



### Voices Of Resistance: Nigerian Women and British Wartime Policies During the Second World War(1939-1945)

Lead Author

**Oluyemisi Abayomi Disu**

Affiliation:

Department of History & International Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Ede Osun State.



**Abstract**

*This study examines the role of women during the Second World War, highlighting their exclusion from decision-making as a significant economic development challenge. The involvement of women in the twentieth-century anti-colonial struggle, particularly their roles in social, financial, and political spheres, remains underexplored. Utilising archival sources, this research delves into women's participation in the Second World War, their challenges, and their responses to wartime threats to their socioeconomic status and livelihoods. Employing historical methods and both primary and secondary sources, the study uncovers the involvement of women in colonial Nigeria during the war, with a focus on their opposition to British wartime policies. Despite their significant public roles prior to the war, British economic and political disenfranchisement altered women's positions. The British imperial government's new economic policies led to severe hardships for women, prompting demands for justice during the interwar years (1939 to 1945). The study concludes that the foodstuff price scheme was a turning point for Nigerian women, influencing the development of the underground economy (black market) in subsequent history.*

**Keywords:** Woman, Nigeria, Britain, Second World War, Wartime policies, and Black Market,



**Co-Authors: Oluwakemi Abiodun Adesina, Olumide Victor Ekanade**

Department of History & International Studies, Faculty of Humanities,  
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State.

## **Introduction**

The Second World War had far-reaching implications for countries worldwide, even though this impact was more of uneven development. The Second World War was a period of both continuity and change. Like other colonial territories, Africa was lured into the conflict as the auxiliary of the belligerents. The contributions of Africa in supporting the efforts of Britain and France have been written by different varieties of writers.<sup>1</sup> According to most scholars, the Second World War brought a conflagration that eventually altered the socio-political and economic alignments, arrangements and structures of past centuries and the world generally. Britain, a significant participant in the war, was not left out in this global confrontation. In its war effort and dire need of soldiers and a workforce, Britain looked to its Empire – spread across the continents of Africa and Asia to prepare them for the war. Her colonies in West Africa particularly became an essential source of staffing and raw materials.<sup>2</sup>

Like other British colonies, Nigeria experienced a long economic crisis during this war due to the worldwide depression in commodity prices and credit markets. Throughout the war, the economic situation was still visible. As the colonial officials restructured the economy to meet the economic and security priorities necessitated by the conflict, the economic crisis took different dimensions and various ways.<sup>3</sup> The period was characterised by social, political and economic stagnation. The years between the wars saw little economic development in Nigeria and other West African colonies.<sup>4</sup> It saw the impact of the Second World War on the export of raw materials that

---

<sup>1</sup>David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War*, (London: James Currey, 1986); C. J. Korieh, *The Second World War and Its Aftermath*, chapter 5 (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 206

<sup>2</sup>David Killingray, *fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in The Second World War* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2012); See John W. T. Gbor, ed., *Military History: Nigeria from the Pre-Colonial Era to the Present* (Longman: Lagos, 2004); Ishola Olomola, "The Demobilization of Nigerian Troops, 1946–1950: Problem and Consequences," *ODU: A Journal of West Africa Studies*, no. 13 (1976); National Archives Ibadan (NAI), ComCol, 1/2807/s.7/Vol. II/245.

<sup>3</sup>J.A. Byfield, "Feeding the Troops Abeokuta (Nigeria) and World War II," *African Economic History* 35 (2007): 78

<sup>4</sup>M. Crowder, "The 1939 – 45 War and West Africa" In *History of West Africa*; vol. II, ed. J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, Chapter 17, (London: Longman Group Limited, 1974), p. 596

---

entered into international trade<sup>5</sup> and the economic implications of the war in the scarcity of resources caused by sudden war demands, which necessitated a diversion of resources from previous uses.<sup>6</sup> Before hostilities broke out, Britain had already put in place secret plans to restrict imports and exports, and the target was to conserve foreign exchange and secure access to certain commodities required by Britain and the Allied Powers.<sup>7</sup> The colonial economic policies transformed the Nigerian market and economic system, which only met the desires of Britain and milked the traders, especially the women in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta.

It must be noted that in all phases of Nigeria's development, Nigerian women participated actively, from the pre-colonial period through the colonial to the post-colonial era. The significant role played by Nigerian women in anti-war struggles and the struggles during the Second World War cannot be underestimated, as it also resulted in the formation of women's organisations. From records, women have long struggled to correct acts of discrimination and violence. This dates back to the nineteenth century, and they have actively participated in activities that aimed to better their lot, although such struggles have been labelled women's *palava*.<sup>8</sup> Before colonial Nigeria, women's interesting the distributive sector was recognised due to their importance in the distributive industry. Beginning in pre-colonial Nigeria, women had played prominent roles in the socioeconomic activities of the city. During the initial phase of colonial rule, the activities of Nigerian women extended beyond the socioeconomic spheres into governance activism and partisan politics.<sup>9</sup> Against this backdrop, this study examines the women's experiences during the Second World War in the wake of the underground economy and economic policies of the British in colonial Nigeria. Before exploring this, it is pertinent to explore women's experiences before the Second World War.

---

<sup>5</sup> T. Falola, "Cassava Starch for Export in Nigeria during the Second World War," *African Economic History* 18 (1989), p. 73

<sup>6</sup> T. Falola, "Salt is Gold": The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during the World War II," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26, no. 3 (1992): 414

<sup>7</sup> A. Olukoju, "Buy British, Sell Foreign: External Trade Control Policies in Nigeria during World War II and Its Aftermath, 1939-1950", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 2/3 (2002): 364-365

<sup>8</sup> A.S. Afolabi, "Lagos Market Women during the Inter-War Years: The Water Rate Agitation, 1932-1941," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 25 (2016): 102

<sup>9</sup> Muritala Monsur, "Women and Urban Experience, 1939-1960," chapter Four, In *Livelihood in Colonial Lagos*, Monsuru Muritala, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019) p 103



