

## Gender Constraints in the Training of Women Traders in South Eastern Nigeria: A Case Study of Onitsha Main Market

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**ABSTRACT** Low participation rate in existing skill acquisition opportunities increasingly features as a major constraint in women's contribution to socio-economic development especially in developing countries. In consideration of this situation, this paper examines work related gender role allocations and segregations and their impact upon women's acquisition of trading skills. Within this context, the study focuses on the extent of women's use of a notable indigenous apprenticeship system as preparation for trading. On the basis of an empirical investigation, conducted in 2002, attention is directed at women's participation in some female fashion enterprises in Onitsha Main Market. Data obtained from this investigation serves to highlight the intricacies of the interaction between socio-structural and choice factors in women's utilization of apparent opportunities. This paper concludes by suggesting ways of upgrading women's participation in apprenticeship as an important channel for improving women's medium scale trading enterprises.

### INTRODUCTION

The types of work that women do, and within such work, their ability to compete effectively with men, largely determine their life chances and power positions in society. Hence, the pattern of women's involvement in income earning work outside the home has increasingly come into focus in Sociology. Correspondingly there have been a substantial increase in women's participation in the productive area of economic activities all over the world, albeit with substantial segregation in work types and levels. The term 'productive' is used here to delineate work that is directed at earning some form of income. For instance, Moser (1993: 24), views women's productive role as comprising work done, for payment in cash or kind. Segregation in women's work is quite often strongly related to non-availability of opportunities for women to obtain adequate training as a prelude to employment. When women are denied opportunities to obtain adequate training for certain forms of gainful employment, they are by this fact effectively denied access to related employment on the basis of their lack of necessary qualification.

While constraints to women's productive capacity are mostly at the arena of the labour market, the problem actually emanates from the relationships which are embedded in mechanisms that are traceable to the social platform from which women arrive at the work arena. These include

the family and its socialization and role allocations, as well as school and other institutions and structures geared at occupational preparation and selection (Boserup, 1970: 141-2; King, 1977: 56; Young, 1993: 96; Van Der Wees and Romign, 1995: 68; Egbue, 2000: 36).

In line with above view, this paper examines some features of trade activities in some particular items, namely lace cloth, wax print fabrics, ladies' shoes and bags, with a view to identify factors that tend to constrain women's participation in retail trading, particularly those that relate to their training.

Above trade items were chosen because they were considered to have special significance for women. It was reasoned that since these were important items in female dress fashions, women would have special interest in selling them.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociologists differ in their explanations of gender segregation within the labour force. For instance, some of them especially feminist sociologists explain it in terms of patriarchal control, which deny women access to lucrative employment that would provide independence for them (Crompton and Lefeuve, 1996: 427). Others, such as dual systems theorists, see lower paid employment for women as capitalist mechanism, which in consonance with patriarchy maintain male superiority over women by

reinforcing women's dependence on men (Hartmann, 1982: 448 and Walby, 1990: 54, 56). In contrast Hakim sees the unequal position of men and women in paid employment as mainly the result of personal choice, rather than being the consequence of material and structural constraints. In her view, women by their choice give priority to marriage and give less commitment to their employment, thus presaging their inferior valuation in the work place (Hakim, 1995: 431).

The subject under review is examined from the general perspective of gender related work segregation. In doing so, this paper takes as its main viewpoint Crompton's observation that women often want to be able to combine both domestic and employment commitments and do therefore make choices. Crompton however, maintains that the structures surrounding such choices should not be underplayed. In her view, these women's choices are made within the context of structures such as the 'male bread-winning' model, which are often deeply enshrined in state policies: (1997: 23)

This theoretical framework acknowledges the interplay between 'structural' and 'action' explanations of human behaviour and the underlying tensions between them in sociological theory and research. These tensions have remained substantially unresolved in the area of work segregation by gender.

