

Bigger, Sexier and Unapologetic: the Thrive of Indigenous Feminism in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Indigenous feminism in Nigeria is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a more pronounced presence and assertive stance within socio-political landscapes. This paper explores the evolution and impact of Indigenous feminism, emphasizing its unique characteristics and contributions to broader feminist discourse. Unlike mainstream feminism, Indigenous feminism in Nigeria incorporates distinct cultural, historical, and social contexts, challenging patriarchal structures through both traditional and contemporary means. This study highlights the voices of key Indigenous feminist leaders, the strategies they employ, the tangible changes they have achieved in their communities, and by examining these case studies, the paper illustrates how Indigenous feminism in Nigeria is not only surviving but thriving—becoming bigger, sexier, and unapologetically bold in its quest for gender equality and social justice.*

KEYWORDS– Equality, Feminism, Indigenous, Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

For several years, feminism has tried to thrive and make way in Nigeria. It is safe to say that the concept of feminism is connected with women's freedom.¹ This can be traced to the 1848 movement in Europe.² Think of feminism and count patriarchy – from the 1980s and years above, feminism has given a voice to women who want to uproot themselves from patriarchy.³

Indigenous feminism in Nigeria represents a dynamic and evolving movement that intersects with the country's complex socio-political landscape. Indigenous African feminism is part and parcel of African women's lived experiences.⁴ Rooted in the rich cultural heritage and historical experiences of Nigeria's diverse Indigenous communities, this form of feminism challenges traditional patriarchal norms and seeks to redefine gender roles within a culturally relevant framework.⁵ The resurgence of Indigenous feminism is characterized by its boldness and assertiveness, embracing a narrative that is unapologetically proud of its heritage while advocating for profound societal changes.

¹Msila, V. "Indigenous Feminism and Black Women Leadership." (Sociology and Anthropology, 9(4):42-51, 2021).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Wane, N., "African Indigenous Feminist Thought: An anti-colonial Project." In The Politics of Cultural Knowledge, pp. 7-21. Brill, 2011.

⁵Nkealah, N., "(West) African Feminisms and their Challenges." (Journal of Literary Studies, 32(2), pp. 61-74, 2016).

The foundation of Indigenous feminism in Nigeria can be traced back to pre-colonial times when women played pivotal roles in their communities. However, colonialism and subsequent socio-political developments introduced patriarchal structures that marginalized women and eroded their traditional authority. The post-colonial era saw the rise of various feminist movements, but Indigenous feminism remained relatively subdued, overshadowed by more dominant narratives. In recent years, however, there has been a significant resurgence, driven by a new generation of Indigenous feminist leaders who are redefining the movement's scope and impact.

One of the key characteristics of Indigenous feminism in Nigeria is its holistic approach, which integrates cultural identity, social justice, and gender equality. This approach distinguishes it from mainstream feminism, which often centers on issues predominantly relevant to Western contexts.⁶ Indigenous feminists in Nigeria draw from their cultural heritage to address gender-based violence, economic inequality, and political marginalization, advocating for solutions that resonate with their communities' lived experiences.⁷ For instance, the movement has increasingly highlighted the role of Indigenous women in environmental conservation, recognizing their traditional knowledge and leadership in protecting natural resources.⁸

The thriving of Indigenous feminism in Nigeria can be seen in various spheres, including politics, education, and grassroots activism. Women like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Amina J. Mohammed have gained prominence on the global stage, while local activists work tirelessly to improve the lives of women within their communities. These efforts are supported by a growing body of literature and academic work that documents and analyzes the movement's progress and challenges.⁹

Moreover, Indigenous feminism in Nigeria is characterized by its inclusivity and intersectionality. It recognizes the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and seeks to address them collectively. This perspective aligns with global feminist discourses that emphasize the importance of intersectionality in understanding and combating inequality.¹⁰ Indigenous feminists in Nigeria advocate for the rights of women across different ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds, ensuring that the movement remains relevant and responsive to the needs of all women.

Despite its successes, Indigenous feminism in Nigeria faces significant challenges, including resistance from entrenched patriarchal systems and the need for greater visibility and support. However, the movement's resilience and adaptability suggest a promising future. As Indigenous feminism continues to grow and evolve, it offers valuable insights and strategies that can enrich global feminist discourses and contribute to more inclusive and effective advocacy for gender equality.

