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Women and Urban Experience in Colonial Lagos

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Abstract

The social and economic history of Lagos cannot be written without reference to the activities of women as individuals or as a group. From the pre-colonial period, women played significant roles in the economic and social activities of the city. At the beginning of colonialism, their activities extended beyond the social and economic realms into political activism and partisan politics. This article examines the experiences of women in the wake of the modernization and urbanization policies of the British in colonial Lagos, especially from 1900 to the end of the World War II. The article extensively utilizes both primary and secondary sources. It concludes that though women in Lagos were industrious, their contact with Europeans further transformed their traditional roles politically, socially and economically.

Résumé

L'histoire sociale et économique de Lagos ne peut être écrite sans référence aux activités des femmes en tant qu'individus ou en tant que groupe. Durant la période précoloniale, les femmes ont joué un rôle important dans les activités économiques et sociales de la ville. Mais au début du colonialisme, leurs activités se sont étendues, au-delà des domaines social et économique, au militantisme politique et à la politique partisane. Le présent article examine les expériences des femmes dans le sillage des politiques de modernisation et d'urbanisation des Britanniques à Lagos durant l'époque coloniale, dans la période allant de 1900 à la fin de la deuxième guerre mondiale en particulier. L'article se fonde considérablement à la fois sur des sources primaires et secondaires. En conclusion, il soutient que bien que les femmes de Lagos étaient industrieuses, leur contact avec les Européens a davantage transformé leurs rôles traditionnels sur le plan politique, social et économique.

Introduction

Yoruba women occupied a significant place in pre-colonial political organization, religion, family life and the economy (Denzer 1994: 2). Nineteenth century accounts and oral records reveal that Nigerian women actively

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participated in the social, economic and political development of their societies. Ample testimonies, according to LaRay Denzer, exist concerning their role in local market organization and trade. They occupied a pivotal place in the local and state economy – organizing household industries, operating the local market system and establishing long-distance trade networks (*ibid.*). Pre-colonial Lagos was not an exception. Women in Lagos responded to economic opportunities, some of which were provided by coastal, long-distance and domestic trade. Indeed, being an island, the early Lagosians took to fishing alongside their farming and hunting activities (Lawal 2004: 13). In fact, long before the beginning of slave trade, Lagos had offered a useful avenue for trade in articles of domestic consumption, which Captain J.B. Adams noted towards the end of the eighteenth century at Ebute Ero Market as being very much in abundance and ‘well within the reach of the common man’ (Adams 1823). Ebute Ero Market was particularly popular with people from far and near who came to trade there. So was the Obun Eko Market, probably established by the Ijebu-speaking people. Where periodic market activities were undertaken by all and sundry, the majority of these traders were identified to be women (*ibid.*).

A major strategy that Yoruba women used to distinguish themselves and further their own cause was to combine opportunities offered by their unique double status as daughters in their father’s lineage and as wives in their husband’s lineage (Akinwumi, Adeboye and Otusanya 2011). Marriage became a tool for translating social power into economic and political power (Barnes 1990). This was possible because marriage offered them ‘new frontiers for the exercise of power and influence in their communities’ (Denzer 1994). Coupled with the right they had in their natal homes, these marital opportunities afforded some resourceful women the scope within which to advance themselves significantly (*ibid.*) A veritable example was Madam Tinubu of Lagos, whose marriage to a Lagos indigene offered her the opportunities to establish herself in trade such that she became a highly respected female merchant in nineteenth century Lagos.

Before contacts with immigrants and neighbours, production and trade were organized within families, and a gendered division of labour probably existed between husbands and wives (Mann 2007: 26). For instance, in Yorubaland, the husband did the work of hoeing the field, making the heaps and sowing. The wife assisted in reaping and in such work as husking and preparing harvested crops (Fadipe 1970: 88). In addition, the wife was free to follow her own trade independently of her husband, and it was an obligation on the part of the husband to supply her with the means for doing this (*ibid.*). This independence possibly accounts for the resourcefulness of

Yoruba women. However, Mann argues that in pre-colonial Lagos, spouses and children must also have cooperated to meet family needs (Mann 2007:26). That is to say, all adults had a means of livelihood.

