



## AN ASSESSMENT OF GENDER ROLES IN MARKET OPERATIONS: A CASE OF CONTEMPORARY ONITSHA AND NKWO NNEWI MAIN MARKETS

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### ABSTRACT.

*This article investigates gender roles in market operations between men and women traders within the patriarchal contexts of Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets, two prominent economic hubs in southeastern Nigeria. Despite significant contributions by women to the informal economy, entrenched gender norms significantly limit their roles and opportunities in the leadership of these markets. The study's purpose is to examine how these gender roles influence market dynamics and decision-making processes, thereby impacting accessibility and economic power for traders of both genders. Employing a qualitative methodology that includes in-depth interviews and participant observations, the research captures the lived experiences of over 100 traders, providing rich insight into the complexities of gender interactions within these bustling trade environments. Findings reveal that while men traditionally dominate high-value trades and leadership roles, women play crucial roles in day-to-day market operations, often resorting to informal strategies to navigate the patriarchal landscape. However, the research also highlights instances of solidarity among women that foster collective bargaining and empowerment. The article concludes with critical policy implications aimed at promoting gender equity in informal markets. Recommendations include the establishment of targeted training programs for female traders, the promotion of cooperative networks to enhance women's market presence, and the integration of gender considerations into market regulations. By addressing the systemic barriers faced by women traders, this study aims to contribute to a more equitable economic environment in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi, ultimately enhancing the overall sustainability of the local economies.*

**Keywords:** *Gender roles, market operations, male and female traders, Onitsha, Nkwo Nnewi*

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## INTRODUCTION

The economic landscape of Nigeria is deeply influenced by social structures, particularly the prevailing patriarchal norms that dictate the roles of men and women in various sectors, including trade. Within this dynamic framework, markets such as Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets serve as critical sites for examining gender roles in economic operations. Historically, these markets have been fundamental to the region's economy, with vibrant trade activities executed by both male and female traders. However, the underlying gender dynamics within these markets reveal significant disparities that shape trading experiences, opportunities, and power relations (Chidozie, 2021; Abubakar&Jibrin, 2023).

Gender roles within market operations are not merely aesthetic or procedural; they reflect broader socio-political contexts that define the placement and agency of women in economic activities. Onitsha, renowned for its strategic location and historical significance as a trade hub, has long been characterised by pronounced gender distinctions in the marketplace. Women, who notably make up a substantial portion of the trader population, often find themselves relegated to specific roles that are traditionally viewed as 'women's work'—such as selling vegetables, textiles, and household goods—while men dominate higher-value commodities like electronics and industrial machinery (Chidozie, 2021; Musa, 2006). This segmentation is emblematic of entrenched patriarchal values that not only dictate the types of goods individuals sell but also their social status within the market hierarchy.

In Nkwo Nnewi, similar patterns are observed, where cultural practices and familial expectations further entrench gender roles. Women traders frequently face challenges that influence their bargaining power, access to capital, and representation within market leadership structures. Such barriers are indicative of a broader problem: while women contribute significantly to the local economy, their potential remains constrained by socio-cultural assumptions about gender appropriateness and economic roles (Nwachukwu et al., 2021). Data suggest that women often navigate these challenges through informal strategies, including forming cooperative networks or relying on family support, indicating a complex interplay between cooperation and competition within gender dynamics (Nwachukwu et al., 2021; Nnoje, 2024).

Despite the critical economic contributions made by women traders, their roles in market operations often go unrecognised in broader economic discourses. This neglect perpetuates the cycle of gender inequity, which is further compounded by structural issues like limited access to financing, lack of market infrastructure, and inadequate support systems for female entrepreneurs (World Trade Organisation, 2020). These challenges are especially pronounced in informal markets, where regulation is minimal, making it essential to critically analyse the implications of gender roles for market operations.

The purpose of this study is to examine the gender roles that define market operations in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi, evaluating how these roles influence economic interactions and power dynamics between male and female traders. By analysing the lived experiences of traders, this research aims to shed light on the complexities of gender relationships in market settings that are often dominated by patriarchal ideologies. Utilising a qualitative methodology that encompasses interviews and participant observations, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced realities faced by traders and the consequences of these realities on market performance and trader relationships.

By delving into these gender dynamics, this article will contribute to a deeper understanding of how sociocultural frameworks shape market operations in Nigeria, with implications for policy development aimed at fostering gender equity in economic participation. Understanding gender roles within the contexts of Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi is crucial, not only for creating more inclusive economic environments but also for ensuring sustainable development that recognises and harnesses the potential of all traders, regardless of gender.

## Methodology and Sources

This research on gender roles in market operations between men and women traders in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets in recent times, employs a qualitative research methodology aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and interactions within these marketplaces. The research utilises a mixed approach combining in-depth interviews, participant observations, and analysis of relevant documentary materials to gather rich, contextual data. In-depth interviews were conducted with approximately 100 traders from both markets, ensuring equal representation of male and female participants to capture diverse perspectives. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing respondents the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences regarding daily market operations, gender interactions, power dynamics, and any challenges faced in their trading activities. These conversations took place in the preferred language of the participants, which included both English and local dialects, thus ensuring clarity and comfort during communication.