II. Historical Context of Indigenous Feminism in Nigeria

Indigenous feminism in Nigeria has deep roots, intertwined with the country's historical, cultural, and socio-political evolution. Understanding the historical context is crucial to appreciating the contemporary movement's dynamism and challenges.¹¹

⁶Amadiume, Ifi, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1997).

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónké. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁹Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's way." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 29, no. 2 (2004): 357-385. See also, Mikell, Gwendolyn, ed. *African feminism: The Politics of Survival in sub-Saharan Africa*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

¹⁰Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." In *Feminist legal theories*, pp. 23-51. (Routledge, 2013).

¹¹Chowdhury-Mohammad, Shadman, "Gender and Feminism in Pre-colonial and Postcolonial Nigerian Literature: Reading, Achebe, Adichie, and Atta." (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2022). Thesis:

<https://doi.org/10.32920/21668138.v1>

In pre-colonial Nigeria, gender roles and societal structures varied significantly among different ethnic groups. Many Indigenous communities, such as the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, had systems that, while patriarchal to some extent, also afforded women significant economic and social influence. For instance, Igbo women participated in trade and held positions of power through associations like the Umuada (daughters' assembly)¹², which mediated conflicts and made critical community decisions.¹³ Similarly, Yoruba women engaged in commerce and political activities, exemplified by figures like Queen Moremi and the Iyalode (women's chief).¹⁴ Hausa women's roles, while more confined due to stricter patriarchal norms, were nonetheless vital in the social and economic domains, particularly in areas like agriculture and trade.¹⁵

Colonialism, however, disrupted these Indigenous systems, imposing Western patriarchal norms that marginalized women and diminished their traditional roles. The introduction of British legal and administrative frameworks relegated women to the domestic sphere, stripping them of their public authority and economic independence. This colonial legacy entrenched gender inequalities that persisted into the post-colonial era.

The post-colonial period saw the rise of feminist movements influenced by global feminist discourses. However, these movements often prioritized issues relevant to educated urban women, overlooking the unique experiences of Indigenous women. Indigenous feminism, therefore, emerged as a distinct strand, addressing the specific cultural, social, and economic contexts of Indigenous communities. Scholars like Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí have been pivotal in highlighting the unique dimensions of African and Indigenous feminism, challenging Western feminist paradigms that often ignore local realities.¹⁶

III. Key Figures and Voices in Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous feminism in Nigeria has been shaped by numerous key figures whose contributions have significantly impacted their communities and the broader feminist movement. Prominent leaders such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, an early advocate for women's rights, played a crucial role in mobilizing women against colonial policies. Ransome-Kuti's activism, particularly through the Abeokuta Women's Union, highlighted the intersections of colonial oppression and gender discrimination. Her efforts paved the way for

¹²Akoleowo, V.O. (2021). "Religion, Patriarchal Construction and Gender Complementarity in Nigeria. In: Afolayan, A., Yacob-Haliso, O., Oloruntoba, S.O. (eds) Pathways to Alternative Epistemologies in Africa." Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60652-7_11>

¹³Amadiume, Ifi, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society.* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1987).

¹⁴Akoleowo, V.O. (2021). "Religion, Patriarchal Construction and Gender Complementarity in Nigeria. In: Afolayan, A., Yacob-Haliso, O., Oloruntoba, S.O. (eds) Pathways to Alternative Epistemologies in Africa." Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60652-7_11>

¹⁵ Women in Pre-Colonial Nigeria; Retrieved and can be accessed at <www.postcolonialweb.org/nigeria/precolwon.html>

¹⁶Amadiume, Ifi, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1997); see also Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónké. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses.* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

future generations of Indigenous feminist leaders.



The movie “*Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti*” was written by Tunde Babalola and directed by Bolanle Austen-Peters which was recently uploaded on Amazon Prime as of June 2024. It is a clear example of the bravery, activism and fight Ransome-Kuti exuded in Abeokuta. I encourage everyone to watch the movie. It gives you a sense of how the women of Abeokuta were encouraged to fight for what is right and just for women.

In contemporary times, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Amina J. Mohammed have become symbols of Indigenous women's potential and resilience. Okonjo-Iweala, as the first female Finance Minister of Nigeria and the current Director-General of the World Trade Organization,¹⁷ has used her platform to advocate for gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Similarly, Mohammed, as the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, has been a vocal advocate for sustainable development and the inclusion of women in decision-making processes.

Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie, a renowned author and feminist, has also made significant contributions to Indigenous feminism. Her writings, including the seminal essay “We Should All Be Feminists,”¹⁸ have brought global attention to the feminist movement in Nigeria. Adichie emphasizes the importance of storytelling in challenging gender norms and empowering women, using her literary platform to advocate for social change.

Grassroots activists and community organizers play a critical role in advancing Indigenous feminism. Women like EmemOkon, founder of the Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre,¹⁹ work at the community level to address issues such as environmental degradation, which disproportionately affects Indigenous women. These activists leverage traditional knowledge and community networks to drive social change, often facing significant resistance from entrenched patriarchal structures.

Case studies of influential Indigenous feminists demonstrate the diverse strategies employed to challenge gender inequalities. The struggles of the Ogoni women against environmental pollution by oil companies highlight the intersection of gender, environmental justice, and Indigenous rights. Their activism has

¹⁷ Retrieved from www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/dg_e/dg_e.htm on July 1, 2024.

¹⁸ Adichie CN, “We Should all be Feminists. (Vintage; 2014).

¹⁹ Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action. Retrieved from <https://gaggaalliance.org/beyond-the-spotlight-grassroots-advocacy-and-the-quest-for-true-change-in-the-african-region/> at July 1, 2024.

drawn international attention, emphasizing the critical role of Indigenous women in advocating for sustainable and just environmental practices.²⁰

IV. Cultural Identity and Indigenous Feminism

Cultural identity is a cornerstone of Indigenous feminism in Nigeria, influencing its principles, strategies, and goals. Indigenous feminists draw on their rich cultural heritage to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality in ways that resonate with their communities.

One significant aspect of this is the role of cultural heritage in shaping feminist ideals. Indigenous feminists often emphasize the importance of traditional practices and knowledge systems in addressing contemporary gender issues. For instance, the concept of "motherism," introduced by Catherine Acholonu, highlights the nurturing and communal roles of women, rooted in African traditions, as a framework for feminist advocacy.²¹ This approach contrasts with some Western feminist models that may prioritize individualism over communal well-being.

The intersection of gender, culture, and identity is another critical dimension. Indigenous feminists in Nigeria navigate complex identities, balancing their roles within their cultural communities and the broader society.²² They advocate for gender equality not as an abstract ideal but as a lived reality intertwined with their cultural and social identities. This intersectional approach recognizes the multifaceted nature of oppression and the need for holistic solutions that address all aspects of women's lives.²³

Environmental advocacy is a prime example of how traditional knowledge and cultural identity inform Indigenous feminism. Indigenous women in Nigeria have long been stewards of their natural environments, possessing extensive knowledge of local ecosystems. This traditional ecological knowledge is invaluable in efforts to combat environmental degradation and promote sustainable practices. Indigenous feminists leverage this knowledge in their advocacy, highlighting the crucial role of women in environmental conservation.²⁴

V. Challenges and Resistance to Indigenous Feminism

Despite its growing influence, Indigenous feminism in Nigeria faces numerous challenges and resistance from various quarters.²⁵ Patriarchal systems and societal norms remain significant obstacles. Deeply entrenched gender roles and expectations continue to marginalize women, particularly in rural and traditional communities.²⁶ Efforts to challenge these norms often meet with resistance from both men and women who

²⁰ Nixon, R., "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor." (Harvard University Press, 2011).

²¹ Acholonu, C. O., "Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism." (Afa Publications, 1995).

²² Coburn, E., LaRocque, E. (2020). "Gender and Sexuality: Indigenous Feminist Perspectives." In: Tremblay, M., Everitt, J. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Sexuality, and Canadian Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49240-3_6>

²³ "Feminism: What it Means and Why it Matters Right Now." UN Women – Headquarters], see <www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>; see also, Annelise Price, (2017) "Indigenous Feminism: An Intersectional Approach to a Marginalized Population." Can be accessed at <<https://blogs.ubc.ca/annapriceportfolio/files/2017/04/Final-Paper.pdf#:~:text=URL%3A%20https%3A%2F%2Fblogs.ubc.ca%2Fannapriceportfolio%2Ffiles%2F2017%2F04%2FFinal>>; see also Wane, N., "African Indigenous Feminist Thought." In: Wane, N., Kempf, A., Simmons, M. (eds) *The Politics of Cultural Knowledge*. (SensePublishers, 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-481-2_2>

²⁴ Wane, N. N., "Mapping the Field of Indigenous Knowledges in Anti-Colonial Discourse: A Transformative Journey in Education." *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(1-2), 187-205.