Overview of Women and the Lagos Economy on the Eve of Colonization

In pre-colonial Lagos, fishing dominated the economy of the island, but the local inhabitants also hunted and farmed a little, despite the fact that the sandy soil was not very good for agriculture (*ibid.*: 25). In the case of fishing, its popularity as an economic activity should not be surprising. The people were mostly fishermen; the modern metropolis of Lagos was said to have started as 'a resting place for fishermen' (Losi 1921). Most of the fish procured from their fishing expeditions on the Lagos lagoon and the surrounding lakes were mainly for domestic consumption. The remaining quantities were exported to neighbouring settlements for sale and in exchange for other goods required (Lawal 2004: 14). The commonest types of exported fish were the smoked or dried ones, the preparation of which was aided by the availability of salt extracted from the sea water (*ibid.*).

About 75 per cent of women engaged in the process of smoking fish for export to neighbouring towns and villages, and exchange for other items which they needed but did not possess, such as clothing material, palm oil and cassava. Salt making, from both the lagoon and sea water, was also a popular economic activity in Lagos before 1900 (*ibid.*). There was access to large deposits of salt in the sea water of Lagos, and demand for salt by the people of the hinterland. It should, however, be pointed out that salt making, like fishing, was reputed to have been introduced into Lagos by the Ilaje and Ijo peoples who were (and still are) found predominantly in the fishing settlements to the east of Lagos (*ibid.*). As a result of this influence, an appreciable percentage of women found engagement in salt making as a way of supporting the livelihood of their household. This salt production and fish smoking stemmed not only from the influence of the Ijo and Ilaje women, but also from the *Mahin*, who were said to have migrated from their homeland from somewhere in the Okitipupa area and extended to the areas close to the Island of Lagos, where such villages as Igbo-Egunrin, Itebu-kunmi, Itebu-Manuwa, Oloto, Igbolomi, Ilu-tuntun and Mahintedo were established (Lawal 1991:100).

Lagos, during the pre-colonial period, was more popular for its trading activities, both local and foreign. The foreign trade was facilitated by the city's access to the lagoon, estuaries and the Ijebu creeks. For instance, 'they went in their canoes to Andrah, and Badagry and to the towns situated

along the north east extremity of the cradoo lake where they purchased slaves, *jaboo* cloth' and other articles of domestic consumption'.¹ Though there is scant evidence to show that women participated in slave trade and long distance trade, domestic trade, it had been established, was dominated by women.

Indeed, domestic trade also operated extensively. Lagosians organized daily markets, where articles of daily need were exchanged.² While a vast majority of women operated at the level of petty trading, a few of them became big-time traders such that in the wake of European contacts, they tapped into the credit system provided by European firms located in the urban centres (Akinwumi, Adeboye and Otusanya 2011). A veritable example of such women was Madam Efunroye Tinubu of Lagos, who emerged as one of the leading intermediaries in trade between the Yoruba interior, Egaland and Lagos in the 1850s (Biobaku 1966:57). Palm oil merchants reportedly advanced her credit lines of over £5,000. Besides, enterprising female entrepreneurs in Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan continued to expand the long distance trade in textiles (both indigenous and imported), kolanuts, palm oil and other imported commodities (Denzer 1994). Therefore, trading as a platform for women's activism in colonial Lagos had been well entrenched in the pre-colonial period.

Market Women, Livelihood and the Water Rate Protest in Lagos

The idea of women's activism, particularly in the context of colonial Nigerian history, often conjures up images of markets and mass movements, of throngs of women vociferously occupying public spaces to assert their rights as gendered and empowered beings (George 2007: 128). Women's livelihood in colonial Nigeria was predominantly in the markets. Besides, markets, particularly in the southern part of the country, were historically understood to be spaces dominated and regulated by women, where they congregated to buy and sell goods, circulate information, and generally interact as a community.³ The nature of markets partly explains why markets were also frequent sites of struggle with the British colonial state – particularly over issues of taxation, sanitation, street trading, price control and general social, economic and political matters.

