



Reviving The Identity Of The African Woman Through Economic Empowerment For Improved Human Health And Development

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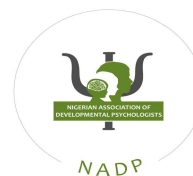
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ABSTRACT

Notable studies have dispelled the idea of gender inequalities in pre-colonial times by highlighting the integral historical roles women played in maintaining societal peace, attributed to widespread socioeconomic and sociocultural empowerment. This article aims to bring to limelight the declining cultural identity of African women over the years due to colonisation and the unwavering role of economic empowerment in reviving this identity and promoting health and human development. Beneficiaries (young female adults aged 18-40 years who are indigenes of the Abuedo community of Delta State in the Niger Delta region of South-Southern Nigeria), were trained in handcrafting for six (6) months (January 2022 to June 2022). Surveys were conducted pre- and post-training using structured questionnaires drafted in the Pidgin-English language to obtain quantitative data on their perception of handcrafting for income generation. Beneficiaries who completed the training were supported in marketing their handicrafts for income generation. Of all 63 beneficiaries, 33.3% were already skilled in trading in handcrafting and expectedly reported the highest baseline median daily income of \$2.9. Beneficiary perception was significantly improved from 61.9% pre-training to 92.1% post-training. Hence, most beneficiaries strongly agreed that there is a positive correlation between the craft trade and income generation. At training completion, 11(17.5%) beneficiaries were fully registered as craft vendors at the regional tourist centres, whereas others preferentially opted for telemarketing. By revealing a positive correlation between handcrafting and economic empowerment, this article concludes that introducing indigenous value systems ultimately births an inclusive society that promotes human development.



Keywords: African woman, Niger-Delta, Economic empowerment, Handcrafting

Introduction




From precolonial times to the early 21st century, the role and status of the African woman have continuously evolved. There remains no doubt regarding women's various integral roles throughout history, particularly in maintaining peace within the family system and beyond. Notable studies have dispelled the idea of gender inequalities in pre-colonial times by highlighting the socially constructed flexible gender in traditional Africa, where motherhood was viewed as the most important social institution (Akinola, 2018)(Afisi, 2010). The late Mr. Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, said, "When women thrive, all of society benefits, and succeeding generations are given a better start in life" (USAID, 2020). Thus, the positive impact of income-generating activities on women's self-confidence and identity cannot be overemphasised as this boost productivity, increase economic diversification and income equality, and other positive development outcomes. By exemplifying the Niger Delta women of South-Southern Nigeria, this article seeks to bring to limelight the evolving identity of African women over the years, the effect of colonisation on our identity and the unwavering role of economic empowerment as the foremost step to reviving this identity.

Pre-Colonialism

Although many African cultures are based on a patriarchal pre-colonial past, it is arguable that the Indigenous women were not necessarily marginalised in their traditional societies, as the present narrative paints it, because, in these societies, women's socio-economic roles were complementary to those of men and the socio-political structure of communities depended on the active participation of women. Fundamental to women's survival and status is the claim to natural resources, namely land, water, forests, plants and wildlife. According to the Niger Delta tradition, a new bride is gifted a natural resource through which she is expected to labour in farming, fishing, and commerce like pottery, cloth making and handcrafting, with all rights reserved to profit from her work and contribute to the family income, hence redefining her social, economic and political relations in the society. Older women testified that with this tradition, women-maintained independence, cultural identity, and standing within their households. More so, power dynamics and hierarchical relationships in a household were based on age, experience, capability, marital status, and initiation rites other than gender, lending senior female household members a

loud voice (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Women were responsible for managing the market system by setting the terms of trade, such as market taxes and tariffs, and their collective network through the governing councils enabled them to interact with political structures with a resultant impact on the state and legal systems. In effect, the well-organised market networks often formed a strong basis for women's political activities, as evidenced in the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 against the British colonial authority in Nigeria. Therefore, before the advent of colonial rule in Africa, individuals with royal kinship, moral probity, leadership charisma, persuasive oratory, gallant prowess and/or sound business acumen earned power-driven, gender-neutral social roles and responsibilities. Table 1 highlights prominent women with such attributes who have been recognised throughout history for their assertiveness with cultural traditions and indigenous political structures, occupying prominent positions as queen mothers, princesses, warriors, prophetesses and regents (Admin, 2016).