Due to the functioning of patriarchal mechanisms in most Nigerian societies in pre-colonial times, gender based segregation of roles featured prominently in every day work life. There has generally been a tendency among scholars to view this situation as incorporating separate but mostly equitable valuation for women's productive capacity (Mba, 1997: 1-36 and Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003: 17-18). However, there is no doubt that a major element in the acceptability of gender based role segregation in traditional society is the absence of basis for comparison. It should be noted that the colonial era brought very significant reduction in Nigerian women's position of being complementary, rather than subordinate to the men. These changes, together with cash economy, western education and increasing exposure to practices in other cultures have generally increased women's questioning of the status quo, as shown by Mba (1997: 292-298).

The operational mechanism of social structures and the relationships between them

and choice are often intricate and even elusive to observers. However, there is no doubt that what appears as rational choice by women, in relation to their income earning work pattern, may be determined by factors such as societal values, lack of necessary resources and lack of necessary power for taking and maintaining preferred decisions. For instance, in normal circumstances a woman who chooses a direction that is contrary to societal norms may be faced with unpleasant consequences as a result of being considered a deviant. Such consequences generally tend to disrupt or threaten marriages, child upbringing and often already precarious economic stability.

All this is highly significant; for after all, besides the quest for economic gain, a major reason why people work is so as to gain approval from others, as well as realize the benefits of group fellowship (Zanden, 1990: 445). Women are therefore more or less constrained to operate within the confines of social structures which shape the world of work, and in which they are immersed as members of society.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study, consists of combining non-participant observation with unstructured interviews and survey of relevant literature. The focuses of the first two techniques are on traders and apprentices in the market, so as to ascertain the following:

- i. Details of the structure of the apprenticeship system as a means of training potential traders in the enterprise areas.
- ii. Socio-cultural and economic factors related to women's participation in apprenticeship training for trade in particular goods.

The study's focus is on shops in the market that are considered to belong to medium scale enterprise. This fluid categorization covers well stocked lock-up shops in this market, that sell high quality goods. The study's scope is limited to market shops located on both sides of the major market street and on the immediate environs. Shop in this location, which sell lace cloth, ladies shoes and handbags, and wax prints (wrappers) are roughly estimated at about one thousand five hundred; comprising four hundred, three hundred and eight hundred shops respectively. A purposive sample was taken with a view to obtaining a viable representation of women traders, sales girls and female apprentices in the market.

The sample population comprised thirty-eight shops. Those interviewed in these shops were thirty-two (32) male traders; fourteen (14) female traders, thirty-four (34) apprentices and eight (8) wage earning sales girls, making a total of eighty-eight interviews. This population was considered adequate in view of the high expenditure of time involved in interviews. Six (6) of the shops had no apprentices; while in each of eight of the shops there were more than one apprentice. Only in four of such eight shops were two apprentices interviewed separately. In the other four shops, one apprentice each was interviewed. There were no female apprentices in the sample; that is those operating under the normal apprenticeship agreement applicable to male apprentices. No such female apprentices were found by the researcher.

Seven of the female traders interviewed worked with their husbands. Of the fourteen women traders, seven were in wax print trade; five in lace cloth trade and two were ladies shoe/bag traders. One wax print woman trader shared a shop with a man and another woman. It was noted during the sampling exercise that many of the women traders in wax print had similar arrangements. A large number of them on the outskirts of the wax print precinct sold low quality cloth or were poorly stocked and were therefore not qualified to be categorized as medium scale retail traders. Many of the women who appeared to be traders in wax print were relatives or servants of owners of shops. They either earned regular wages or some other forms of remuneration. Many of the younger workers were children of shop owners or house-helpers.

## FINDINGS

### a) Major characteristics of the Onitsha Traders' Apprenticeship System

A major apprenticeship principle here is that the trainees pay a fee to their masters as a prerequisite for acceptance for a training programme. Customary practices of partnership such as wine-sharing also feature during the agreement ceremony. On the other hand, the master feeds and houses and generally sustains the young trainee during the length of training. Period of full-time training is usually between 6 and 7 years, especially for those who begin apprenticeship during adolescence. The master/patron is usually

a successful person in his trade and is quite often a relative or an acquaintance of the trainee's family. The relationship between the trainer and the trainee is that of master and servant.