## Women in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

In the pre-colonial era, Nigerian women were involved in so many activities. Women played an active and prominent role in the socioeconomic and political development of the country. Ample testimony exists concerning their role in local market organisation and trade in the published observations of the nineteenth-century travellers and missionaries, including Hugh Clapperton (1826), Richard and John Lander (1830), Thomas Bowen (1857), William H. Clarke (published 1972, but the account covers his journeys from 1854 to 1858), and Anna Hinderer (1873).<sup>10</sup> Many tasks were undertaken by busy, industrious women like Madame Tinubu, who expanded the scope of her trade to the coast, Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan (the second Iyalode) and Erelu Kuti, amongst others. Economically, the division of labour was on a gender basis.<sup>11</sup> While the men were involved in felling trees and cultivating crops, women assisted in cultivating fields. Hence, they were engaged in trading activities in agriculture, which men produced. They took part in planting and harvesting. LaRay Denzer noted that the women of mid-western and eastern Nigeria engaged much in cultivation while the Yoruba women did not. Rather than engaging much in cultivation, the Yoruba women helped harvest, transport the harvested crops, process them into a variety of products for household consumption, and sell them in the markets. They processed cassava into gari, palm fruit into palm oil, and palm kernels into palm kernel oil. Thus, they assisted in harvesting and conveying farm products to the village and market. They processed the agricultural products for the market and carried out the marketing of these agricultural products, dominating the retail trade of all these products.<sup>12</sup> Although they did not process cocoa, women played a critical role in bulking each year's cocoa crop as they

---

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa, From the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo*, (London: Routledge, 2014; first published in 1829 by Carey, Lee & Carey, Philadelphia, 1829), p. 21; Robin Hallett, ed., *The Niger Journal of Richard and John Lander* (London: Routledge, 1965), 71, 88; T.J. Bowen, *Travels, Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856*, 2nd ed. (London: F. Cass, 1968), pp. 296-97 & 307-08; W.H. Clarke, *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland 1854-1858*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1972), pp. 13, 20, 33, 45, 54, 171, 184, 239-45; Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1877), pp. 202 & 295

<sup>11</sup> N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, ed. F.O. Okediji and O.O. Okediji, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970) pp 87-89

<sup>12</sup> LaRay Denzer, "Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27, no. 1 (1994): 7

---

moved through the rural areas purchasing cocoa.<sup>13</sup> The Nigerian women dominated the retail trade of imports such as salt, matches and textiles. They were involved in catching the fish at night and smoking the fish. Women took an active part in fishing by paddling canoe. They engaged in the mining of salt and grinding of corn.<sup>14</sup> In addition, they were also involved in crafts and services. Skilled women engaged in crafts or manufacturing, including weaving (and its associated tasks-combing cotton, spinning, and dyeing), pottery, bead making, mat weaving, soap making, beer brewing, and processing vegetable oils. For instance, in Abeokuta, women controlled the manufacturing of indigo-dyed cloths, one of their major economic activities and an industry heavily dependent on imports of cheap textiles, caustic soda and synthetic dye.<sup>15</sup>

Women were pivotal in the local and state economy, organising household industries, operating the local market system, and establishing long-distance trade networks. Hinderer included many industries that women monopolised, including making pottery, dying cloth, processing palm and nut oils, and making soap.<sup>16</sup> The Lander brothers remarked that "The women of Jenna employ themselves generally either in spinning cotton or preparing Indian corn for food."<sup>17</sup> In Badagry, Clapperton visited three dye houses in Badagry, "with upwards of twenty vats or large earthen pots in each, and all in full work."<sup>18</sup> Thus, they controlled occupations like food processing, cloth and mat weaving, pottery making, tie and dye, and cooking. Samuel Johnson also provides the most detailed examination of women's economic contribution. He noted that all women engaged in household production, crafts, or trade, careers in all these areas. Trading dominated women's activities in urban centres, and their training began early. Little girls hawked various commodities under the tutelage of their mothers, female relatives, or guardians. New brides normally expected their husbands to give them their starting capital for independent trading. Women's trading activities varied according to their means, from selling small quantities of food items outside the compound or in the local markets to long- distance trading on a very large scale. Indefatigable female traders traversed Yorubaland and

---

<sup>13</sup> Julian Clarke, "Households and the Political Economy of Small-Scale Cash Crop Production in South-Western Nigeria," *Africa* 5, no. 3 (1981): 7-23

<sup>14</sup> G.A. Marshall, "Women, Trade, and the Yoruba Family," (Ph.D. Thesis), Columbia University, 1964

<sup>15</sup> J.A. Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Indigo Dyers in western Nigeria* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002)

<sup>16</sup> Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, 60 & 202

<sup>17</sup> Hallett, ed., *The Niger Journal of Richard and John Lander*, p. 64

<sup>18</sup> Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition*, p. 15



beyond in large caravans, sometimes numbering hundreds of people, trading in foodstuffs, kola nuts, palm oil, cloth, arms, and ammunition. They took great risks. Referring to Ibadan traders, Johnson observed that: "the women of those days were as hardy as the men, and often went in a body as caravans to Ikire and Apomu for com and other foodstuffs although the road was unsafe from kidnappers. They supplied the town with food whilst the men were engaged in slave hunting."<sup>19</sup> The Nigerian women, most especially the Yoruba women, controlled their economic activities and the profits made from them. Big traders employed enslaved persons and freeborn labour (male and female), fixed prices, controlled the movement of goods, and established and ran their own crafts guilds or associations.

The people witnessed women's group consciousness and solidarity based on their needs and mutual interests. They were involved in their towns' economic activities and held onto significant rights in society. Nigerian women had critical legal rights in their natal homes. Some remarkable rights include the right to serve as representatives in decision-making bodies, the right to partake in public policy, the right to inheritance, and the right to own property. Land was owned communally, and women had access to it through their husbands or parents. Women had access to the use of their fathers' houses, a share in the profits from their fathers' farms, and participation in their paternal lineage's ancestral and orisa cults.<sup>20</sup> Thus, women possessed independent sources of ritual, economic, and political influence.<sup>21</sup> They could count on their father's people for financial assistance in their trading ventures and protection in cases of marital discord. Although a man was the head of the household in a patrilineal system, older women had control of the labour of younger family members.<sup>22</sup> While women were not equal to men socially and politically, they wielded influence in policy-making and processed institutional mechanisms to make the influence felt.<sup>23</sup> Despite women's

---

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (London: Routledge, 1921), p. 245

<sup>20</sup> N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, ed. F.O. Okediji and O.O. Okediji, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), pp. 87-89

<sup>21</sup> Sandra T. Barnes, "Gender and the Politics of Support and Protection in Pre-Colonial West Africa," paper presented at a conference on "Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power: Case Studies in African Gender," New York University, 8-11 April 1991.

<sup>22</sup> McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, and Social Change*, p. 110

<sup>23</sup> C. Johnson, "Grassroots Organizing: Women in Anti colonial Activity in Southwestern Nigeria," *African Studies Review* 25, (1982): 137-157  
doi:10.2307/524214



enormous involvement and achievements during the pre-colonial era in Nigeria, constraints later existed, limiting their effectiveness.