Table 1: Fierce African Women Leaders/ Warriors in the Pre-colonial Time

Leader/Warrior	Legacy
	<p>Queen Amina of Zaria, North-Western Nigeria</p> <p>Expanded the territory of the Hausa people of North Africa to its most extensive borders in history in the 14th century and erected the 'Amina's walls' around various conquered cities. She was a strong warrior and acquired a reputation as an undefeated conqueror.</p>
	<p>Magajiya Daurama of Northern Nigeria</p> <p>The founding "queen grandmother" of the Hausa Empire (consisting of 7 Hausa kingdoms) presided over the upheaval that saw a transference of power from the matriarchal royal system.</p>
	<p>Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife Kingdom, South-Western Nigeria</p> <p>With the powers of the Spirit of River Esimirin, she spied on her slave captives, helped her people defeat them in battle and was re-instated as queen following the victory.</p>



Queen Idia of Benin, South-Southern Nigeria

The fearless Army General used her magical powers to lead the Armies of Benin on several successful battles and help her son overcome his enemies.



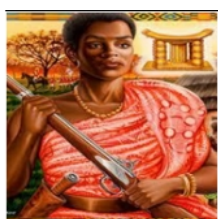
Queen Ahangbe (or **Tassin Hangbe**) of Dahomey, Republic of Benin

She was the ruler of the Kingdom of Dahomey as co-sovereign with her twin brother Akaba from the late 17th century to the early 18th century. She led warfare in the Ouémé River Valley and other military expeditions.



Queen Dong-Hong-Beh of Dahomey, Republic of Benin

The leader of the Dahomey Amazons in 1851 was an all-female army consisting of 6,000 warriors trained in military arts to defend and protect the king.



Queen Nana Yaa Asantewaa of Ashanti Empire, Ghana

The military Commander in Chief of the 'Yaa Asantewa War' was the last war between the Asante and British colonialism. Owing to her defiance of the might of British colonial hegemony, she won the title of the 'mere woman' who 'fought against the cannon.



Queen Ndaté Yalla Mbodj of Waalo, Senegal

The last great *Lingeer* (Queen) of Waalo fought against French colonisation and the Moorish invasion of the Jolof Kingdoms.



Queen Ana de Sousa Nzinga Mbandi of Ndongo, Angola

The reformists assigned women to important government offices by fighting Portuguese colonialism. She reigned for 36 years in the 17th century.



Queen Muhumuza of Rwanda The spiritual leader of the East African *Nyabingi* spiritual practice who stood against patriarchy, colonialism and social injustice.



Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita of Kongo She was a prophet of the Kongo Empire who created the Antonianism Christian movement. She is known as the mother of the African Revolution and is seen as an antislavery figure.



Queen Makeda of Sheba, Ethiopia The Hebrew Bible mentions the first African queen and female Monarch. Despite her wealth and power, she defeated the serpent King *Awre*, who troubled the Northern Ethiopia Kingdom of Axum at the time. Later, she had a son who became Ethiopia's first imperial ruler.



Queen Ranavalona I of Madagascar One of the few African leaders who succeeded in keeping foreign powers at bay during the colonialisation period of Africa by the Europeans.



Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe The medium to the ancestral Shona spirit who led a revolt, the *Chimurenga*, against invading Europeans in 1896.



Queen Nandi of Zulu Kingdom, South Africa The mother of the great leader, Shaka, played a resilient role in shaping the Zulu Kingdom.