Length of apprenticeship depends on several factors. These include nature of trade, intensity of learning practices, age, education, learning capacity, ability of the trainee and the need of the master for the trainee's services. The latter factor is however not usually stated during the processes of agreement. In reality, however, the master's need for cheap labour in his own shop is an important premise for setting the training period and for effecting the release of the trainee. In the past, the terms of agreement for training usually included a proviso that the master provides a settlement for the trainee, after one or two years period of post-training internship.

In more recent years, the period of internship has become characterized by disagreement between masters and interns, often leading to non-implementation of the latter part of "settlement" agreements. As a result, an increasing number of apprenticeship agreements do not include the "settlement" feature.

Educational qualification for apprentices has witnessed an upward trend; from predominantly primary school dropout and graduates and secondary school dropouts to now include secondary school graduates. This is a remarkable change, because in the past masters were in disdain of secondary school leavers as being unable to cope with necessary sustained heavy work. Above change is explained by high unemployment rate of this category of educated youth, leading to reduction of their expectations and aspirations in employment opportunities. Apprentices are usually within the age range of 15 to 21 years, though currently there are considerable number of graduates of tertiary educational institutions, and older and more experienced men who enter this apprenticeship system due to unemployment. This latter category of trainees, as well as children and wards of wealthy persons, attend a modified non-residential form of apprenticeship and spend less number of years in training.

A major characteristic of the Onitsha trade apprenticeship system is that up to now only males are eligible for it. Exceptions of this rule are comparatively few wives and widows usually 30 years and above. These women undergo a form of loose training programme under husbands, other relative or family friends. This is usually

carried out on a part-time basis due to women's home commitments.

Trainees in normal apprenticeship are as a rule, people from the poorer strata of society whose parents cannot afford the social and other costs of higher education for their children. They also tend to be school dropouts due to low academic ability. Poor parents are generally dependent upon the goodwill of their children's trainers as assurance for these children being set up in business at the completion of apprenticeship. It is also generally true that the higher a potential apprentice's education, the less he is likely to fit into apprenticeship conditions of hard labour in exacting conditions, as also observed by King (1977: 56).

Accreditation of training is mostly informal and is gauged mostly by the expressed satisfaction of customers, resulting in increased economic gain for the master. Basic content of this apprenticeship system include:

1. Appropriate selling procedures.
2. Profitable stock purchasing strategies.
3. Money management.
4. Customer and personnel relations.

#### **b) Non-Suitability of Apprenticeship Scheme for Women**

Women were generally absent from indigenous trader apprenticeship in the market. In particular, they registered zero participation in apprenticeship training for the commercial ventures understudy. Indeed present constitution of the scheme is largely attributable to the fact that it was originally not intended for women. For example:

1. Male apprentices are on the average between the ages of 15 and 22 years. In contrast, for the average female primary school leavers, these are vital years for marriage, child bearing and domestic role commitments.
2. Apprentices spend the average workday by their master's side in and around the market stall. Societal moral codes do not encourage such an exposure of young female to the constant company of male traders, who dominate medium scale trade enterprises.
3. Apprentices are expected to be personal servants to their masters and run errands. This type of exposure to often rough market environment is deemed more suitable for males than females. As observed by Young (1993: 96) culturally prescribed codes in

many developing countries are against young female being in close proximity for long periods with males who are not their kin.

Above situation accounts to a large extent for the dearth of female apprentices in the trade categories under review. All indications from the interviews were to the effect that there were no women regular apprentices in these trades.