With the introduction of British colonial rule and its influence spreading gradually throughout Nigeria, the imperial government successfully imposed colonial rule through a series of treaties and strategic military expeditions where necessary. Scholars have debated at length about the nature of the impact of colonial rule on Africa in general and specific colonies .in particular. Central issues in this debate concern the degree of change specific societies experienced due to the African encounter with Western values, laws, and government. European policy-makers, however much they wanted to engineer change, realised the importance of dialogue and compromise with local authorities in developing and enforcing new laws and policies. More often than the colonial administrators liked to admit, their African subjects transformed European policies and institutions into new syncretic forms in tune with their values and culture; one of the consequences of this was that the introduction of colonial rule caused women's status to deteriorate and gave rise to gender inequality. Colonialism, however, became a break that altered the existing position of women in Nigeria. As noted by Etienne and Leacock, women's economic roles and ability to participate in local government were notably changed during this period.<sup>24</sup> Mba's broad study of women's political activity in southern Nigeria concluded that "the position of women was diminished and enhanced under colonialism."<sup>25</sup> Though women lost a part of their former political authority, they still wielded influence. They commanded respect by exploiting new opportunities in wholesale and long-distance trade and later in underground economies like black markets. The literature on the market in Africa generally has immensely discussed the dominant role women played in market activities at all levels, locally, nationally and internationally. The position occupied by women in economic transactions has significantly influenced development in the political arena. In Nigeria, for example, market women have progressed in their trade transactions by extending economic relationships with foreign entrepreneurs, especially Europeans, during the colonial period and even after independence. They succeeded in linking local market transactions with foreign economic interests.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>M. Etienne and E. Leacock, "Introduction," in *Women and Colonialism*, M. Etienne and E. Leacock, eds., (New York: Praeger, 1980), p 17.

<sup>25</sup>Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982), p. 67

<sup>26</sup> Ayo Bamidele, *Public Administration and the Conduct of Community Affairs among the Yoruba in Nigeria* (California: ICS Press, 2000), p. 184



Within these changed circumstances of the colonial situation and the perceived threat to women's interests, women re-strategised by regrouping their forces to preserve and protect their interests. Strategies employed included organising market women along new lines, using traditional skills and concepts of leadership, and western protest actions. Notable in this were the Southwestern Nigerian women, the Lagos Market Women's Association, and, in roughly the same period, the Abeokuta Women's Union, which also came on board. The significant role played by these groups of women during the Second World War is a major impetus for this study.

### **Nigerian Women and the Wartime Economy**

The Nigerian women's role in the Southern Protectorate's economies, specifically mostly in the Yoruba provinces like Lagos and Abeokuta, demonstrated that very few decisions regarding the economy failed to contribute significantly to their livelihood. The outbreak of World War II had a devastating effect on livelihood in colonial Nigeria.<sup>27</sup> Suffice it to say that women's livelihood in colonial Nigeria was in the markets. One of the effects of the war caused by the economic policies was that women were affected and seriously hurt by the policies on cocoa and palm kernels. At first, while the British were trying to deny Germany of war materials, it adopted the war measure of "strangling German trade", and by so doing, the German market for cocoa and palm products was lost out as all exports to Germany were stopped.<sup>28</sup> As a means of safeguarding cocoa production due to its essential role in the Nigerian economy, the government bought the whole crop.<sup>29</sup> In fact, during the war depression, the government lowered its prices compared to the prices of others, though the government price was not stable as it fluctuated throughout the war.<sup>30</sup> The decline in demand, the low storage and shortage of cocoa in Nigeria, and the shortage of shipping space to London were used

---

<sup>27</sup> A. Olukoju, *The "Liverpool" of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impacts of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 230

<sup>28</sup> A. Olorunfemi, "Effects of War-Time Trade Controls on Nigerian Cocoa Traders and Producers, 1939-45; A Case-Study of the Hazards of a Dependent Economy," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13, no. 4 (1980): 676

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 677

<sup>30</sup> A. Olukoju, "Buy British, Sell Foreign: External Trade Control Policies in Nigeria during World War II and Its Aftermath, 1939-1950", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, no. 2/3 (2002):367



by the officials to justify the prices in shipping space to London.<sup>31</sup> Through the low prices, it was realised that farmers were producing at a loss, and many farmers were noted by the agricultural officers to have abandoned their cocoa farms.<sup>32</sup> The profit margins for women traders who collected cocoa from the farms were equally small due to low prices.

Besides, the policies on palm kernels did not support the livelihood sustainability of women. Due to the difficulties faced by the government in shipping and storage, actions were taken on palm products as the state made inconsiderate decisions. In August of 1940, the government declared that palm kernels should not be bought on a large scale as they were used to. However, this resulted from the passing of all the continental sources into the hands of the enemy.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, there was a high priority of the palm kernels item, which amounted to the priority for its available storage. The government later banned the export trade of palm kernel from the cocoa producing areas in western Nigeria to discourage a glut of palm kernel on the market. Hence, women could no longer benefit substantially from trading in cocoa and palm kernels, but some benefitted from the state's decision to create an export market in cassava starch. Even the export market cassava starch, which some women benefitted was not made to last long. Indeed, the war did not allow cassava starch to be obtained from Java and Brazil, where Britain seemed to be looking for alternatives as significant sources for the British market.<sup>34</sup> Besides, in most Yoruba societies, where starch was used for laundry purposes, women were seen dominating the production system.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, indigo dyers also saw their markets shrink as traders from French colonies were banned from Nigeria.<sup>36</sup>

Another severe problem that the women faced was the inflation in the prices of goods, and this was a result of the challenges confronted by the British colonial administrators in Nigeria during the Second World War, as food shortage and general scarcity of resources caused by sudden war demands which led to a diversion of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Olorunfemi, "Effects of War-Time Trade Controls on Nigerian Cocoa Traders and Producers, 1939-45," pp 683-684

<sup>32</sup>A. Olukoju, "Buy British, Sell Foreign," p 369

<sup>33</sup> Olorunfemi, "Effects of War-Time Trade Controls on Nigerian Cocoa Traders and Producers, 1939-45," p 684

<sup>34</sup> T. Falola, "Cassava Starch for Export in Nigeria during the Second World War," *African Economic History* 18 (1989), p. 76

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78

<sup>36</sup> J.A. Byfield, "Taxation, Women, and the Colonial State: Egba Women's Tax Revolt," *Meridians* 3, no. 2 (2003): 264



resources from previous uses.<sup>37</sup> Food shortage was experienced everywhere in the country,<sup>38</sup> although some areas suffered more than others. There was little food supply throughout the country as farmers shifted their involvement in the production of food crops to the promotion of export crops. Besides, there was no improvement in farm technology. The farmers still maintained the use of traditional hoes and cutlasses. This factor restricted farmers in producing in larger quantities as they could not cultivate to increase the production of food crops and meet the demand and supply of these food commodities. In addition, many farmers, especially the young ones, found it challenging to embrace farming. They no longer go to the farm as they replaced their farming activity and occupation with preoccupying themselves in industries. Thus, the labour that was hitherto meant to produce foodstuff in the rural areas was in the urban areas doing labourers, loafing, and hawking. They were also conscripted into the army.