Participant observations were performed over a one year period, enabling the researcher to engage directly with the market environment and observe the dynamics between male and female traders in real-time. By situating herself within the market context, the researcher documented daily activities, interactions, and practices concerning gender roles, focusing on transaction processes, service exchanges, and informal networking behaviors. Detailed field notes were compiled throughout this period to chronicle the social fabric and operational realities of these markets.

Additionally, secondary analysis was utilised to supplement primary data collection. Relevant data sources included textbooks, journal articles, news paper articles, conference proceedings, and unpublished dissertations, addressing economic participation and gender issues in Nigeria. These documents provided contextual insights and historical background, enhancing the understanding of the socio-economic environment influencing market operations and gender roles.

A random sampling approach was adopted to identify and select participants, ensuring representation from various socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, and types of trading activities. This strategy aimed to enrich the data collected by encompassing a wide range of experiences, thus facilitating a holistic exploration of gender dynamics in the market environment.

Data analysis involved transcribing recorded interviews and systematically coding the information to identify patterns and relationships related to gender roles and market operations. The analysis focused on individual narratives and broader socio-cultural contexts, ultimately aiming to highlight the implications of these gender dynamics for economic participation and equality.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participant identities in all data reporting. While this qualitative approach provides valuable insights into gender roles in market operations, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The nature of qualitative research limited the generalisability of findings to other contexts. Be that as it may, the research employs a robust methodological framework to explore and understand the gender dynamics in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets over the specified period, contributing to the broader discourse on gender and economic development.

## Findings

### Gender Roles in Market Operations

In the bustling markets of Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets, as already glean from previous subsections, gender roles are intricately woven into the fabric of daily commerce, reflecting broader societal norms and economic structures. Men predominantly occupy leadership positions and typically dominate industries such as electronics, car parts, and wholesale distribution of various goods. This trend aligns with traditional perceptions of masculinity as providers and decision-makers in economic contexts (Obienusi & Chikwendu, 2020; Gloria Chukwuma, personal communication, 2025). Additionally, male traders often benefit from greater access to credit facilities and networks that provide them with vital information regarding market trends and opportunities (Blessing Ibekwe, personal communication, 2025). Such advantages position them to pursue less risky transactions with potentially higher returns, reinforcing their dominant status in trade. In fact, male traders often organise collectively: for example, the Onitsha Market Traders Association (OMATA) provides a unified platform for male leaders to coordinate market activities and lobby government for infrastructure investment (Innocent Ezeoha, personal communication, 2024). Likewise, ASMATA (Onitsha Markets Amalgamated Traders' Association) unites multiple market unions under male leadership to address broader trading issues. In Nkwo Nnewi, the Agbo-Edo Motor Spare Parts Dealers Association (AMSPDA) among other unions exemplifies this pattern; it is a male-dominated body that regulates the auto-parts trade, setting quality and price standards and resolving disputes (Gabriel Chibueze, personal communication, 2025). These examples underscore that men's organisational strength in wholesale commerce and governance is as crucial as women's retail roles. This male dominance in leadership and capital-intensive sectors is not merely a reflection of individual ambition but is rooted in social norms that privilege male authority (Igbokwe, 2016). Such norms have historically limited women's access to capital and decision-making roles (Basden, 1921; Van Allen, 1975). Conversely, female traders in both markets predominantly operate in sectors associated with lower capital outlay, such as the sale of car accessories/decorative, foodstuffs, textiles, and household items (Chima Eze, personal communication, 2025). This economic specialisation is rooted in culturally defined roles that see women primarily as caregivers and homemakers, which significantly shapes their market engagement strategies. For instance, in Onitsha, many women specialise in the retail of perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables, leveraging their roles as primary caretakers in their families to tailor their business operations to meet local

household needs (Chinyere Obi, personal communication, 2025). In Nkwo Nnewi, women similarly dominate sectors that cater to everyday consumption, with scanty presence in male dominated areas like spare parts production and wholesale trading; characterising their economic contributions as essential, albeit often undervalued (Chinyere Obi, personal communication, 2025). In other words, while men tend to dominate leadership positions and high-value trade sectors like electronics and spare parts in Nkwo Nnewi Main Market, women are more active in low-capital areas such as motor and motorcycle accessories, foodstuff, clothing, and household items.

**Figure 1:** A section of new motorcycle parts at Nkwo Nnewi Main Market



**Source: Author**

Nevertheless, there are a handful of women who are found in these male dominated areas of wholesale trade and motor parts production in the market. For instance, a middle-aged female, Ukamaka Okoye, who owns and operates the EMO Foundry Works company – a vehicle parts manufacturer; brings together over half a dozen young people who obtain daily pay by working with crude tools and implements to produce motorcycle hand clutch levers, car battery terminals, and other similar components (Iyatse, 2020; Chikwendu, 2024).