Queen Kandake Amanirenas of Nubia, Sudan The queen of the ancient African Kingdom of Kush, between 40 and 10 BC, was best known for skillfully defending her kingdom against the armies of the Roman Empire.



Queen Nefertiti of Ancient Kemet, Egypt In partnership with her husband, she established the cult of *Aten*, the sun god, promoted Egyptian iconic artworks.



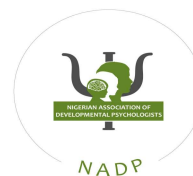
Queen Cleopatra of Egypt The [prototype](#) of the [romantic](#) female actively influenced Roman politics at a crucial period.

Legendary queens and women of Africa... The pre-colonial era

<https://africaheritages.wordpress.com/2016/09/10/legendary-queens-and-women-of-africa/>

Post-Colonialism

The 20th century ushered in integration into larger economic and political systems through policies surrounding state formation, urbanisation, religion (Christianity and Islam), formal education, and economic monetisation, all of which resulted in the installation of a sexist administrative structure that has persisted to this day (Saidi, 2020). Much of the documented knowledge of the pre-colonial period were the writings of colonial missionaries, who wrongly viewed the existing traditions as human rights violations without fully understanding the context in which they were adopted by our forefathers and used this jaundiced perception while reviewing several policies that have led to persistent gender-based discriminatory practices, economic crises and repeated conflicts within the households and society at large. Following the discovery of a hydrocarbon reserve in the Niger Delta, exploitative oil exploratory activities and oil contamination of arable farmlands and water bodies created an imbalance in the power dynamics of the Indigenous people, with the



women at more disadvantage having fewer lands to farm, lower access to economic opportunities, and loss of cultural identity.

Under the sponsorship of the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, a project was conducted in the Abuedo community of Delta State on the use of the craft trade from January 2022 to June 2022. The rationale was that having a skill in the lucrative craft trade would economically empower the indigenous women and ultimately facilitate human capital development and restore cultural identity. The research question was, "Does a 6-month training of young female adults (18-40 years) of the Abuedo community on handcrafting improve their perception of utilising the craft trade for income generation?" This question was to be answered with the following specific objectives:

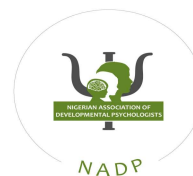
To provide technical support through the sensitisation and training of young female adults on handcrafting for income generation

To determine and compare the perception of young female adults on the use of the craft trade for income generation pre- and post-training

To appropriately disseminate the study findings and recommendations to key stakeholders for evidence-informed decision-making and/or policy-making to promote human capital development.

METHOD

Ethical consideration was bound by the revised Declaration of Helsinki Rule whereby the young female adults were notified of their rights to informed consent, confidentiality, minimal risks, and opt-out. The 6-month project was from January 2022 through June 2022. The project was jumpstarted with the courtesy of a community leaders' engagement meeting held in January 2022 at the mechanic workshop of the Assistant Youth Leader. It had in attendance six representatives (2 ladies and four gentlemen) from the traditional ruler's house, community youth association, and community women association, and aimed to obtain their informed consent on the upcoming project. Community sensitisation campaigns on the craft trade for socioeconomic development were held for the young female adults aged 18 and 40 years who are indigenes of the Abuedo community, and those enrolled as beneficiaries were those who consented to participate in the training (by signing the informed consent form) either as trainers or trainees based on prior handcraft skill. The training sessions were informal and culturally appropriate to facilitate learning at the trainee's convenience, minimise attrition and bias and improve study validity. Quantitative data was collected for the perception surveys pre- and post-training



with a structured questionnaire designed in the Pidgin-English language (the most standard language amongst the youth in the region). All sensitive identifiers, such as the beneficiary’s name and address, were excluded from the questionnaire. Three project assistants (appointed by the women leader) monitored the project by conducting random check-ins during training sessions to guide the beneficiaries and ensure correct and complete data collection. Beneficiaries who completed the training (both trainers and trainees) were supported to become handcraft vendors through registration at the regional tourist centres or telemarketing. Key implementation activities and timelines are illustrated in a Gantt chart below.

