dominated by men. One biographical account notes her rising to the podium in a lecture hall filled with male speakers in Zaria: "she climbed onto the podium to speak out in a room full of men,"[32] a moment that underscored her willingness to breach socially enforced gender spaces. *Grassroots Mobilization and Women's Organizing Strategies*

Sawaba's strategy was grounded in lived experience and intertwined with local conditions. She campaigned tirelessly among working-class women, market traders, and ordinary households. She championed western education, arguing it was essential for northern women's emancipation; she spoke out against underage marriages and forced labour, linking them to broader colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures.[33]

Her activism incurred severe reprisals: she was arrested 16 times over her life; beaten, tortured, jailed; her hair was shaved without consent; in one case, she said, "If I don't know book, I know rights… I have not been a member of any House of Assembly. I have not held any office except that I was a member of the House of Prison."[34] These repeated arrests and public humiliations became part of her political identity, signaling that she was willing to endure personal cost for public principle.

Sawaba also contested the lack of women's voting rights in Northern Nigeria. While southern and western women gradually won limited franchise, the Northern Region under the NPC and Native Authorities resisted. Sawaba marched with northern women to the office of Premier Ahmadu Bello to demand suffrage, even declaring that she would stand against the premier in his own constituency if women were denied political participation.

Legislative Engagement and Political Representation

Unlike some other female nationalists, Sawaba never held legislative office during the independence era; her claim to leadership was more extra-parliamentary, rooted in activism, opposition politics, and public engagements. She was, however, chosen at times to lead the women's wings of NEPU and later became Deputy National Chairman of the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP) during the Second Republic—though these official party positions came after the immediate independence period.[35]

Her representative work was thus less about holding formal office (which was rare for women in northern Nigeria under colonial and early postcolonial rule) and more about *making demands heard*, pushing for reforms via protest, mobilization, press publicity, and standing up to Native Authorities and colonial officers. She used her arrests, trials, and public denunciations as tools to draw attention to women's grievances often ignored by official government structures.

Legacy and Historical Significance

Sawaba's legacy is profound, especially in Northern Nigeria. She is widely remembered as "the most jailed Nigerian female politician" (TheCable) and a symbol of resistance for women in regions where gender norms, indigenous authority, and

colonial rule intersected to suppress female political agency. Her confrontations with Native Authorities over taxation, her challenges to forced marriage, her vocal demand for women's right to vote—all prefigured later gender reforms in northern Nigeria.[36]

Memorialised institutions bear her name: in Zaria, there is Gambo Sawaba General Hospital; at Ahmadu Bello University, a hall is named after her; her portrait was proposed for the ₦5,000 note alongside other female nationalists, indicating that modern Nigeria recognises her symbolic importance.

Though she did not live to see all her hopes fulfilled, northern women were not granted full voting rights until after prolonged struggle, Sawaba's life laid much of the groundwork. She helped expand what it meant to be a nationalist leader, insisting that political liberation must include the voices of northern women, not merely in law but in daily practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the Nigerian independence movement was not only a story of elite male nationalists but also of women who redefined the very meaning of political participation. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba each emerged from distinct regional, cultural and class backgrounds, yet converged in their insistence that decolonisation without women's inclusion would reproduce colonial inequities in a new guise. Through their organisations—the Abeokuta Women's Union, the Eastern Nigerian Women's Union, the Nigerian Council of Women, and grassroots mobilisation under NEPU—they built federated structures, created new repertoires of mass protest, and translated everyday grievances about taxation, education and social welfare into constitutional and national claims.

The analysis of these four figures shows how women operated simultaneously at multiple levels: local and municipal struggles, regional associations, national party politics, and even international anti-imperialist networks. Their work broadened the constituency of nationalism to include market women, teachers, domestic workers and youth, thereby giving the independence movement a far deeper social base than it might otherwise have achieved. Taken together, these case studies affirm that Nigerian women were not ancillary actors but architects of decolonisation. Their

capacity to mobilise across class, ethnic and regional lines, and to press for both nationalist and gender-specific reforms, left a durable imprint on the political imagination of the new nation. The legacy of their strategies (federated women's unions, disciplined demonstrations, and the linking of local grievances to constitutional reform) would continue to shape Nigerian women's movements in the post-independence era.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Nigerian women were not peripheral actors in the country's decolonisation but central to its very possibility. From the inter-war years to the eve of independence, women's collective action and leadership transformed everyday grievances about taxation, education, social welfare and political exclusion into mass movements and constitutional claims. Whether through the market-based revolts of the 1920s and 1930s or the federated organisations of the 1940s and 1950s, women developed a repertoire of protest and negotiation that extended beyond elite nationalist politics and reached deep into the lives of ordinary Nigerians.

The research has highlighted how women fused local and national struggles. In the anti-colonial protests of the 1920s and 1930s, they challenged the exploitative economic and administrative policies of the colonial state, demonstrating the power of non-violent, women-led action to compel reform. In the independence era, leaders such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Elizabeth Adekogbe and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba built institutions, mobilised constituencies, and redefined the meaning of citizenship. They did not simply ask to be included in nationalist politics; they restructured it by linking grassroots networks to constitutional debates and by

insisting that independence without women's substantive inclusion would reproduce colonial hierarchies in a new idiom.

A key insight that emerges from this work is that women's activism in Nigeria was both historically grounded and innovative. It drew on older communal and market associations but also created new forms of federated unions, elected committees, disciplined demonstrations and international linkages. These strategies allowed women to bridge regional, religious and class divides and to carve out a political space for themselves in a system that doubly marginalised them. The story of Nigerian independence thus becomes, in part, a story of how women transformed the struggle for self-determination from a narrow constitutional negotiation into a mass movement with deep social roots.

This study also highlights the plurality of women's strategies. Ransome-Kuti used the Abeokuta Women's Union to challenge Native Authority taxation and then internationalised her message through the Women's International Democratic Federation. Ekpo inserted women into the NCNC and later into Eastern Regional politics, using social-welfare projects as a bridge to formal politics. Adekogbe built the Nigerian Women's Movement around suffrage demands and consumer rights. Sawaba took the fight to Northern Nigeria, risking imprisonment to mobilise against child marriage, political disenfranchisement and forced labour. Together they

demonstrate that Nigerian women were neither passive recipients of male-led nationalism nor a monolithic bloc; they were diverse actors whose local experiences shaped national and global repertoires of protest.

Beyond recovering individual biographies, this project underscores why the gendered history of nationalism matters. It helps explain how ordinary market traders and teachers helped to define constitutional questions of representation, taxation, and sovereignty. It also helps us see Nigerian independence not only as a transfer of power between British and Nigerian elites, but as a broader social transformation contested on multiple fronts, including the domestic, the municipal and the international.

Reflecting personally on the importance of this study, it becomes clear that recovering these histories is not simply an academic exercise but an act of historical justice. Studying the lives of these women allows us to understand the moral imagination behind political action: courage rooted in daily hardship, solidarity built across ethnic and class lines, and a refusal to accept the limits imposed upon them. As Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti famously declared, *"We are not beggars for crumbs but full citizens demanding our rights."* That insistence still speaks to present-day struggles over inclusion, democracy and justice in Nigeria and beyond. In foregrounding their voices, this study not only restores women to the centre of

Nigeria's nationalist story but also invites us to measure any future vision of self-determination by the yardstick of their unfinished work.

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