**Figure 2:** A Picture of a Female Motorcycle Spare Parts Producer - Ukamaka Okoye, at work



**Source:** <<https://guardian.ng/business-services/nnewi-nigerias-self-made-industrial-hub/>>

However, despite their significant numerical presence and economic contributions, women are often excluded from decision-making bodies or relegated to auxiliary roles within associations. In a personal interaction, Mrs. Ofoegbu, in a rather lamenting tone, enumerated the contributions of women in Nkwo Nnewi which have been total ignored or taken for granted. These contributions included political mobilisation, sensitisation activities, provision and maintenance of utility infrastructure and so on. These activities were often carried out by different women trade unions or social and religious clubs/associations within the market (Ofoegbu, 2024). Such neglect has been largely perceived by the womenfolk as evidence marginalisation. This marginalisation reflects the patriarchal norms embedded in both traditional Igbo society and the contemporary market environment. Even where women's associations exist, they often lack the political leverage of their male counterparts and must navigate a system where access to power is mediated through male-dominated institutions (Allen, 1972, p. 165). However, this is not to suggest that women are passive actors within the market. On the contrary, they have historically been at the forefront of resistance and advocacy. Female traders have developed strategies to assert their agency and influence within the marketplace, through protests (Okonkwo, 2014) and various social networks with government officials.

The ongoing negotiation between male and female traders illustrates a complex relationship shaped by both resistance and adaptation. Despite these entrenched roles, women in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi markets have exhibited remarkable resilience and adaptability. They have formed associations and networks that provide mutual support, facilitate access to credit, and advocate for their interests. These grassroots organisations have

been instrumental in empowering women traders, enabling them to navigate the challenges posed by limited capital and patriarchal constraints. As these market women organise themselves to confront the male-dominated hierarchy and advocate for their rights and interests, they challenge traditional gender roles and redefine the norms that govern market operations. In parallel, male traders have long relied on formal unions and political ties to protect their own interests. OMATA, for instance, consolidated resources and advocated for major reconstruction and infrastructural upgrades to benefit its members, mirroring the way women's groups pool resources for credit and goods. Similarly, other unions like the ASMATA coordinates daily market regulation across Onitsha under predominantly male leadership. Thus both genders leverage collective organisation – women through local guilds and men through trade associations – to bolster their positions in the market (Uchendu & Agbo, 2015; Chukwu, 2019). Moreover, women's increasing participation in market protests and lobbying (Okonkwo, 2011) reflects a broader mobilisation of the trading community. Male market leaders too have begun to view market access and policy as political issues: OMATA and ASMATA officers routinely engage with politicians to secure appointments or projects for traders. In this way, both women's and men's collective actions challenge existing power structures and call for more inclusive policies, even as the forms of activism differ by gender.

The gender roles established within these markets significantly impact how social structures function. Male traders often utilise their formal positions to reinforce traditional masculinity, portraying themselves as the primary economic providers. This reinforces existing attitudes toward female traders, portraying them as secondary contributors. Female traders, however, are increasingly pushing against these perceptions through their organised groups and community initiatives. The role of gender on market operations can also be seen in how decisions are made regarding market governance, infrastructure, and collective resources. For instance, women are increasingly asserting their presence in discussions related to market conditions, striving for improvements in security, sanitary facilities, and access to basic trading services (Chima Eze, personal communication, 2025). Their active participation in informal networks and cooperatives challenges the traditional governance structures led by male traders and promotes a more inclusive approach to market operations.

Worthy to note is that the gender dynamics within Onitsha Main Market have undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting broader societal shifts and the interplay between traditional norms and contemporary economic realities. Historically, Igbo women played central roles in trade, often dominating local markets and controlling the distribution of goods. They were initially the primary traders, managing the sale of agricultural produce and other commodities, while men were more involved in production and long-distance trade (Basden, 1921). For example, Van Allen (1975) observed that women's guilds ("Otu Odu") controlled market sections and pricing, while men specialised in larger-scale, long-distance commerce. Specifically, the matrifocal trading system in Onitsha enabled women to wield substantial economic power and assert considerable social influence within their communities. One prominent example can be seen in the pre-colonial era when Onitsha's market days – particularly the Otu Nkwo – were predominantly organised and managed by women. In this system, women not only oversaw the daily transactions of essential commodities like yams, palm oil, and cassava but also controlled the flow of goods to local and long-distance traders. Their role in setting prices and ensuring the regular supply of produce meant that they effectively functioned as the economic gatekeepers of the region. As Ogonna Mbanefo and Obiageri Ikpe narrates in an interaction with the researcher, since time immemorial, Onitsha market women formed guilds who established a sort of control on the markets for food items with the purpose of relative price regulation and quality control (Mbanefo, personal communication, 2024; Ikpe, personal communication, 2024).