In 1908, the unity of opposition to the government was broken over the water rate issue. The government had decided, for sanitary reasons, to introduce pipe-borne water into Lagos and argued that Lagosians ought to pay a water rate for this amenity (Cole 1975:98). The water rate controversy was an example of grassroots politics. The press, women, traditional and

the elite had different reasons for opposing the scheme.⁴ The press for instance, opposed the water rate not because it objected to taxation, but on the American colonists' principle of 'No taxation without representation'.⁵ The educated elite argued on the principle of political economy that anything which can be obtained free should not be paid for, and since water could be obtained free in Lagos, then the water rate should not be paid for.⁶ Others were esoteric in their arguments except for the women.⁷ The women, for the first time, announced their determination to oppose all unfavourable colonial policies. On 2 April 1909, 3,000 women met in the traditional quarters of Lagos to discuss the protest against the water rate. All markets were closed and serious reprisals were taken against anyone who did not obey the closure (Okonkwo 2011:9). The meeting, which was held from 7:30 am to 1:45 pm, was to find a viable means of stopping the water rate (*ibid.*). Several women speakers suggested a boycott of sales to the European firms and to cooks until the government withdrew the water scheme (*ibid.*).

This protest by the women was basically to protect their means of livelihood. As observed, the new water rate would put all the women hawking water (who were quite a feature in colonial Lagos) out of business (Cole 1975:236). Also, the *Lagos Weekly Record* noted that women traders would be particularly hard hit by the water rate, because the female street hawkers (carriers of water) represented the bottom rung of the trade ladder, and the earnings of these sellers hardly exceeded 18d to 2/- weekly.⁸ The *Lagos Weekly Record* in one of its editorials raised a question: 'After providing for body and soul could these people, who form the majority, afford to pay a water rate?'⁹ In response to this protest, Governor Walter Egerton defended the water rate by maintaining that the poorest classes would not pay it. Only houses within a short distance of the public pump would pay the water rate.¹⁰ This protest was later taken over by the educated elite and the traditional elite until it was finally suppressed in September 1916.

The population of Lagos from the 1930s up until independence revealed an upward increase in the number of migrant workers. Lagos offered employment opportunities for immigrants from the hinterland and neighbouring countries. These migrant workers comprised young people, both males and females, and street hawkers were among the most visible young workers (George 2007:131). In the late 1940s, anthropologist Suzanne Comhaire noted the existence of eight thousand market women 'plus all their assistants and apprentices, either regular and occasional, four or five to one nominal market women' (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997:95-6). In addition to this, the 1950 census did a breakdown of the population figure by age and sex, and recorded 1,451 girls aged five to fourteen who worked as 'petty traders, hawkers, and shop assistants'.¹¹ The children did not spend the money realized from their sales

because it belonged to their parents, who used the money earned from child labour to cater for the children's education and welfare as well as the parents' immediate needs (Olutayo 1994:210). The city of Lagos, during and after the Great Depression of the 1930s, witnessed phenomenal growth in street trading, petty trading and hawking. This was the consequence of the urban policies of the British government, which dispossessed Lagosians of their lands for modernization purposes and encouraged commercialization in the city.

Trading, the common means of livelihood for females, young and old, in Lagos, faced several objections from colonial authorities, and to some extent from the educated elite. For instance, the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), Lagos, in one of his memoranda to the Secretary of the Town Council, Lagos, noted the consequence of petty trading as follows:

Owing to petty trading, scraps, wrapping leaves and other rubbish are scattered indiscriminately all over the streets of the town creating an excellent attraction to rodents. The "gari" which is to be seen all over the road at Ebute-Ero illustrates my point. The wide distribution of this rubbish resulting from petty trading makes the clearing of it by municipal employees impossible.¹²

The Medical Officer of Health emphasized further that street traders often resorted to the use of public drains haphazardly such that the danger of contamination of food either directly or by flies was inevitable, because a large proportion of fish and other food items sold in the town were exposed for sale on the edge of the public drains.¹³ There was also the objection of the town engineer, as contained in his correspondence to the Secretary of the Town Council. He described the situation thus:

To my mind the main objection to this petty trading is one which only indirectly affects this office, namely, impediment to traffic, and whilst our transport is inconvenienced by the congestion in certain areas, it is the general public who really suffer from this. In this connection I would specially mention Faji and Araromi markets. In each area there are streets which are practically impassable owing to petty traders, their wares, and their stalls.¹⁴

Women, the Town Council and Street Trading Prohibition in Lagos

Apart from the social problems identified with street trading and hawking, the colonial government also discovered that of the estimated 4,000 people who congregated for trading purposes on the streets of Lagos, 1,000 paid £1 per annum as a temporary licence, for the occupation of Crown Land (squatters), while the permit for trading on streets and areas around market attracted 2/6d per month.¹⁵ The implication of this arrangement is that the

remaining 3,000 traders that did not pay to the council deprived the government of revenue. Further, the town council also discovered that the petty traders were increasing day by day in the town because the available spaces used in front of houses became a source of additional income for house owners. In fact, an appreciable number of house owners and touts turned middlemen engaged in this habit for livelihoods. Reports from a survey carried out by the town council on some major streets in Lagos lend credence to this assertion:

At 50/52 Palm Church Street, the owner (Joseph Adeodu) collects 30/- per year from one woman (Aina Iyalode) who sits in front of the drain and who pays 2/6d a month to the council. If the amount is not paid to the owner he will complain of the woman being in front of his premises. Formerly there was more than one woman paying to him. This information was obtained from a relative of the petty trader. At Ebute-Ero where no payment whatsoever is made to the council, the petty traders are compelled to pay 3d a day to a person called the financial secretary to be permitted to squat on the foreshore. No petty trader who had not paid will be tolerated by the other traders in that locality. This is one of the most overcrowded areas in Lagos on market days which occur every fourth day. In Broad and Victoria Streets the women traders who sit on the pavement outside shops or houses pay a fee of from 2/6d to 5/- a month to the owner or occupier of the premises.¹⁶

As a follow-up to these discoveries, the administrator of the colony, C.T. Lawrence, in his letter to the Chief Secretary to the Government expressed his reservations over the estimated figure of 4,000 petty traders in Lagos. Instead, he posited that there was no street in Lagos or Ebute Meta where hawking or selling outside houses did not take place. He also observed that small stalls were erected close to the roads inside the fence in Ikoyi as well as at the old Colonial Hospital. He therefore proposed either prohibition or prevention of street trading within a certain distance of a recognized market.¹⁷ This proposal was not taken seriously until 1936 when the situation had become embarrassing even to the colonial authorities. The Commissioner of Police for the colony was asked to enforce bye-law No. 4 of 1933 prohibiting street trading within the 200 yards perimeter around the following markets: Idumagbo Market; Moloney Bridge Street Market, Anikantanmo Square Market, Lewis Street Market, Ebute-Ero Market, Iddo Market, Oyingbo Market, Ebute-Metta Obada Market, Yaba Market and Apapa.¹⁸ However, the following questions are pertinent. Why did it take so long for the colonial authorities to prohibit street trading? What was the response of the market women to the colonial policies against petty and street trading? Were there market organizations or associations coordinating the activities of market women during the period?

Research finding reveals that the nature of colonial urban policies and their impact on the 'natives' and their traditional occupations, namely farming and fishing, was responsible for the expansion of petty/street trading. Besides, immigration into Lagos of fortune-seekers and the dispossession of peasants of their lands in favour of commercial activities further encouraged street trading in colonial Lagos. Street trading was also a source of revenue for the colonial authorities during the period of study.

It took the colonial authorities some years to react to trading on the street because of the adoption of the Manchester doctrine of minimal financial commitment to the colonies. Thus, rather than address the issue of street trading, the government was busy making money from traders in form of charges for stalls and premises in order to generate money for building of infrastructure and general colonial administration. In spite of the earlier warnings by Olajumoke Obasa, leader of the Lagos Women's League, of the moral danger associated with street trading by under-aged boys and girls,¹⁹ the colonial government did not see it as a problem until 1941 when the colonial welfare office was opened.