Similarly, during this wartime period, Nigerian women were involved in street trading, petty trading, and hawking. However, this standard livelihood for females, young and old, in Nigeria faced several objections from colonial authorities and, to some extent, the educated elite.<sup>39</sup> Inversely, while there was an increase in the demand of food by consumers, there was a reduction in the number of producers, which resulted in the inflation of food crop prices.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, the output of farm produce was not adequate to meet the needs of the people in most of the provinces in Nigeria. To rescue the situation by restricting the exportation of certain farm produce from the producing centres to other needy provinces to prevent an increase in the prices of goods, the food price control scheme was initiated in 1941 by Captain A.P. Pullen whose name was attached to the policy.<sup>41</sup> This achieved little but led to much confrontation between local traders and officials, several times becoming a

---

<sup>37</sup> T. Falola, "Salt is Gold": The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during the World War II," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26, no. 3 (1992), p 415

<sup>38</sup> *National Archives* (NAI), Series CSO 26 File No. 36378, p. 2

<sup>39</sup> NAI, Com. Col. 1, File 1368, vol. 1, "Correspondence from Holley, A.G (Town Engineer) to the Secretary, Town Council, Lagos, 31 March 1932

<sup>40</sup> Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1914-1947," *Journal of the Society of Nigeria* VI, no.4 (1937): 416

<sup>41</sup> Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1914-1947," in *Essays in Economic History*, W. Oyemakinde (Ibadan: Sunlight Syndicate Ventures, 2003), p. 108

---

significant issue in local politics.<sup>42</sup> These restrictions caused much hardship to farmers and traders, mostly women. For instance, farmers in Oyo province complained bitterly about trade restrictions. This was due to the poor sales during the 1943 yam harvest since they were forbidden to export to places like Ibadan, Lagos and other urban centres. However, the appointed agents could not purchase all the harvest, and farmers were holding a large surplus which they could not dispose of legally.<sup>43</sup>

This restriction resulted in a substantial decrease in the volume of foodstuffs marketed. Between 1940 and 1942, there was a fall in the volume of certain foodstuffs imported and sold in Nigeria. Inflation was also rampant during the Second World War. Prices rose abnormally without any corresponding increase in wages or profit margin. For instance, a bag of local rice from Abeokuta was sold for forty-five shillings in 1938, it increased to fifty shillings in 1940 and 1944, it was sold for seventy shillings. The price of a bag of yam flour, sold for twelve shillings in 1940, rose to forty-five in 1946.<sup>44</sup> In Lagos, there was a significant rise in the prices of imports, especially essential commodities. The price of a bag of cement increased from £2 11s to £9 6s in the second week of September 1939.<sup>45</sup> The prices of bicycles, sewing machines and bedsteads advanced by £1 on existing levels; those of the 26-gauge corrugated iron sheets moved from £2:11:2 to £4 2s while prices of the 35-gauge sheets rose from £1 5s to £2.<sup>46</sup>

There was also a significant rise in the prices of essential commodities such as salt, sugar, and milk, and this also led to a severely short supply from 1942 onwards and the strict rationing of the available supplies.<sup>47</sup> The import-substitution strategy adopted by the government, rather than ameliorating the condition, further worsened the situation. For instance, salt scarcity in wartime Nigeria was often acute to the point

---

<sup>42</sup> W. Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no.4 (1973): 413

<sup>43</sup> NAI, Oyo Prof. 1/1294: President, Oyo Province, to District Officer, Ibadan, May 1, 1940: 125

<sup>44</sup> NAI, Ib Div 1/1/1984, Inspector of Produce to District Offices, Ibadan, August 10, 1946: 88

<sup>45</sup> A. Olukoju, *The "Liverpool" of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impacts of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 230

<sup>46</sup> NAI, DCI 1/1 4031 vol. 1 "Control of Merchandise Prices" Minute to P.A.S, 11 September, 1939. See A. Olukoju, *The "Liverpool" of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impacts of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 230

<sup>47</sup> A. Olukoju, *The "Liverpool" of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impacts of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 231

---

that the police once sighted a woman begging for it from house to house along Bucknor Street in Lagos after she had failed to get any from the market.<sup>48</sup> The policy of controlling prices of local foodstuffs was unacceptable to farmers, suppliers, and even traders, who claimed that they had not been consulted before the fixing was done and that the cost of producing the goods had also not been considered. The colonial government turned a deaf ear to the grievances of the women traders. In bypassing the scheme, the women later devised a means by establishing what was known as a 'black market,' where they sold goods at convenient prices. Transactions in the black market were conducted discreetly in secret locations outside the main markets. By October 1943, the colonial government had discovered that the price control was not effective because prices of foodstuffs were increasing steadily, and the cost of living was high. A committee that was set up to look into the issue recommended that the government should bulk purchase essential local foodstuffs and retail at controlled prices at designated places in Lagos.<sup>49</sup>

Following this, the British bought foodstuffs directly from the source and sold them at controlled prices in designated stores. European firms served as the sole government agents in purchasing foodstuffs for the supply zones.<sup>50</sup> Transport control and diversion of labour both for services construction and to obtain maximum output of export goods helped to decrease supplies of local saleable consumer goods. This affected most supplying zones in Nigeria. Lagos experienced a scarcity of vegetables, Kaduna experienced the shortage of *garri* in November 1943; between November and December 1944, Ikot-Ekpene and Ijebu province were disturbed for the same reason, Abeokuta province experienced the shortage of rice and maize, Oyo province experienced the shortage of yam and yam flour, Hausaland experienced the shortage of palm oil from Burutu, pepper, onions and cattle. The years were generally bad, especially the year 1943, which saw the highest price rise in local foodstuffs as the commodities became scarcer. The situation became so alarming that the Office of Inspector of Prices gave a warning. People were warned against selling foodstuffs at exorbitant prices.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> NAI, Com. Col. 1, File 2283/S.10, vol. II, "Salt Rationing" Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police, CID to Commissioner of Colony, 31 July, 1942

<sup>49</sup> CSO 26/4, 095-12, Vol. XII, Colony Annual Report, 1939, National Archives Ibadan (NAI)

<sup>50</sup> CSO 26, 36289/522, Minutes of Meeting of the Supply Board, 4 April 1944, NAI

<sup>51</sup> Ije Prof. 1,2648x, Vol. I, from Secretary, AWAM to Deputy Food Controller, 18 October 1943, NAI