**Figure 3:** A Picture of Female Traders Selling Retail Food Items in these Markets



**Sources:** <https://www.obinwannemnews.com/the-vibrant-markets-of-igbo-land-a-driving-force-in-nigerias-economy/>

These female networks helped enforce ethical trading practices and protected their members. At the same time, men provided complementary functions: they organised production of staple crops and imported wares from afar, integrating Onitsha into wider trade networks. The roles of men and women thus laid the foundation for the market's dynamism, establishing a legacy of economic autonomy and interdependence that persisted over centuries (Basden, 1921; Van Allen, 1975).

However, the subsequent introduction of Western economic structures began to alter these dynamics. The legacies of colonial policies often marginalised women's roles in commerce, favoring male-dominated enterprises and formal economic activities. Men increasingly occupied leadership positions within the market, controlling high-value goods such as electronics and automobile parts, while women were relegated to retailing foodstuffs and household items. This shift was not simply an organic outcome of men's initiative; it was also institutionalised by the formation of male-led unions. For instance, OMATA was empowered to liaise with the British administration and later the Nigerian government to manage market affairs. After the Nigerian Civil War, OMATA spearheaded the rebuilding of Onitsha Main Market: it provided a unified voice for traders, mobilised resources, and advocated for new infrastructure investments. These efforts – documented by Uchendu and Agbo (2015) – ensured that post-war modernisation of the market was driven by its male leadership. As a result, lucrative sectors became almost entirely male domains. Colonial urbanisation and new trade opportunities, combined with OMATA's and similar bodies' influence, reinforced men's access to capital and space in the economy (Nnatu, 2023). Thus, while women continued to trade, the formal organisation of commerce increasingly passed into male hands.

Nonetheless, the colonial effect on women's role in the commercial landscape of Onitsha and indeed in many urbanising towns across the then Eastern Region did not come without fierce resistance. Specifically, when British economic policies and taxation reforms threatened to undermine the traditional trading practices that had long empowered women, market women organised collective protests against these policies, leveraging their numbers and economic clout to demand more favorable treatment from colonial administrators (Chikwendu & Obienusi, 2020). For example, there are records of groups of Onitsha women who, in solidarity with the wider Aba Women's Riot of 1929, banded together to confront local officials over unjust market levies and monopolistic practices imposed by the colonial government. Their ability to mobilise large numbers of traders and compel government attention highlighted not only their economic importance but also their capacity to influence political decision-making in a rapidly changing environment (Van Allen, 1975; Chikwendu & Odife, 2023). By contrast, male traders typically sought redress through their unions and colonial courts rather than street protests. The organised women's activism underscored that, even under male-dominated institutions, women could force recognition of their interests; conversely, male-led market bodies often negotiated quietly behind the scenes to protect traders' (predominantly men's) privileges (Chukwu, 2019).

In more modern contexts, women in Onitsha have continued to establish powerful organisations that function as both economic support networks and platforms for political advocacy. One notable example is the Onitsha Women Traders Association, which has actively coordinated efforts to secure credit facilities, negotiate bulk procurement deals, and provide vocational training. This association has been instrumental in enhancing the bargaining power of women traders and ensuring that their interests are represented at higher levels of market governance. Through the cooperative pooling of resources, these women have been able to invest in improved business infrastructure and technology, further solidifying their foothold in a market that has traditionally been dominated by male-led wholesale trade (Igbokwe, 2016). Men, meanwhile, have likewise organised formal groups to advance their interests. OMATA leadership, for instance, has long arranged bulk import agreements for its members and accessed bank loans collectively, practices analogous to those of women's groups but focused on large-scale commodities. In fact, Obi (2024) notes that the Onitsha Leadership & Entrepreneurship Centre (OLEC), though initiated by women entrepreneurs, is "equally open to everybody" – meaning male traders may also join its business programs. In this way, both female and male traders exploit collective organisations: women through guilds and cooperatives, men through formal unions like OMATA and ASMATA, each working to enhance access to resources and market influence (Uchendu & Agbo, 2015).

Furthermore, gender roles in Onitsha market operations are evident in responses to crises and infrastructure development. Women's associations have often been at the forefront of rebuilding market infrastructure after calamities. In the wake of disasters such as fires or flooding—a not uncommon occurrence in the congested urban sprawl of Onitsha—women-led groups have organised fundraisers and mobilised local resources to repair damaged stalls and public facilities. These initiatives demonstrate a high degree of organisational skill: women coordinate with local government agencies, secure donations, and manage reconstruction projects to restore normalcy quickly (Okeke, 2021). Men's groups have also contributed; for example, after major fires, OMATA typically forms a reconstruction committee that works with municipal authorities to rebuild permanent shop

structures and improve utilities. These joint efforts between women's committees and male-led unions underscore that both genders take leadership in economic recovery. Male traders often help source materials and advocate for government support, complementing the grassroots actions of women. As Uchendu and Agbo (2015) observe, OMATA periodically mobilises traders for collective action – whether to negotiate levy waivers or to lobby for emergency repairs – revealing a resilience built on cross-gender collaboration. The visible impact of these combined actions has not only preserved the day-to-day operations of the market but also reinforced the social status of both women and men as indispensable community leaders (Okeke, 2021).