Table 2. Gantt chart

Activity	Executor	January 2022	February 2022	March 2022	April 2022	May 2022	June 2022
Engagement with the community leaders	Project manager, Project assistants						
Beneficiary sensitisation, identification and training	Project manager, Project assistants, Community leaders						
Monitoring and Evaluation	Project manager, Project assistants, Community leaders						
Beneficiary registration	Community leaders, Tourist centre managers						

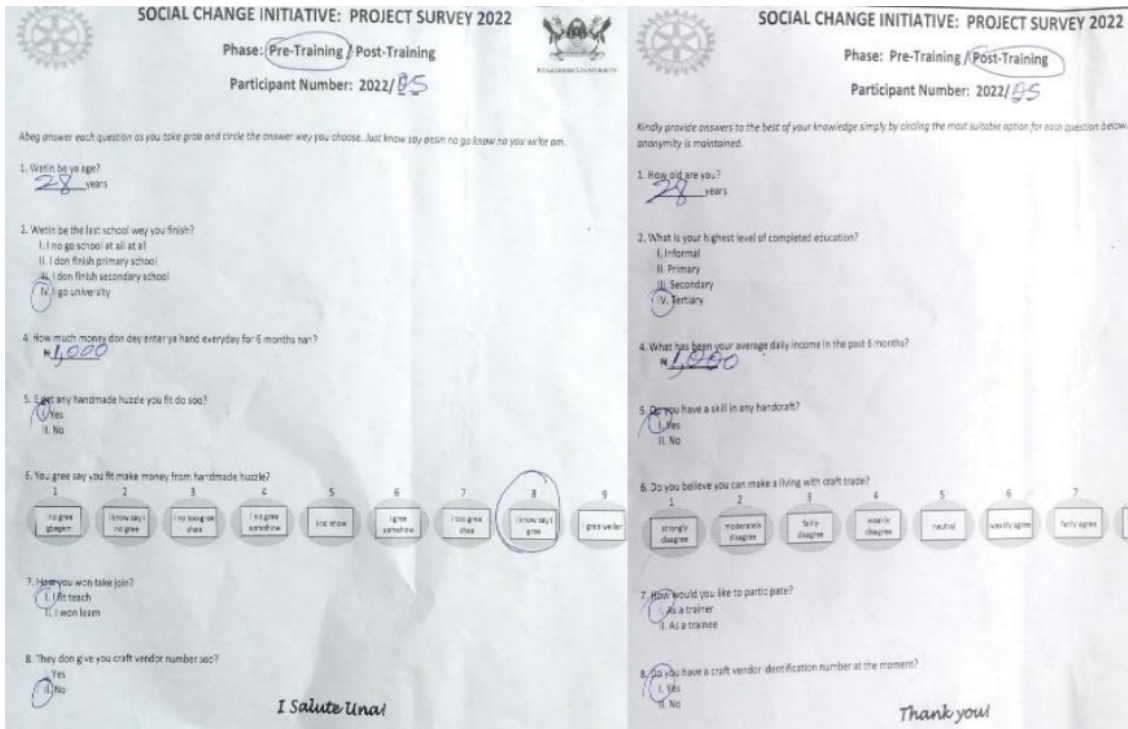


Figure 1: Samples of the pre-and post-training questionnaires written in the Pidgin-English and corresponding British English languages, respectively



Figure 2. Satisfied beneficiaries displaying their handcrafts

RESULTS AND SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

Of all 63 beneficiaries, 33.3% were already skilled and trading in handcrafting and expectedly reported the highest baseline median daily income of \$2.9. Significant improvement in the perception of using the craft trade for income generation was

recorded from a pre-training value of 61.9% to a post-training value of 92.1%. Nonetheless, 11(17.5%) of the successful beneficiaries were fully registered as craft vendors at the regional tourist centres, whereas others preferentially opted for telemarketing. The analysed data is summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Perception and Training of Young Female Adults on the Use of Craft Trade for Income Generation in Delta State- Nigeria 2022