In addressing this, Pullen initiated and published the maximum measurement standard for commodities and the maximum selling prices for foodstuffs in Lagos. The price unit per standard measure was called 'oloruka' by market women and their customers. Prices of all other commodities, both perishable and non-perishable, were fixed, and the supply was regulated without considering other factors like transportation and the situation of things in the markets. The table below shows the controlled prices for essential food items as well as the price limits per standard measure to conform with:

**Table 1:** The controlled prices for essential food items and the price limits per standard measure

Commodity	Price	Unit	Price per Oloruka
Peppers	46s. 8d	Per cwt wholesale	1s. 3d
Peppers	53s 4d	Per cwt retail	„
Coarse Grade Garri	3s. $4\frac{1}{2}$ d	Per cwt wholesale	$2\frac{1}{2}$ d
Coarse Grade Garri	3s. $8\frac{1}{2}$ d	Per cwt retail	„
Fine Grade Garri	3s. 10d	Per cwt wholesale	4d
Fine Grade Garri	4s. 4d	Per cwt retail	„
White beans from Northern Nigeria	8s. 9d	Per cwt wholesale	7d
White beans from Northern Nigeria	10s.	Per cwt retail	„
Local beans	7s. 6d	Per cwt wholesale	6d
Local beans	8s. 6d	Per cwt retail	„

**Source:** Public Notice No. 15 of 1941 as shown in Official Gazette No. 11 of 20, February 1941.

The market women were expected to purchase their issuance each morning in bags or tins from the government stores and retailed the foodstuffs by the pan measure or bottle and at the prices at which they were controlled and were therefore forced to sell at or below the controlled prices at which foodstuffs were obtained in the government stalls. The failure to do so ended up making some women not to get trade.<sup>52</sup>The measure did not favour the market women.

<sup>52</sup> G.O. Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria 1939-1953* (London: Longman, 1973), p 64



Their opposition emanated chiefly from the fact that the prices fixed by the government for foodstuffs were, in many instances, unfair as they were based on the pre-war standards. The market women had to protest.

The failure of the Pullen markets had many contributing factors. Crucial of these significant factors were the refusal of market women to undermine their livelihoods and the inability of the colonial bureaucracy to create viable alternatives for consumers. Women's critical role within the economies of Nigeria, most especially in Yorubaland, like Lagos, and other Yoruba provinces, such as Abeokuta, meant that their livelihoods were affected by a few economic decisions. Initially, the Nigerian women were responsible and involved in the processing of cassava into *gari*, palm kernels into palm kernel oil and palm fruit into palm oil. Although women were not responsible for and were neither involved in the processing of cocoa, they played a prominent role in bulking each year's cocoa crop as they moved through the rural areas to buy cocoa.<sup>53</sup> Women dominated the retail trade of imports such as salt, matches and textiles and controlled the manufacturing of indigo-dyed cloths, one of the significant economic activities in Abeokuta and depended mainly on imported cheap textiles, caustic soda and synthetic dye.<sup>54</sup> But with the outbreak of the war, things changed drastically.

As part of its measure, there was the search for substitute products to replace or augment scarce ones.<sup>55</sup> One of the new raw materials was starch obtained from cassava. The extent to which the colonial government could search for resources could be seen both in the production and export of cassava starch. The extensive control measures taken during the Second World War immensely influenced starch export. There was the regulation of the quantity exported as shipping space was scarce, and the imperial government fixed the price; and market forces were not allowed to determine other significant developments but by the imperial bureaucracy in Lagos and the Food Ministry in London. During this wartime, there was also the need to shift the sources of cassava starch because of the hardship of getting adequate supplies from Java and Brazil and the fear that the war might even cut off these supplies. There was also the consideration of the economy in the search for alternative markets.

---

<sup>53</sup> Julian Clarke, "Households and the Political Economy of Small-Scale Cash Crop Production in South-Western Nigeria," *Africa* 51, no. 3 (1981): 7-23

<sup>54</sup> Judith Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Indigo Dyers in Western Nigeria* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 2002)

<sup>55</sup> Michael Crowder, "World War II and Africa: Introduction," *Journal of African History*, 26 (1985)



For instance, in 1940, it was reported that the Colonial Office emphasised that there were manufacturers in Britain who found it worthy to use cassava starch from the colonies of British, where prices were low, to give their finished product "preferential benefits in Empire countries, especially in the Dominions".<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, the Pullen Scheme of Britain, which attempted to transform the African marketplace into a regulated space, aligned more with labor relations regarding wages and workers supervision than with independent and autonomous traders. By so doing, the economic space of women in the marketplace was transformed, diffusely and indirectly, if not in practice, from an established fixture of urban life into a marginalized "black market". In fact, the Pullen scheme tried to undermine the economic freedom of women in favour of a more akin masculine public sphere. The first to react to this arrangement was the market women, who were not pleased with the system because they were cut off from business since the government was now doing the purchase and the distribution. Captain Pullen summoned Madam Pelewura for a meeting on January 15 1945 to discuss the foodstuff problems. He intended that if Madam Pelewura could be bought over, the Lagos Foodstuff Scheme would make good progress. At the meeting, Captain Pullen justified the reason for the Lagos Market Scheme as an excuse for the wartime crisis. He therefore sought her cooperation, but Pelewura refused and insisted that even if she was offered one hundred pounds per month, she would not agree to do so because 'the scheme had snatched away the legitimate trade from the Lagos Market Women'.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the wartime economic policies in terms of administration eventually undermined the functions of *Iyalaja*, unlike what was in the pre-colonial Yoruba society. The Pullen scheme demonstrated the colonial's limits to remaking the relationship in the marketplace between gender and autonomy. While the male wage worker operated in the public sphere, the female domestic worker operated in the private sphere to reproduce the social conditions necessary for a stable, reliable workforce. For instance, while male wage workers argued for higher wages based on their status as breadwinners, their wives were largely economically independent. They made significant

---

<sup>56</sup> National Archives Ibadan (NAI), Colonial Secretary's Office (C.S.O\_26/36895 Vol. 1 Cassava Products: Export Trade

<sup>57</sup> Olumuyiwa Okuseinde, "Managing Urban Food Crisis: The Lagos Foodstuff Marketing Scheme, 1943 1946," in *Urban Transition in Africa: Aspects of Urbanization and Change in Lagos*, (ed.), Kunle Lawal (Lagos: Pumark Nigeria Limited, 1994), pp 70-74.