²⁵ McGuire-Adams, T. (2020). "Indigenous Feminist Theory and Embodied Settler Colonialism." In: *Indigenous Feminist Gikendaasowin (Knowledge)*. New Femininities in Digital, Physical and Sporting Cultures. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56806-1_2>

²⁶ Spencer-Wood, S.M. *Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism, Power Dynamics, and Social Agency Materialized in Colonial Institutions*. (*Int J HistorArchaeol*20, 477–491 (2016). <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-016-0356-3>>

perceive feminism as a threat to cultural values and social stability. This resistance can manifest in various forms, from social ostracism to violence against women activists.²⁷

Economic and political barriers further complicate the struggle for gender equality. Many Indigenous women face economic marginalization, limiting their opportunities for education, employment, and political participation.²⁸ The lack of economic resources restricts their ability to engage in activism and advocacy effectively. Additionally, political structures often exclude women from decision-making processes, perpetuating their marginalization.²⁹

Strategies for overcoming opposition are critical to the success of Indigenous feminism. Building alliances with other feminist movements and civil society organizations can amplify Indigenous women's voices and create broader support networks.³⁰ Education and awareness-raising efforts are also essential, helping to challenge and change harmful gender norms and stereotypes. Grassroots initiatives that empower women economically and politically can create a foundation for more effective advocacy and resistance to patriarchal systems.

VI. Impact and Achievements of Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous feminism in Nigeria has achieved significant milestones, impacting various aspects of society and paving the way for future progress.³¹ One of the most notable achievements is the influence on legislative and policy changes. Indigenous feminists have successfully advocated for laws and policies that address gender-based violence, economic inequality, and political representation. Numerous states in Nigeria have enacted laws to combat gender-based violence, spurred by the efforts of feminist activists and organizations.³² For instance, the passage of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act³³ in 2015 was a significant victory for women's rights advocates, providing legal protection against various forms of violence.

Social and economic advancements are also evident. Indigenous women have made strides in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment, contributing to their communities' overall well-being. Initiatives that support women's entrepreneurship and access to resources have helped reduce economic disparities and enhance women's independence and agency.³⁴

Looking to the future, Indigenous feminism in Nigeria has the potential for continued growth and influence. The movement's resilience and adaptability suggest that it will continue to address emerging challenges and

²⁷Nwankwor, C. "Nigeria: Women's Suffrage, Change, and Continuities in Political Participation." In: Franceschet, S., Krook, M.L., Tan, N. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights. Gender and Politics*. (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59074-9_18>

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹AnietieEwang, "Nigeria Risks Falling Further Behind on Women's Equality." (Human Rights Watch, 2022), can be accessed at <www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/08/nigeria-risks-falling-further-behind-womens-equality>

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³¹Fayemi, K. "30 States in Nigeria enact Laws prohibiting gender-based violence." (BusinessDay, 2021). Retrieved from <http://businessday.ng/news/article/30-states-in-nigeria-enact-laws-prohibiting-gender-based-violence-fayemi/>

³²Eniola, B.O., Aremo, J.I. (2023). "A Reflection on Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria." In: *Contemporary Issues on Governance, Conflict and Security in Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29635-2_18>

³³Nigeria: Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 (VAPP), 25 May 2015, <www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2015/en/105106> accessed on July 1, 2024.

³⁴Adeosun, O.T. and Owolabi, K.E., (2021) "Gender inequality: determinants and outcomes in Nigeria," *Journal of Business and Socio-economic Development*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 165-181. <<https://doi.org/10.1108/JBSED-01-2021-0007>>

opportunities. By fostering a more inclusive and intersectional feminist discourse, Indigenous feminism can contribute valuable perspectives and strategies to the global struggle for gender equality.³⁵

VII. Conclusion

The discourse surrounding Indigenous feminism in Nigeria has become evident that the movement transcends mere gender advocacy. It embodies a robust assertion of cultural identity, resilience against historical marginalization, and a proactive stance in reshaping societal narratives. Indigenous feminists assert their agency in challenging patriarchal norms, fostering alliances with broader feminist movements, and leveraging grassroots initiatives to empower women economically and politically. These efforts not only amplify Indigenous women's voices but also redefine notions of empowerment within the Nigerian context. Moving forward, sustaining this momentum requires continued collaboration, education, and advocacy to dismantle systemic barriers and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable future where Indigenous women thrive as leaders and catalysts of social change.

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