Of course, there are several instances where men and women together have contributed to salvaging situations after disaster struck in Onitsha markets. One notable instance is the 1997 fire at Onitsha Main Market, which devastated numerous shops and livelihoods. Among the affected was Mrs. Chinenye Ukpo, a retired civil servant who invested her life savings into establishing a shop in the market. The fire obliterated her business, erasing years of savings and investment. Despite this personal tragedy, Mrs. Ukpo's story became emblematic of the broader struggles faced by women traders in Onitsha. Meanwhile, the response to that fire was a collective effort: OMATA representatives collaborated with women's groups to set up temporary stalls, while market leaders lobbied government for funds to reconstruct the site (Kennedy Onyeka, personal communication, 2024). In this way, the market organisation played a critical role in the recovery, illustrating that market infrastructure often depends on joint male–female initiatives for rebuilding (Ekpe, personal communication, 2024; SMEDAN, n.d.; Uchendu & Agbo, 2015).

In another incident, a fire in the Onitsha Drug Market in 2022, led to significant losses. The rebuilding efforts saw active participation from various stakeholders, including women's groups and associations like the Onitsha Market Women Association (Ekpe, personal communication, 2024). These groups collaborated with market authorities and government officials to lay the foundation for new shop structures, ensuring that affected traders – many of whom were women – could resume their businesses. OMATA and the Onitsha Vigilante Service, for example, coordinated security and worked with rebuilding committees to reallocate stalls fairly. Such collective action underscores the critical role both women and men play in the economic recovery of Onitsha's markets. While the aftermath of a disaster often spotlights women's community leadership (Okeke, 2021), it also relies heavily on the institutional capacity of male-led market unions to organise funding and logistical support.

Furthermore, women's associations have been at the forefront of advocating for the rights and welfare of traders within the marketplace. For instance, over 500 women protested their ejection from the Pocket Layout Market in Woliwo Fegge, Onitsha South Local Government Area, due to a land dispute. These women, many of whom were widows, had their shops and wares destroyed, and their organised protest highlighted their determination to protect their livelihoods and assert their rights (Vanguard, 2022). Male traders seldom organise mass protests over such issues; instead, they leverage their political connections. Market chairmen and union leaders often petition local authorities privately or use political patronage to influence land or lease disputes. Nevertheless, the power of collective action – whether through women's direct protest or men's lobbying – is evident in how both channels are used to address systemic challenges (Chukwu, 2019; Vanguard, 2022).

These examples illustrate the multifaceted roles women in Onitsha play in rebuilding and sustaining market economies. Their individual resilience, combined with collective advocacy and action, not only facilitates economic recovery but also strengthens community bonds and promotes social justice. Men have similarly worked to sustain the market, albeit through different mechanisms. OMATA, for example, operates an internal credit fund sourced from member levies, providing loans to traders for business repairs – a role analogous to women's savings groups. When infrastructure projects are needed, OMATA leaders routinely negotiate with government for road maintenance, power supply, and security (Okonkwo, 2011). In sum, recognising and supporting the contributions of both women and men in market operations is essential for the continued prosperity and resilience of Onitsha's markets. Only by valuing the diverse ways each gender participates – from women's grassroots organising to men's union diplomacy – can a truly inclusive market environment be fostered.

Aside from the roles of individuals and market associations, there is also the conspicuous role of cooperative societies and social clubs. Women in Onitsha Main Market have demonstrated resilience and adaptability by forming cooperative societies and associations to pool resources, access credit, and support each other's businesses. These organisations were often structured around shared economic goals and communal values. On the men's side, similar functions are performed by more formal or union-based groups: many male traders participate in rotating savings schemes ('esusu') and contribute to OMATA's collective fund. While women's cooperatives are often community-based, men frequently rely on institutional credit or OMATA's internal finance mechanisms. Yet both systems aim at enhancing traders' financial capacity. For example, Obi (2024)

affirms that OLEC's business training, though initiated by women, "is equally open to everybody" in the market, meaning male traders can also benefit from these entrepreneurial programs. In effect, male and female associations in Onitsha function as parallel engines of economic support, each compensating for gaps in formal finance and each reinforcing the status of their members in the market.

One prominent example of collective organisation in Onitsha is the Onitsha Women's Group, which has initiated programs to empower thousands of women and youths through micro and small business ventures. Under the auspices of the Onitsha Leadership & Entrepreneurship Centre (OLEC) and the Ado Business Incubation Centre (ABIC), this group provides training and resources for entrepreneurship. While the initiative was developed by female entrepreneurs, it is explicitly open to all business owners in the Main Market. This inclusivity illustrates that infrastructure and development efforts in the market are not strictly divided by gender: male traders have equal opportunity to join and benefit from these programs. Moreover, organisations such as OLEC, though championed by women, often partner with unions like OMATA to coordinate events, indicating a growing collaboration in capacity-building across genders.