The Lagos Women's League (LWL) was the most influential long-standing elite women's organization in twentieth century Lagos. It was founded in 1901 as the Lagos League under the leadership of young Mrs Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa, daughter of Emily Blaize and R.B. Blaize, a successful and politically influential merchant in Lagos (Olusanya 1992:123-7). The formation of the League provided Mrs Obasa with the opportunity of putting fully into practice her talents and enthusiasm for social welfare work.²⁰ Mrs Obasa's interests in social welfare work were many and varied, but the most important for this study was her interest in women. She did a great deal in promoting their welfare and championing their standard of living. She not only visited the markets regularly, instructing the women on how to take care of their babies and on general hygiene and sanitation, but also sought ways of improving their livelihood in order for them not to depend entirely on their men folk.²¹ For instance, she made *ogi*, pap made out of corn, a popular morning meal in Lagos and a means of livelihood for some women. Prior to this period, the way that *ogi* was being prepared for sale was not hygienic and this made it unattractive to the educated members of the society (Olusanya 1992:133). Mrs Obasa got some of the women together, taught them how to prepare *ogi* hygienically and how to measure it for sale. These women passed on the knowledge to others. With the hygienic way of preparing it, *ogi* became a popular morning meal, not only for the non-literate, but also for literate and well-to-do members of the society.

Opportunities for women in waged or salaried employment were limited to the educated. As more girls completed Standard 6 or higher schooling, their rate of employment increased (Denzer 1944:26). At first, they tended to take up occupations that simply transformed their normal domestic activities into cash, including washing clothes, cooking, sewing and looking after children as well as teaching and nursing (Denzer 1991).²² The seamstresses discovered that this work paid much better than other jobs (including teaching), combined easily with the responsibilities of family life, and required little initial investment. Immediately after World War II, opportunities expanded as Western fashions became increasingly popular and elite women demanded elaborate styles in traditional attire.²³ In fact, fashion training institutes such as the Singer Fashion Institute sprang up in central Lagos, and many female residents enrolled as apprentices to learn sewing.²⁴

Women's Movements and Anti-colonial Protest in Lagos

Apart from trading, artisanship, teaching and nursing, another area where women's activities were particularly important in southwestern Nigeria was in the anti-colonial movement. Women have possessed a long and rich history of collective organization through which they articulated and protected their interests from pre-colonial times onward (Awe 1977). Colonialism altered women's position in their societies (Etienne and Leacock 1980:16). It particularly affected their economic roles and limited their political participation. Southwestern Nigerian women quickly perceived the nature of the threat to their interests and regrouped their forces in order to preserve their interests (Johnson 1982:138).

In the city of Lagos, the first mass-based women's interest group to recognize the power of collective action in protecting and promoting women's rights during the colonial era was the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA). The exact date of its foundation is unknown, but by the mid-1920s it was an active movement. Madam Alimotu Pelewura was the dynamic leader behind the foundation of the LMWA (*ibid.*). Madam Pelewura was an acclaimed market woman of substance in Lagos Colony. She was one of the women born in Lagos who were deeply concerned about the rights of individuals to be fairly treated by the state. She was a thorn in the flesh of the colonial authorities, as she fought relentlessly for the improvement of the lot of members of her association and agitated for the rights of women, and for independence (Jacobs 1997:22).²⁵

One of the memorable events during Madam Pelewura's career was the famous 'olologbo case', which took place in 1942. It was a court case in which colonial authorities accused her of violating the price control law.

However, Madam Pelewura who felt wrongly accused swore that God would make the judgment of that magistrate on her case, the last to take place in that court, as the allegation was deliberately hatched to humiliate her. Ironically, that was the last case the judge heard in that court (*ibid.*). Madam Pelewura also resisted the government's attempt to move Ereko Market to a new location (Johnson 1981:1–10), and she became actively involved with a much more militant group, the then Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) (Coleman 1958:197).