Variables	All Beneficiaries	Pre-training Perception			Training	
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Trainer	Trainee
	n=63	n=12	n=12	n=39	n=16	n=47
Age in years						
Mean± SD	26.9 ± 5.3	23.9±3.5	24.1 ± 4.4	28.7 ± 5.4	31.4 ± 4.8	25.3 ± 4.6
min-max					24-39	18-37
Baseline daily income in \$						
Median (IQR)	2.5 (1.2, 3.6)	1.7 (1.2, 1.9)	1.8 (0.7, 3.6)	2.9 (1.7, 3.6)	3.9 (2.9, 5.3)	1.9 (1.2, 2.9)
min-max					1.2 – 6.0	0.5 – 4.8
Educational level, n (%)						
Informal	11 (17.5)	3 (25.0)	1 (8.3)	7 (17.9)	1 (6.3)	10 (21.3)

Primary	12 (19.0)	3 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	9 (23.1)	4 (25.0)	8 (17.0)
Secondary	28 (44.4)	5 (41.7)	7 (58.3)	16 (41.0)	7 (43.8)	21 (44.7)
Tertiary	12 (19.0)	1 (8.3)	4 (33.3)	7 (17.9)	4 (25.0)	8 (17.0)
Prior skill, n (%)						
Yes	21 (33.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (16.7)	19 (48.7)		
No	42 (66.7)	12 (100.0)	10 (83.3)	20 (51.3)		
Beneficiary role, n (%)						
Trainer	16 (25.4)	0 (0.0)	1 (8.3)	15 (38.5)		
Trainee	47 (74.6)	12 (100.0)	11 (91.7)	24 (61.5)		
Post-training perception, n (%)						
Disagree	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)		
Neutral	5 (7.9)	1 (8.3)	1 (8.3)	3 (7.7)		
Agree	58 (92.1)	11 (91.7)	11 (91.7)	36 (92.3)		
Fully registered as craft vendor, n (%)						
Yes	11 (17.5)				3 (18.8)	8 (17.0)
No	52 (82.5)				13 (81.3)	39 (83.0)
<i>Abbreviations:</i>						

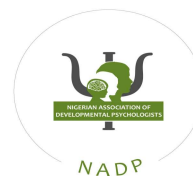
<i>SD= Standard Deviation occurrence</i>	<i>IQR=Interquartile Range</i>	<i>n= Number / Frequency of</i>
<i>Conversion rate: \$1 Ω N415</i>		<i>*There were no missing values</i>

The generalizability of the research findings is limited as it was conducted in only one of the many communities within the Niger Delta region, and beneficiary selection was by convenience (introducing a selection bias). The choice of this setup was mainly due to limited resources for study expansion. Reassuringly, since the handcrafts' raw materials are abundant in the community and require very little or no money exchange to access, project scalability and sustainability are highly feasible. Beneficiaries' preference for telemarketing via various social media platforms would also boost sustainability since this will forestall the overcrowding of craft vendors at tourist centers. Figure 2 displays the monitoring dashboard for easy data visualisation for project scalability.



Figure 3. A sample of the monitoring dashboard

CONCLUSION



Mrs. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated, "The problem with gender is that it prescribes how women should be rather than recognising how they are". The sine qua non to societal development is by re-introducing progressive cultural principles (e.g., handcrafting) which promote indigenous value systems (e.g., women's economic empowerment). Therefore, an inclusive society that secures active roles for women in socio-economic and human capital development is key to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and ultimately restoring the cultural identity of African women- who are confident, self-sufficient, bold, and beautiful.

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