Another notable organisation is the Women Initiative for Peace and Good Governance (WIPGG), headquartered in Onitsha. WIPGG operates as a non-governmental organisation committed to promoting peace and good governance through women's active participation in societal development. By engaging women in policy advocacy and community development projects, WIPGG enhances their roles in decision-making processes, thus influencing economic and social policies at the grassroots level. This is a largely women-driven initiative; however, its establishment was made possible in part by male political allies who recognised that a stable market needed empowered participants. For example, some local government officials and OMATA executives reportedly supported WIPGG's founding charter (Vanguard, 2022). WIPGG's influence – which even prioritised fair electoral processes within OMATA – has since strengthened the political relevance of women in Onitsha Main Market. At the same time, men's political influence in market affairs often runs through traditional channels: male traders typically engage with formal party politics or union elections, rather than gender-based NGOs. Nonetheless, the rise of groups like WIPGG signals a shift: market governance now includes women's voices at forums that men's associations have historically occupied alone.

The Women Empowerment Project Committee (WEPC) also plays a crucial role in fostering economic activity among women in Onitsha, especially business owners. Led by Ms. Bennedikter Molokwu, WEPC offers funding, skills acquisition programs, mentoring, and capacity-building initiatives. These programs create an enabling environment for women to engage actively in Onitsha's economic institutions, thereby promoting gender equality and economic inclusivity. While WEPC itself is women-focused, male-led bodies have created complementary initiatives: for instance, OMATA's executive also organises mentorship schemes and informal training for younger male traders. The dual existence of WEPC and OMATA's own training efforts shows that both genders invest in human capital development, albeit often in separate spaces. Religious and community groups further augment these networks. Organisations like the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) of Onitsha Province and the Onitsha Anglican Women's Association (OAWA) not only provide spiritual support but also fund education and small loans for female traders. Their male counterparts – such as men's fraternal orders or parish councils – similarly undertake socio-economic projects that benefit the market (e.g., sponsoring vocational scholarships or market clinic projects). In Onitsha, these gendered societies weave together a social fabric in which both women and men sustain entrepreneurship and community welfare.

Additionally, the Mbada Women Association of Wazobia FM Onitsha focuses on building peaceful and healthy relationships among women. By fostering a sense of community and mutual support, this association enhances social capital, which is essential for economic collaboration and resilience among women traders (Abuoma Agajelu, personal communication, 2025). While there is no direct male analog to Mbada, some male market leaders engage in civic activities of similar spirit: for example, OMATA executives often sponsor local festivals or sports tournaments, building goodwill among traders of all genders (Chidozie Okeke, personal communication, 2024). These activities, though not explicitly framed as gender initiatives, serve a comparable purpose of building networks and trust.

These cooperative societies and associations in Onitsha all have a strong presence in the Main Market and are structured to address the specific needs of women, providing platforms for economic activities, social support, and advocacy. Their contributions to the town's economy are multifaceted, encompassing entrepreneurship, policy influence, and community development. By empowering women through collective action and resource sharing, these organizations not only uplift individual members but also drive broader economic growth and social transformation in Onitsha. Men's groups similarly drive development, but through more formal economic channels: OMATA's annual budgets fund maintenance of market infrastructure, and ASMATA-led initiatives

help build roads and drainage in market areas (Okonkwo, 2011). Thus, the networks formed by both women and men have been instrumental in empowering traders, enabling them to navigate the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures and limited access to formal financial institutions (Igbokwe, 2016).

Moreover, women have increasingly participated in market governance, advocating for their rights and challenging discriminatory practices. For instance, in 2022, over 500 women protested against their ejection from the Pocket Layout Market in Onitsha, highlighting issues of land ownership and the need for greater inclusion in decision-making processes (Vanguard, 2022). These acts of collective bargaining demonstrate that women traders are no longer passive participants; they actively use their collective power to press for reforms. Men's political engagement has its own history: traditional market chairmen (all men) have long been kingmakers in local elections. Politicians recognise the numerical strength of market unions and often court OMATA and ASMATA leaders for support. In return, market leaders mobilise their members as voting blocs, and successful candidates may appoint union heads to government posts or initiate market development projects as patronage (Chukwu, 2019; Onuoha, 2022). This reciprocal relationship – where male leaders deliver votes and gain political appointments – has blurred the lines between commerce and politics. Onitsha's experience shows that while women now lobby candidates and vote as a group, men continue to leverage formal unions and political networks to shape policy. Both strategies – the grassroots activism of women and the institutional patronage of men – are transforming the socio-political landscape of the markets.

In summary, the matrifocal trading system in Onitsha has historically and continuously provided a platform for women to exert economic control and social influence. Whether through managing market days in pre-colonial times, protesting colonial impositions, forming influential trade associations, leading community revitalisation efforts, or mobilising politically during elections, women have harnessed their collective power in multiple ways. Their sustained involvement in the market not only challenges traditional gender roles but also reaffirms the critical role that women play in the economic and social advancement of Onitsha. At the same time, men have contributed indispensably through their own channels of power. From coordinating long-distance trade in the pre-colonial era to founding powerful modern associations like OMATA and AMSPDA, male traders have secured Onitsha's connections to regional and global markets. Their leadership in wholesale trade, market governance, infrastructure development, and political mobilization has been equally significant. For instance, throughout the civil war and rebuilding period, OMATA's elected male executives guided Onitsha's resurgence, exemplifying how men have used formal structures to drive market resilience. Thus, the economic story of Onitsha's markets is a joint one: women's activism and entrepreneurship intertwine with men's institutional authority and commerce.