Alimotu Pelewura was not alone in her struggles for the betterment of women in colonial Lagos. Among members of Madam Pelewura's Market Women's Association were Madam Comfort Ige, Madam Egberongbe, Madam Bilikisu, Madam Rabi Alaso Oke and Madam Memunatu, among others (Jacobs 1997:23). Madam Pelewura's struggles in Lagos represented an expansion of the traditional type of women's organization, and an important step in Nigerian women's attempts to preserve their prerogatives under the changing conditions of the colonial system. In addition, the educated elite also found it necessary to build upon the traditional structures as well as utilize both traditional and Western protest tactics. Thus, the founding of the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) was their attempt at organizing women along the lines of Western-style associations (Johnson 1982:143).

Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, a daughter of Kitoye Ajasa – a prominent Lagos lawyer and legislator during the colonial period – while addressing the educated women in Lagos, warned them of their pomposity and inaccessibility by their uneducated counterparts. She opined that unless the so-called highly educated make themselves open and approachable they would have no one to lead.²⁶ According to a newspaper report, her concern was for the protection of women from the excesses of men. The exploitation of the colonial government led her to gather on 10 May 1944 a dozen prominent women in her home at 18 Broad Street, Lagos to discuss the women's political situation.²⁷ This culminated in the formation of the NWP. The NWP stated its aims and objectives as follows:

The women's party makes its strongest appeal to the women of Nigeria irrespective of class or any other distinction, reminding them of their backward and unenviable position among the women of other rules and calling them to action. It appeals to those who may be outside the ranks of the Women's Party for sympathy and cooperation:

1. To shape the whole future is not our problem, but only to shape faithfully a small part of it according to the rules laid down.
2. To seek by constitutional means the rights of British citizenship in its full measure on the people.

3. To work assiduously for the educational, agricultural and industrial development of Nigeria with a view to improve the moral, intellectual and economic condition of the country.
4. To work for the amelioration of the condition of the women of Nigeria not merely by sympathy for their aspirations but by recognition of their equal status with men.²⁸

In spite of its well-outlined aims and objectives, the NWP did not enjoy total support from prominent men and market women in Lagos. For instance, Herbert Macaulay did not give the kind of support he gave to the Lagos Market Women's Association to the NWP because he felt that the NWP threatened his special relationship with market women.²⁹ The leadership of the NWP remained undeterred and continued in pursuance of their objectives as spelt out in their constitution. The first remarkable achievement of the organization was the appointment of Oyinkan Abayomi, their leader, as the first female to serve on the Lagos Town Council.³⁰ Further, the NWP advocated the improvement in female education by proposing the establishment of more girls' schools apart from Queen's College, as well as broadening the curriculum. Also, the NWP demanded scholarships for Muslim girls, more vocational schools and adult education for illiterate women.³¹

The NWP also fought a long battle in reducing discrimination against women in civil service employment, especially in the area of discrepancies in salaries and rankings. One of the most important efforts of the NWP was its opposition to the Children and Young Person's Ordinance of 1946, which prohibited children under fourteen from engaging in street trading, required parental permission for girls between fourteen and sixteen to trade, and limited to the hours of daylight the time in which young girls were allowed to trade (Johnson 1982:146).

The agitation that led to the enactment of the Ordinance was championed by Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa of the defunct LWL, and was reported in the newspaper of the period. As it would be recalled, Olajumoke Obasa, a voluntary social worker, founded the Lagos League (LL) in 1901, which later metamorphosed into the Lagos Women's League (LWL) in the 1920s. The League's interests were social reform, social welfare and moral problems in Lagos (George 2007:135). The League came up with the 'Girl Hawkers Project' in 1926 in order to protect the unnecessary exposure of under-aged children to moral danger in Lagos as a result of hawking and street trading. The LWL therefore, requested for prohibition of children of both sexes from hawking about the streets until boys had attained the age of 12 and girls 16 owing to the danger of stealing and the immoral practices to which they were exposed daily. Also, between 1926 and 1946, several reports were

made in the newspapers of girls who were violated, injured or killed while hawking. One of such reports was the case of an eleven-year-old girl named Olawunmi Olusanya whose dead body was found in the 'Dig for Victory Garden' in Lagos barely twelve hours after she was sent out to hawk *foo-foo* in her neighbourhood in the *Oke-popo* area of Lagos.³²