---

contributions to the household economy and to the eventual success of the general strike.<sup>58</sup>

Pullen's plans for the marketplace were based on a campaign of standardisation and regulation, not only of prices but also of labour relationships. As the Pullen stalls were established, the nature of the market woman's work was redefined as an employment relationship that could be brought to an end at the decision of her male supervisor. With Pullen's focus on standardising prices, weights, and measures rather than relying on negotiation between traders and consumers, the Pullen scheme attempted to diminish the economic autonomy of market women significantly. This explains why the market women were the only ones actively opposed to the Pullen scheme. By this point, they had amassed significant support from the press, the Lagos chiefs, religious authorities, and "a host of other respectable personalities in the community."<sup>59</sup>

Above all, the Pullen scheme attempted to standardise and regulate the marketplace according to the presumably logical colonial presupposition of the normal economic state of affairs. This posed a direct challenge to the autonomy of market women and agency and the continuity with which they had enjoyed those privileges. The strength of the response of the market women provides a powerful example of women's resistance to their deprivation and injustice at the hands of colonial authorities who refused to recognise the deepness of their expertise and organisation. The colonial administration concentrated on pegging prices in Lagos, the capital of the colony, in the hope that such an action at the centre would check the problem all over the country, but it was by and large a record of failure which proved embarrassing. However, the unsuccessful attempt to control prices during the Second World War led to its strong opposition by the Nigerian women.

### **Market Women's Reaction to the Wartime Economic Policies**

The dominant role played by women at all levels, locally, nationally and internationally, in market activities has been identified by different writers. The idea of women's activism, particularly in the context of colonial history in Lagos and Nigeria, generally calls upon images of markets and mass movements, of many women audibly occupying

---

<sup>58</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, "Domesticity and Difference: Male Breadwinners, Working Women, and Colonial Citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian General Strike." *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 783-812.

<sup>59</sup> *West African Pilot*, September 25, 1945



public spaces to assert their rights as gendered and empowered beings.<sup>60</sup> Initially, the livelihood of women in Nigeria was in the markets. In southern Nigeria, women were known to be in charge of the markets. Historically, women dominated and controlled market trading. The regulating of prices and quality for market women's types of goods was done by a leading female chief or the head of the market who also resolved commercial disputes.<sup>61</sup> With the introduction and imposition of the unpopular wartime economic policies, most especially in the setting up price controls and regulation of the sale of food, the power of markets shifted to the male. This change was, however, implemented because the female traders could refuse to sell, thereby closing the market, and the shutting down of the markets might be enough to make the imperial government reconsider their plans.<sup>62</sup>

With the World War II outbreak, the British implemented broad wartime regulations to requisite food for military purposes, established production quotas in agricultural provinces, and controlled food prices and distribution in the Lagos markets. These regulations extended colonial control into the food marketplace, which was dominated by independent self-governing traders who consisted mainly of women. The first to react to these economic policies of the wartime was the market women, who were not pleased with the system because they were cut off from business since the government was now making purchases and distribution.<sup>63</sup> These market women objected not only to the threat that food price control presented to their livelihood but also to the threat it represented to their economic autonomy. In response to some of these British market ordinances and economic policies that appeared unfavourable to women in the market and traditional practices, women formed organisations. In Lagos, there was the founding of the Lagos Market Women's Association and the Abeokuta Women's Union in 1946,

Women in Lagos markets stuck to the pre-existing trade systems before the colonial era. They adapted it to the changing nature of

---

<sup>60</sup> A.A. George, "Feminist Activism and Class Politics: The Example of the Lagos Girl Hawker Project," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3/4 (2007): 128

<sup>61</sup> M.K. McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*, (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2010), p. 66

<sup>62</sup> Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4 (1973)

<sup>63</sup> O.B. Ojoaba and O.E. Ojo, "Influence of British Economic Activities on Lagos Traditional Markets, 1900-1960," *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol., 23 (2014): 128

---

urbanisation in the colonial era. However, the colonial officers planned to centralise the retail system to assert imperial order and nationalise revenue. Subsequently, clerical salesmen were appointed to manage retail spots created by the government. Lagos market women were central actors in challenging food price control, and they engaged the colonial administration. However, the colonial state planned to use the policy of food price control and takeover of market management, which the market women resisted aggressively. Lagos Market Women Association (LMWA) used petitions, protests and friendly alliances with labour unions to stop the price control scheme. LMWA engaged in war on both fronts; the first was against the Pullen scheme, and the other supported the Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA) demanded by colonial civil servants through labour unions. They struggled to maintain the economic power of commodity prices in the markets. The market women, under the banner of the Lagos Movement Women's Association, vigorously protested against the colonial policies. They protested against the price control plan popularly known as the Pullen Scheme after its director, Captain A.P. Pullen. In a memorandum of May 21, 1942 addressed to the Food Controller, the Oyingbo Market Women Association condemned food price control in Lagos as a useless scheme which should be scrapped.<sup>64</sup> They argued that seasonal variations in supplies determined price fluctuation and that the price structure operating in Lagos reflected the cost at the producing areas that the government had not dared to influence. Ernest Ikoli, in his letter to the Inspector of Prices on August 13 1942, claimed to have interviewed a cross-section of the Lagos market women, and he concluded that the whole system before price control was "so nicely balanced that price adjusted themselves according to the laws of supply and demand".<sup>65</sup>

The market women defended themselves economically and politically through protests, petitions, editorials, boycotts, rallies, and demonstrations to address Pullen directly, as well as intentional non-cooperation with his inspectors and his controlled food markets.<sup>66</sup> The Market Women Association opposed the Pullen market, which was founded on the simple economic reality that government-controlled prices were unrealistically low, thus putting traders who operated on

---

<sup>64</sup> NAI, Comm. Col. 1, Series File No. 2516, Vol. 1 From the Oyingbo Market Women Association to the Food Controller, 21 May 1942, p. 178

<sup>65</sup> NAI, Comm. Col. 1, Series, File No. 2516, Vol. 1 Ernest Ikoli to the Inspector of Prices, 13 August 1942, p. 231

<sup>66</sup> E. Kamm, "Price Control, Profiteering, and Public Cooperation; The Lagos Market Women's Association and the Limits of Colonial Control," (University Honours These, Paper 309, 2016), p. 2

---

fragile profit margins rushing out of business.<sup>67</sup> The Lagos Women's League sent a petition to the Governor on September 17 1942, asking for his protection against food price control measures, which, according to them, sought to remove the basis of their livelihood.<sup>68</sup> They asserted that farmers were selling above pre-war prices and argued that they must add rising transport costs and some profit margin before arriving at the selling price in Lagos.<sup>69</sup>