#### **c) Women's Ownership of Stalls**

Data obtained from interviews and observation of a sample of traders, apprentices and sales girls indicate that there were comparatively few women traders engaged in medium and high-level capital expenditure category of retail trading. A total of fourteen women traders were interviewed in the thirty-eight shops. Nine out of these shops had women traders who claimed to have some level of financial ownership of their shop. Five of these women traded in wax print cloth fabrics, three sold lace cloth, while one sold ladies shoes and bags. Only one of the wax print female traders claimed to have set up her business enterprise by herself, and to have full ownership from the onset. Another female wax print trader, a widow, took over her husband's business. Of the other three, one worked with her husband and claimed part ownership while one manned a shop with the assistance of a senior apprentice. While the latter claimed part ownership of the shop, she also admitted that major financial decisions were made in conjunction with her husband who managed another shop in the same market. In the case of the fifth woman wax print trader, the setting up of the shop was originally financed by the woman's husband. However, this female trader claimed that her husband no longer demanded that she give account of the shop to him; as was the case up to four years ago; and had verbally transferred ownership to her. Of the three lace traders, one woman claimed to own her shop though it was originally set up with her husband's financial patronage. One woman managed her shop on behalf of her husband who also sold lace cloth in another shop while the third woman assisted her husband who was also a trader in the same shop. All of them claimed some level of ownership of their shops. One shoe/bag female trader claimed to be a part owner. She worked full time in the shop with her husband. Out of a total of fourteen women, only the first two mentioned

wax print traders had verifiable claim to full ownership of shops. Seven of fourteen women interviewed assisted their husbands in the shops. This amounts to 50 percent of the sample of women. A rough estimate of about 40 per cent of wives working in all shops selling these categories of goods in the market were assisting their husbands. This is especially the case in lace and shoe shops. In these two trades, less than 10 percent of shop keepers (whether traders or assistant) were women. Several explanations were given for women's low level of participation in these trades. While about 17% of the respondents were of the opinion that females were not as naturally endowed with business acumen as men, there were also several other explanations for women's absence in these large trading enterprises.

For one thing the economic scale of these medium scale businesses are generally higher than what fathers are prepared to entrust to daughters who are expected to fully become members of their husbands' families when they marry. Furthermore, such large-scale enterprises could constitute a deterrent to marriage, since would-be suitors would be scared away by such economically high-powered young females. This explains why most of the women found selling goods in the shops were married women who belong to at least one of the following categories:

- i) They were working side by side with their husbands.
- ii) Had started such businesses with their husbands' financial support.
- iii) They were widowed; had taken over their late husband's business.
- iv) They were currently managing their husband's shops.

While interviewees acknowledge that a few of these women were comparable to men in their level of success, quite clearly the highest stakeholders and by far the largest numbers of owners of these businesses were male.

#### **d) Traders' Views on the Training of Female Traders**

None of the female traders in the sample had fully undergone the indigenous form of trader apprenticeship. They were mostly guided into trading by their husbands. For instance, the widowed wax print trader claimed that she had no experience of trading before her husband's death.

She had stepped fully into trading under the guidance of her deceased husband's senior apprentice, who was also a close relative of hers. It was learnt that financially independent female traders in these items tended to begin their enterprise at the lower scales with smaller quantities and less expensive goods, and then gradually work their way up to the more expensive items; improving their skills with time. Even then, these women usually find it more difficult to obtain lease for shops from landlords. It was also observed that the women who assisted their husbands in shops did not consider themselves as beginning to learn at the same basic level as junior apprentices. Rather they regarded themselves as more worldly wise due to their exposure to women's fashion and also their greater age. They considered themselves to have become full-fledged traders after about four to six months of assisting their husbands in the shops. This follows a general pattern adopted by married females, who are guided by other women traders or by close male relatives, for short periods before setting up their own trade enterprises. This period of loose form of tutelage usually did not exceed six months and may be as brief as three months. Attendance to this form of training is usually arranged to accommodate the learner's domestic chores and other responsibilities.