This inherent danger associated with street trading was the concern of the LWL under the coordination of the elite women in Lagos. The League's position, however, offended the livelihood sensibilities of the market men and women as well as African traditions. According to custom, young girls began their training in trading at an early age, well before the age of fourteen, thus extending the range of the economic activities of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and guardians, many of whom were farmers or had businesses elsewhere (Ogunsheye 1960). Moreover, young hawkers played a major role in supporting the income of their parents, especially those at the lower rung of society. This practice of child labour stems from Yoruba terminology, *omo eni l'omo eni*, i.e. my child is my child seeming to imply that I can treat my child the way I like, 'he/she is mine'. The children too held the belief that 'my mother is my mother, I cannot change her' (Olutayo 1994:209). Therefore, street hawking by under-aged children continued unrestricted in colonial Lagos until the 1940s in spite of the warnings, happenings and dangers associated with it. Therefore, the Children and Young Person's Ordinance was a contradiction because custom formed part of the education for the young girls for whom the government failed to provide schools.

The position of the NWP, unlike that of the LWL, was to support the market men and women to fight against the obnoxious Ordinance that threatened their livelihood during the period. Thus, the NWP, market women's movements and others fought the government on the newly enacted Ordinance.

Women's urban experience is not complete without mentioning the memorable roles they played to sustain the livelihoods of their striking husbands in the 1940s. From 22 June to 6 August 1945, around 40,000 Nigerian workers, mostly civil servants and railwaymen in Yorubaland in the southwest, stayed off their jobs to protest the government's refusal to raise wages after years of acute inflation (Lindsay 1999:783). Although, historians have stressed the importance of community support in explaining the strike's ultimate success, none have noted a crucial irony: male workers demanded wage increases and even family allowances on the basis of their status as breadwinners, yet they survived during the course of the strike in large

measure because of the economic independence of their wives and the importance of market women to local economies (*ibid.*).

Lindsay (1999) argued that during the four years of trade unionists' cost of living agitation (1941–45), the government instituted price controls and then took on food distribution itself in an attempt to curb inflation from the supply end. These actions, according to Lindsay, threatened the livelihood of market traders, who engaged in political protest, isolated acts of sabotage, vigorous black marketeering to thwart the official scheme. The hardship occasioned by the price control policy affected their standard of living to such an extent that families could no longer feed and this in turned heightened political and labour activism.

Women mobilized against government interference in market trading, which deprived them of earnings; men suggested that their inability to secure food for their families diminished their masculine status. The combined efforts of men and women, particularly market women, rendered the scheme ineffective as they refused to sell at prices that would deprive them of even meagre profits (Oyemakinde 1973). In spite of this stance of the market women, the colonial administration clung to price controls, a decision that mobilized an opposition coalition of elite women, market traders and nationalist politicians (Lindsay 1999:791).

Consequently, groups such as the LWL and the Oyingbo Market Women's Association held public meetings and lodged formal protests. Madam Alimotu Pelewura, leader of the 8,000-member LMWA, charged that the government was depriving the women of their livelihood and that the authorities who set price controls had no knowledge of local markets and trading practices (Johnson 1981:1–10). With the assistance of veteran nationalist Herbert Macaulay and his National Democratic Party (NNDP), they employed a variety of protest strategies, including invading a local town council meeting and petitioning the governor, the Lagos Chamber of Commerce, the Commissioner of the Colony and the legislative and the town council (*ibid.*).

After many joint protest meetings and deputations to the authorities, the commissioner admitted that the law needed remedy and agreed to suspend arrests of offenders.³³ Also, the NWP collaborated with other groups, mostly the LMWA, in the campaign against the British commodities price control scheme championed by Captain Pullen and popularly referred to as the 'Pullen Price Control Scheme' and other restrictions imposed by the administration during and after the World War II.