Like Onitsha, women have equally historically played a central role in Nnewi and its commercial environs complimenting that of the men. They have carved a niche in the operations of Nkwo Nnewi Main Market, contributing significantly to its development and resilience. Their involvement spans various facets of market life, from trade and economic activities to social organisation and advocacy. In the pre-colonial system, Nnewi women dominated much of the local trade in agricultural produce, textiles, and artisanal goods, granting them autonomy and influence. Since the 1970s, market women in Nkwo Nnewi have organised effectively: they established a Market Women Association that provides a platform for collective decision-making, enabling them to negotiate better trading conditions and address issues affecting their members. These women have challenged patriarchal norms and become influential activists, shaping market policies through their guilds and cooperatives (Anaedoonline, n.d; Nnaemeka, 1997).

At the same time, men have also played key roles in Nkwo Nnewi's economy. Traditional leadership in the Nnewi town – including the Obi and his chiefs (all male) – historically presided over market days and adjudicated trade disputes. In the late colonial and post-colonial period, enterprising men shifted the market's focus to automotive spare parts. Male traders recognised and exploited Nnewi's strategic location, developing it into a motor-parts hub. For example, the Agbo-Edo Motor Spare Parts Dealers Association (AMSPDA) and other male-led groups standardised pricing, enforced quality control, and linked Nnewi to national and international supply chains. Male-led cooperatives like the Nnewi Auto Spare Parts Vendors Cooperative (NASPVC) also emerged, enabling joint procurement and modern inventory practices. These associations – composed largely of men – underpinned the market's industrial shift and infrastructure development, allowing Nkwo Nnewi to integrate global technologies and attract foreign investment (Ikegeuonu, personal communication, 2024). In short, while Nnewi women strengthened the traditional trading base, Nnewi men expanded and industrialized the market's commercial reach.

Since the 1970s, women in Nkwo Nnewi have demonstrated significant autonomous leadership within the market system, contributing to the socio-economic development of the entire region (Anaedoonline, n.d;

Nnaemeka, 1997). Their roles have evolved from mere participants in trade to influential leaders and activists, shaping market policies and advocating for traders' rights. This situation has been encouraged by the historical recognition of the economic prowess of women in Igboland, where market trading by women was an accepted institution. In Nkwo Nnewi, this tradition continued into the post-1970s era, with women establishing themselves as key players in market operations (Abuoma Agajelu, personal communication, 2025). They organised themselves into associations, such as the Market Women Association, which provided collective decision-making power and representation in market affairs. These associations enabled women to exert influence over market governance, negotiate better trading conditions, and address issues affecting their members.

Notably, male traders in Nkwo Nnewi also formalised leadership structures during this period. For example, groups of hardware and spare-parts dealers (nearly all men) formed registered associations to coordinate their activities. The AMSPDA is one such body that has become one of the most influential in Nkwo Nnewi Market. Through regular meetings and elected committees, AMSPDA members enforce product standards and stabilise prices, effectively governing the core motor-parts trade. These men's associations complement women's unions: where women's groups often focus on food and retail issues, AMSPDA and related male guilds focus on industrial commodities and infrastructure. Together, these parallel institutions – women's guilds and men's associations – shape a more inclusive governance of the market.

A notable example of women's autonomous leadership is the protest led by Mrs. Martha Mbonu, known as Ugegbe Nnewi, in 2018. She mobilised market women to protest against the imposition of a mandatory N500 market ID card fee by the market chairman, which was required for participation in the 2019 elections. The protest highlighted the women's capacity to organise and challenge policies perceived as unjust, asserting their rights within the market system (Anaedoonline, n.d.). Men responded to such challenges primarily through the union framework: the market chairman (a man) ultimately suspended the fee after negotiations, and subsequent elections proceeded with oversight from the Nkwo Nnewi traders' council (Onuoha, 2022). In this case, women's direct action and men's behind-the-scenes mediation both played a role in policy change.

Furthermore, women's leadership extended beyond economic activities into political activism. Nnewi women have been active in voting, and campaigning for market anticipated representatives. Their involvement reflects a broader shift towards gender inclusivity in Nigerian politics. Since the 1970s, Nnewi women have emerged as vigorous participants in the political arena of markets, through the aforementioned mediums, determined to reshape the socio-political landscape of the marketplace. Historical research and firsthand accounts reveal that Nnewi market women have long transcended traditional roles, leveraging their social networks to influence electoral outcomes. Men's political mobilisation in Nkwo Nnewi has traditionally been led by market union bosses and town chiefs, who treat each election as an opportunity to negotiate for development projects. In fact, during election periods, these male market leaders are known to deliver their membership as a bloc for favored candidates and to receive patronage in return (Onuoha, 2022; Chukwu, 2019). Thus, men have historically used formal, institutional channels to exert political influence, while women have combined organised activism with grassroots campaigning. Together, their efforts – women's protests and men's patronage networks – have made Nkwo Nnewi Market a politically strategic space for any local candidate.