All the women traders in the sample expressed the view that it is not feasible for women to undergo training through the indigenous apprenticeship system, and that there is need for accommodating women's particular requirements and characteristics. In particular, they stressed that part-time training schemes should be favoured for the training of adult female prospective traders, who are usually married with children. Learning through the process of assisting husbands in shops was considered by most males and females to be a viable means of learning to trade. This is because such women traders usually began their training enterprise as reward from their husbands for meritorious performance of wifely functions. In general, tutelage by husbands or husband's trusted female relatives or family friends/acquaintances was considered, the best channel for skill acquisition by women. All this indicates very little trading prospects for young and unmarried girls, especially those whose families belong to middle and high-income levels. Five male traders and eight apprentices in the sample expressed the view, that women did not

have the kind of intelligence needed for big business, and were better off in formal educational institutions, where they could enroll in business studies disciplines, designed for future wage employment. In their view, petty trading was a more suitable occupation for women desirous of trading.

### **e) Sales Girls and Retail Trading**

Girls were generally acceptable as sales personnel (i.e. sales girls in medium and high scale retail enterprises). These sales girls usually belong to low-income parentage and need to earn income for family sustenance, or in order to finance their higher education. This occupation is however not viewed by traders as interchangeable with apprenticeship or as an effective route to retail trading enterprise, due to several factors, as follows:

- i) Four out of six employers of sales girls in the sample, complained that these girls had low level of commitment to their work. Sales girls, in their view tended to change employers very often, in search of improvement in their wages.
- ii) These employers also observed that since sales girls wages were not determined on sales commission basis, sales girls usually tended to display a low level of interest in improving their sales records.
- iii) Most sales girls display very little keenness in mastering all the skills necessary for retail trading, as a basis for future careers in this occupation.

Indeed, five out of the eight sales girls interviewed reported that they were on part-time study programmes in tertiary educational institutions. Three of the girls were registered in study programmes that were not related to trading. Indeed, sales girls in the categories of retail trading under study are increasingly expected to be secondary school leavers with three or four credits and at least a pass in English language. Such educational qualifications are regarded as an enhancement of the status of an employer's enterprise. With regard to above complaints, traders who employ sales girls utilize various incentives to sustain and increase their commitment levels.

It should be noted that wage earning sales girls are employed only by the more prosperous enterprises, whose stalls/shops tend to be more spacious. As a result, these employees tend to

have designated workspace for clerical/cashier functions and some office furniture. These special features help to raise their status above those of apprentices. Traders also increasingly employ this category of female staff as a means of circumventing what they consider as excessively fraudulent tendencies of senior apprentices. Sales girls often serve also as clerks and cashiers.

### **f) Women's Need for Training**

The fact that women are socially excluded from available apprenticeship training for retail trading puts them at a disadvantage in that sector of enterprise. For one thing, they are excluded from aspects of knowledge and expertise, which over the years have been found useful as sound basis for success in medium scale retail trading. Secondly, women are consequently excluded from the real world of economy-oriented interaction with their male counterparts on equal footing. This entrenches men's already superior economic position, by further replicating in the market arena, women's powerlessness that is already evident in the homes. Furthermore, it perpetuates the impression that women are innately less able to handle private enterprise involving large capital.

Most respondents had some awareness that women who wished to become traders lacked the effective training resources available to men. 51 male respondents and 19 female, i.e. 79.5 per cent of respondents indicated awareness that male potential traders had better chances, due to their use of apprenticeship training. Indeed, it was generally understood that male traders, who did not undergo full apprenticeship training constituted bad business risks.

Twelve female respondents, that is 54.5 per cent of female respondents gave at least three other reasons, besides social exclusion from apprenticeship training, why women were disadvantaged in medium scale retail trading. These include the following:

- i) Sources of large capital such as banks, relatives, and friends were much less available to women than men.
- ii) Women came into medium scale retail trading more advanced in age than men, and so had reduced time for achievement.
- iii) Women had to deal with demanding domestic roles that conflicted with business enterprises, while men were free of these.