Conclusion

This account of the urban experience of women in colonial Lagos is an attempt to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on women's studies in colonial Lagos. Women in colonial Lagos were confronted with myriad challenges ranging from economic hardship to restrictions on trading on the streets of Lagos. Besides, the threat of income tax and the rivalry for spaces in the market between the colonial authorities and the women awakened their political consciousness, which translated into agitations and protest on the part of women for improved standards of living, particularly in their bid to jealously guard their livelihoods. In addition, the prominent role women played in the workers' strike of the 1940s as the underground supporters of their striking husbands by providing livelihood from trading, and their virile anti-colonial movements further strengthened their activities beyond the social and economic realms into political activism and partisan politics. Although it can be seen from the narratives and analysis of this study that women's responses were dictated by the circumstances of the period, the experiences of market women, the educated elite and the poor market women in Lagos remained a turning point in the history of women's movements in Lagos and in Nigeria in general.

Notes

1. NAI, CSO/26/28322/s.887 'Union of Lagos Colony Fishermen to Chief Secretary of the Federation'.
2. *Ibid.* p. 15.
3. See for details Sudarkasa. N., 1973, *Where Women Work: a study of Yoruba women in the market place and in the home*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan (cited in George 2007).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Lagos Weekly Record*, 25 July 1908, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*
8. For details, see 'Editorial', *Lagos Weekly Record*, 8 August 1909.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *African Mail*, 22 January 1909, p. 156.
11. See Population Census of Lagos. Nigerian Department of Statistics, 1951, Nigeria: Government Printer.
12. NAI, Comcol 1, file 1368, vol. 1, 'Memorandum from Medical Officer of Health to the Secretary, Town Council, Lagos'. Market and Street Trading in Lagos, 31 March 1932.
13. *Ibid.*

14. NAI, Comcol 1, file 1368, vol.1, 'Correspondence from Holley. A.G (Town Engineer) to the Secretary, Town Council', Lagos. 31 March 1932.
15. NAI, Comcol 1, file 1368, Market and Street Trading in Lagos. p. 2.
16. NAI, Comcol 1, file 1368, Reports from a survey carried out by the Town Council on some major streets in Lagos.
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18. NAI, Comcol 1, file 1368, a copy of the press release on Market and Street Trading in Lagos issued by the President, Lagos Town Council to the editors of the *Daily Times*, *Daily News* and *Daily Telegraph*, 1936.
19. NAI, Comcol 1, File no 498, Lagos Women's League, 26 February 1924.
20. *Ibid.*
21. NAI, Comcol 1, file 498, Lagos Women's League letter to the Chief Secretary to Government on the need to provide employment for women in the colony, 26 Feb. 1924, p. 2.
22. 'The seamstress in Nigeria: the evolution of a popular woman's occupation from colonial times', paper presented at the seminar on Women and the Peaceful transition Programme, Kwara State Polytechnic and Office of Women's Affairs, Ilorin, 19–21 March 1991, p. 90.
23. *Ibid.* p. 91.
24. Oral Interview with Alhaja Raji Risikatu.
25. An interview was supposed to be held with Alhaja Mogaji, who was trained under late Madam Alimotu Pelewura in Colonial Lagos. However, on getting to her residence, Mama could no longer grant me an interview as a result of old age (90+), She decided to release a copy of her biography for use in gathering data for this aspect of the research.
26. Oyinkan Abayomi's address to the educated women in Lagos, Herbert Macaulay Papers, Box 73, file 7, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan.
27. *Daily Service*, 11 May 1944.
28. Private papers of Mrs Tinuola Dedeke (founding member of the NWP), cited in Johnson (1982).
29. *West African Pilot*, 26 June 1944.
30. *Daily Service*, 8 January 1947.
31. NAI, CSO file no 43222, Correspondence from the Secretary NWP to Commissioner of the Colony.
32. *Daily Service*, 'Eleven year old girl hawker found dead in public garden', 21 June 1946, p. 1.
33. *Daily Service*, 21 April 1.

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