The actions of the market women reinforced the reality that women, especially the traders, were vital forces in anti-colonial struggles. Women such as Rabi Alaso, Madam Alimotu Pelewura<sup>70</sup> and Madam Abibat Mogaji opposed Britain's economic policies. Madam Pelewura, the Market Women's Guild's president, informed the Colony Commissioner that all markets would be closed on Wednesday, November 24 1943. This action was, however, taken by the women to defend their ability to earn a living for themselves and their families. The singular action of the market women was also carried out to protect their ability to operate amongst themselves and their communities without colonial intervention. Their protests against the evils of Pullen Scheme gained support from other sectors of Lagosian society. This made the opposition to the Pullen price control scheme 'unanimous' in the press.<sup>71</sup> Captain Pullen later summoned Madam Pelewura to a meeting on January 15 1945, to discuss the foodstuff problems. He intended that if Madam Pelewura could be bought over, the Lagos Foodstuff Scheme would make good progress. At the meeting, Captain Pullen justified the reason for the Lagos Market Scheme as an excuse for the wartime crisis. He therefore sought her cooperation, but Pelewura refused and insisted that even if she was offered one hundred pounds per month, she would not agree to do so because 'the scheme had snatched away the legitimate trade from the Lagos Market Women'.<sup>72</sup> Just like the LMWA, the longstanding economic crisis without any hint of relief created conditions for the

---

<sup>67</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonisation and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp 8-9

<sup>68</sup>NAI, Com. Col. 1, Series, File No. 2686, From the Lagos Women's League to the Chief Secretary to the Government, Lagos, September 17, 1942, p. 2

<sup>69</sup>*Daily Times*, June 6, 1943.

<sup>70</sup> J. Cheryl, "Madam Alimotu Pelewura and the Lagos Market Women," *Tarikh*, 7, (1981)

<sup>71</sup>The price control scheme was condemned as an unrealistic approach to settling the crisis of the day. See *West African Pilot*, 16 October 1941

<sup>72</sup>Okuseyinde, "Managing Urban Food Crisis: Lagos Foodstuff Marketing Scheme, 1943-1946," in *Urban Transition in Africa: Aspects of Urbanization and Change in Lagos*, (ed.) Kunle Lawal (Lagos: Pumark Nigeria Limited, 1994), pp. 70-74

---

emergence of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), which came into existence in 1947 through the coming together of two different strands of women's organisations- market women and Christian-educated women of the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC). At the first meeting of the ALC that was held March 15, 1945, at the Abeokuta Grammar School with Alake, Ademola, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti "reported a case of seizure of rice at Isabo market by some Native Authority policemen." She also recounted the steps she had taken to have the rice returned to its owners.<sup>73</sup>

### **Nigerian Women and the Underground Economy**

During the Second World War, as the colonial administration's economic policies and measures greatly affected Nigeria's nature and character, the women began to get themselves involved in the underground economy. The success of the underground economy among women in colonial Nigeria, especially in Lagos, was transient. The failure of the economic policies to address the problem confronting the economy of Nigeria ushered in worries about the food crisis and the economy at large. The scarcity of food led the whole country to be frightened and thus increased the inflation in the prices of available foodstuffs. The entire country was engulfed conspicuously with panic, and some provinces were so seriously frightened by an exaggerated notion of the degree of scarcity of foodstuffs and the tempo of price rise in the country in general that they got somewhat neurotic about holding that which they had. With this unpleasant aftermath, there was the proliferation of provincial legislation which banned the selling and even moving of foodstuffs outside the country by individuals. This could be seen when the Central Secretariat in Lagos warned the provincial authorities on this as follows:

"The consequences of an order prohibiting the movement of foodstuffs from any one province may have unfortunate results elsewhere".<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, Abeokuta provincial authorities passed such restrictive orders with effect from June 11 1941,<sup>75</sup> Sokoto followed in April 1942,<sup>76</sup> Kano in June 1942,<sup>77</sup> Oyo and Bornu in September 1942,<sup>78</sup> and

---

<sup>73</sup>Minutes of the Abeokuta Ladies Club, March 15, 1945. Ransome-Kuti Papers, Box 87, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan.

<sup>74</sup> NAI, Series DC11/1, File No. 4038/Vol.1., The Circular to Kaduna, Enugu, Ibadan, 21 July 1942, p. 49

<sup>75</sup> NAI, Series DC11/1, File No. 4038/Vol.1., p. 2

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 46

---

Adamawa and Kabba in November 1942.<sup>79</sup> As early as 1942, it was noted that guinea corn and rice availability was cause for concern. In February of that year, the Director of Agriculture recommended in a confidential memo that the movement of rice from the main producing areas- W. Sokoto, Bida Division, and Ilorin Province- be prohibited.<sup>80</sup> Although Abeokuta was not one of the main rice-producing areas, rice grown within the province became increasingly crucial to the rice supply estimates for Lagos's military and civilian population. To ensure adequate supplies, Abeokuta farmers were assigned a production quota (3,000 tons), the government set the price (£3/ton), and the export of rice was prohibited except by special permit.<sup>81</sup> This action also angered people who had foodstuffs as they tightly hoarded the ones they had and did not sell them out. Most affected farmers and traders were forced to smuggle the restricted goods.<sup>82</sup> By and large, the price control of food led to reduced volumes of supplies. The reduction of the volume of supplies also stopped the farmers from producing in large quantities and from continuous production. At worst, the farmers and dealers were forcibly made to feed the more outspoken, arrogant artisans and clerks in their abodes,<sup>83</sup> and they were also robbed of the actual profits that were supposed to be derived from their export produce by the Marketing Boards.<sup>84</sup>

Since the traders could not afford to sustain long-term losses, the market women responded by ignoring the scheme, controlling prices, and selling at a price that guaranteed their profits.<sup>85</sup>The

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 94

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 113

<sup>80</sup> NAI, Report from Director of Agriculture to Secretary Supply Board, 4 February 1942. cso 26/37909/S.14, p. 1

<sup>81</sup> NAI, Memo from Deputy Food Controller, A. Pullen to Chief Secretary, 15 October, 1943. NAI, Department of Commerce and Industry (DCI) 1/1-4041/S.20/C1; p. 5-6; Also, Extract from letter from P. F. Brandt to the Director of Supplies, 12 January, 1944, dci 1/1-4041/S.20/C1; p 65

<sup>82</sup> A.T. Ajayi, "Economic Crisis During the Second World War and The Response of the Market Traders in Ibadan, Nigeria," *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)* 3, 3 (2014): 19

<sup>83</sup> Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (1973): 420

<sup>84</sup> David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War*, (London: James Currey, 1986); C. J. Korieh, *The Second World War and Its Aftermath*, chapter 5 (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 206

<sup>85</sup> A.T. Ajayi, "Economic Crisis During the Second World War and The Response of the Market Traders in Ibadan, Nigeria," *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)* 3, 3 (2014): 15