In a nutshell, the role of gender in Nkwo Nnewi Market is multifaceted and indispensable. Their historical and ongoing contributions have shaped the market into a dynamic economic center. At the same time, male traders have equally contributed to its growth. From traditional leadership roles to modern industrial entrepreneurship, men have provided governance, capital, and political linkage. The interplay between men's authority and women's initiative has driven Nkwo Nnewi's evolution. For sustainable development, this balance must be acknowledged: policies that empower market women should go hand-in-hand with reforms in male-dominated structures, ensuring that credit, space, and decision-making authority are accessible to all traders regardless of gender.

## Conclusion

The exploration of gender roles in market operations between male and female traders in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main Markets, within the period under review, reveals a complex tapestry of interactions shaped by socio-cultural norms and economic realities. This study highlights how these gender dynamics significantly impact the efficiency of market operations and the broader landscape of Nigeria's informal economy. Evidence produced through interviews and observations demonstrates that while women constitute a substantial segment of the trader population, their economic and political contributions are often undervalued with the dominance of men in administrative positions, market union leadership and decision-making processes, due to deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. Women in these markets frequently engage primarily in the retail trade of

goods deemed appropriate for women, such as textiles, food items, and household goods. In contrast, men dominate higher-value categories such as electronics and machinery in wholesale measures, which are associated with greater economic prestige and profitability (Akanle et al., 2019). This division not only reflects a societal perception that diminishes women's capabilities but also limits their access to more lucrative trades. Although there are few women who tend to break the jinx by engaging in higher-valued category trading and production, such disparities underscore a critical issue: gender roles in market operations contribute to the perpetuation of economic inequalities within the informal economy in Nigeria (Enfield, 2019).

While some women traders display resilience and resourcefulness in navigating the market landscape, their efforts are frequently stymied by systemic barriers. These include limited access to capital, which constrains their ability to procure goods in larger quantities, and societal attitudes that undervalue their labour. The resulting lack of recognition translates into a diminished presence in leadership and decision-making roles within market associations, perpetuating cycles of disenfranchisement (Nwachukwu et al., 2021). As men predominantly occupy these leadership positions, policies that reinforce existing power structures further entrench gender disparities, creating a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in the informal economy. Thus, addressing these ingrained gender dynamics is critical for promoting equity within Nigeria's informal market sector. Policymakers must proactively engage with these issues, recognising the central role that gender plays in economic participation and market operations. One avenue for initiating this change is the implementation of targeted programs aimed at empowering female traders. Microfinance initiatives that offer tailored loan products for women can enhance their access to capital and enable them to diversify their inventory, thereby increasing their profitability and status within the market (Assefa&Kegne, 2023). More so, training programs focusing on financial literacy, business management, and negotiation skills can equip women with the necessary tools to assert their presence and assertiveness in market transactions.

The establishment of more cooperative societies among women traders presents another critical strategy for enhancing their bargaining power and fostering solidarity. By pooling resources and sharing knowledge, women can collectively navigate the challenges of the marketplace, negotiate better deals, and advocate for their rights within market structures (Ujah, 2023). These cooperatives can serve as platforms for mentorship, enabling experienced traders to pass on their insights and skills to newer entrants. Such grassroots movements can empower women and help dismantle the patriarchal barriers that currently define market operations.

Apart from these economic strategies, cultural transformation is equally essential. Initiatives that raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in trading environments should be championed within the broader community. Educational campaigns aimed at both men and women can help reshape attitudes toward gender roles and emphasise the need for a liberal gender role dispensation between men and women traders (Chikwendu&Aniefiok-Ezemonye, 2025), for equitable participation in market activities. By challenging societal norms that dictate what men and women should do in the marketplace, these efforts can create an environment that fosters inclusivity and equal opportunity.

Involving male traders in discussions about gender roles within market operations is also crucial. By promoting dialogues that engage both genders on the importance of equity, men can become allies in the fight against gender discrimination, helping create a more balanced power dynamic in the market (UN Women, n.d.). Facilitating these discussions will not only foster mutual respect but will also encourage collaborative efforts to improve market conditions for all traders.

In essence, the implications of gender roles in market operations extend far beyond the individual experiences of traders in Onitsha and Nkwo Nnewi Main market; they reflect the systemic inequalities that permeate Nigeria's informal economy. To foster gender equality, it is imperative that policies address the barriers women face in the marketplace. By implementing supportive frameworks, promoting economic empowerment initiatives, and encouraging cultural change, stakeholders can work towards creating equitable access to economic opportunities for all traders, irrespective of gender. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a more inclusive economy that recognises the invaluable contributions of both genders, driving sustainable development within Nigeria's vibrant informal trading sector.

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