In contrast to these women, 13 male respond-

ents representing 19.7 per cent of male respondents and 14.7% of all respondents expressed the view that medium scale retail trading was not suitable work for women. In their opinion, women were not endowed with the intellectual capacity necessary for handling large capital. Two females, that is 9.09 per cent of female respondents and 2.27 per cent of all respondents' expressed fairly similar views; thus making a total of 15 respondents. These 15 respondents make up 17.04 per cent of all respondents.

32 respondents, that is 37.5 per cent of respondents were of the opinion, for various reasons, that women would be better off enrolling in business options in school in preparation for wage employment in public and private sectors of the economy. These respondents were generally of the opinion that the market, as presently existing, was not an adequate place for intelligent young girls to learn work skills.

A large percentage of the respondents expressed the view that young unmarried women's prospects in trading would improve substantially as a result of availability of some form of practical training for women, such as those presently available for learning of domestic science, catering, tailoring, and hairdressing. 49 respondents (15 females and 34 males) that is 55.69 per cent of interviewees made suggestions to this effect. From the foregoing, there was a high level of awareness in the market that available indigenous apprenticeship training was not suitable for women's needs for training due to several social constraints.

#### **SUGGESTIONS ON STRATEGIES FOR TRAINING OF FEMALE TRADERS**

Above situation clearly suggests a need for change in at least two directions. One direction entails seeking out strategies designed to incorporate women into modified versions of existing apprenticeship scheme. The other is to establish other training schemes deemed to be better suited to take care of women's special needs, while at the same time providing effective training for potential women medium and high scale traders.

For such schemes to succeed, there is need for joint action between government, traders and voluntary agencies to ensure adequate input from these important sectors, as well as provision of expertise and funds for pilot studies.

Certain factors are vital to the effectiveness of training schemes as follows:

- i) Training period should not exceed four years.
- ii) It should incorporate short-term market experience. For instance, there should at most be two monthly stints of market experience annually in the second and third year of training and three months industrial attachment during the final year. This is likely to be more acceptable to trainees and parents than longer periods of market exposure.
- iii) Training scheme should incorporate formal business subjects like book-keeping, commerce and business management.
- iv) Training should be complemented by credible and well secured loan schemes, to enable at least the first batch of graduates of the schemes to gradually set up and expand their enterprises.
- v) Commitment to help train other females should constitute a major undertaking of beneficiaries of this scheme.
- vi) Major focus should be directed towards utilizing competent male traders to substantially increase the number of effective women role models for aspiring female traders.
- vii) Ultimate authority for this scheme should eventually be located in a corporate body to ensure that young females are removed from possible moral strangle-holds likely to be attached to patronage, if established traders are allowed direct involvement in provision of loans.
- viii) It should be kept in mind that need for overall efficiency and effectiveness remains paramount.

#### **CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing, there is little doubt that women are constrained by several structural features of society from having access to the apprenticeship training under study. The pattern of women's exclusion are as follows: men, women and youth are socialized to view training as unsuitable for women, while patriarchal mechanisms in society are employed to ensure the maintenance of the status quo. It is generally acknowledged that men's dread of women acquiring skills is a usual occurrence in developing countries; (Boserup, 1970: 22). Men's

protectionist inclinations in skill acquisition opportunities serve as active deterrent to women. However, such situations are even more harmful to these countries than the more developed ones. This is because access to skills is of greater importance to developing countries where entrepreneurship is vital to initial growth of the economy.

The process by which women prepare for a career in a particular work area may not necessarily follow the same pattern as the men. Thus, women do not necessarily have to use the existing apprenticeship system. However, exposure to the real world of a preferred career is the right of every female and male. Therefore, in order to effectively train both unmarried and married women, various options should be seriously explored on the basis of equal opportunity for all, as well as for expansion of women's contributions to economic growth. It is on record that segregated training programmes for women have been proved to have some merit in a developed country such as Great Britain: (McDougall, 1996: 15). Evidence from Southwestern Nigeria indicates that women do effectively engage in big business (trading) ventures. Cultural change should therefore constitute a vital aspect of creation of viable training strategies for greater numbers of Southeastern Nigerian women aspiring to be medium-scale traders.

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