---

ineffectiveness of the price control scheme introduced another form of trade: the 'black market trade', where the producers in the provinces hid a lot of foodstuffs away from the government agents who offered lower than equilibrium prices. For instance, in Abeokuta, the rise of an "unofficial" market compromised the state's efforts to obtain sufficient rice at a controlled price. Rice producers, traders, police, and railway staff ignored the export prohibition and moved rice out of the province so that it could be sold well above the control price. In 1943, three thousand tons of rice 'disappeared' from Abeokuta.<sup>86</sup>To stem the smuggling, those caught exporting rice illegally were given prison terms rather than fines.<sup>87</sup>Consequently, the underground economy emerged here and there, and as long as ready buyers were available to participate in the informal activities, the black market operated smoothly, though illegally. According to one of the Ibadan traders, as quoted by Ajayi Adeyinka Theresa:

We locked up our shops and sat in front of it. When a customer was around, we would negotiate to agree on the price. When we both agree on a price, we would open our shop to bring out the commodity in question. However, our customers sometimes come to our homes in the night to buy our goods.<sup>88</sup>

In the market, because the women controlled the distributive trade, especially retail trade, many began to engage in unscrupulous means of marketing profits, particularly in marketing food items. They began to manipulate the measurement of foodstuffs. For instance, a report on report on standardisation of Native retail measures in Lagos briefly described the situation thus:

As to measures, the diversity of the size, shape and condition of the bowls used in Lagos Markets is bewildering. In the Ereko market, out of 35 bowls tested, no two were of the same dimensions. Even, allowing a tolerance of 1/8 in both diameter and depth there still remained 23 different sizes of bowl, many of them quite distinct from recognised trade sizes. In the Faji market, I found 22 different bowl sizes, which even with 1/8 tolerance still meant 17 diverse sizes. These bowls": they do not include the almost endless variety of calabash bowls, crinkled pans, wicker baskets, cigarette tins, sometimes cut down or pressed to

---

<sup>86</sup> NAI, Letter from Acting Chief Secretary to the Government to the Secretary Western Provinces, 16 October, 1943. dci 1/1-4041/S.20/C.2, p.7

<sup>87</sup> NAI, Commissioner of Police vs. Adeyemi Shodipe, Abudu Ramonu, Sanni Okete, Adeagbo Adio, Supreme Court of Nigeria, in the District Court of Ebute Metta. DCI, 1/1-4041/S.20/C.2, 1-3

<sup>88</sup> Ajayi, "Economic Crisis During the Second World War", 21



a smaller cross-section, cigarette tins, lids, ash-tray, butter tin lids and tins like closed opera hats, which are to be found in these markets.<sup>89</sup>

While measuring food items for customers, the bowls were also heaped. Heaping the bowls would ordinarily be conical for *gari*, beans, maize, yam flour and rice. The height of the cone was made to be dependent not only on the moistness of the commodity but, most importantly, the patience and goodwill of the seller. Thus, these were subjected to manipulations by smart sellers to the disadvantage of careless and unsuspecting buyers.<sup>90</sup> In addition to these, women selling imported items such as tin milk, cigarettes and textiles bought smuggled commodities from ship workers at lower prices to maximise profit.<sup>91</sup>

Since the business was an illegal one, organised in such a way that the prospective buyers would pay in advance for the commodities before the arrival of the ship, many of them were swindled by dishonest seamen. Thus, as a result of the risk of losing financial capital, few people actually explored this means of survival.<sup>92</sup>

The women of Nigeria were also involved in counterfeiting as they traded with the fake money in other towns, including in Lagos. The bad money was distributed by forgers' wives, hawkers, and traders in exchange for legal money. The women were seen buying goods for resale and collecting good money in the exchange process. In some cases, the women spent counterfeits of higher denominations to receive change in legal currency. Hence, they were not after profit-making from their transactions in goods. Counterfeit money was also sold to agents or dealers at half of their face value.<sup>93</sup>

During the Second World War, Nigerian women were also involved in the parallel exchange market. After complaining to the colonial government about their non-consultation before the fixing of the cost of production, which was also not considered but ignored by the colonial government, the traders, the suppliers and the farmers ended up devising a means of bypassing the scheme by establishing what was known as "a parallel exchange market" where they sold their goods at prices convenient for them. At the parallel market, transactions were conducted discreetly in secret locations outside the

---

<sup>89</sup> Herbert Macaulay papers, "Lagos Market: Standardisation of Native Retail Measures in Lagos," Box 13, file 7

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>91</sup> Alhaja Raji Risikat cited in M.O. Muritala, "Urban Livelihood in Lagos 1861-1960," *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* 20 (2011):128

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ije Prof 4/J.433 Vol. II, Counterfeit Coining.*



main markets. The parallel market became an alternative to the official markets. In the parallel market, there was a sharp difference between the controlled prices and the prices set by the traders. For instance, a bag of *garri* was sold for twenty shillings in the black market while the controlled price was ten shillings and eight pence. A bag of yam flour was sold in the black market for twenty-six shillings in 1944, while the controlled prices were fifteen shillings. A bag of local beans was sold for thirty-five shillings while the controlled price was twenty-six shillings.<sup>94</sup>

The parallel markets won in the competition with the guaranteed market. While the government efforts failed, the parallel markets flourished, and the underground economy continued. The people often patronised the traders for their foodstuffs as long as they had money. They were not subjected to prolonged waiting queues, as it was the case in the official market. At the point of production, the producers hid a lot of foodstuffs away from the government agents who offered lower than equilibrium prices or even substandard prices and instead made secret sales to the local evaded price control wardens/merchants who could provide more. The local merchants then deal exclusively with market women operating outside of the regulated Pullen markets.<sup>95</sup> Since the parties to the secret deal in the informal economy stood to gain from it, rather than arresting the defaulters and fining them five pounds, no one reported the other. Thus foodstuffs were poured into the secret stores of these market women who operated flourishing black market and an underground economy.<sup>96</sup>

The problem of high prices was far from solved, even with the special scheme headed by Pullen to alleviate the people's suffering. In the first instance, the black-market activities did not only continue, but the prices of foodstuffs also kept increasing daily. Foodstuffs were still smuggled into the markets despite the scheme, and people preferred to buy from the market secretly rather than the one provided by Pullen's scheme. Indeed, Pullen admitted that the black market, far from being destroyed, had intensified, that the difference between official rates and black-market prices had risen to over 400 percent,

---

<sup>94</sup> A.T. Ajayi, "Economic Crisis During the Second World War and The Response of the Market Traders in Ibadan, Nigeria," *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IAHI)* 3, 3 (2014): 21

<sup>95</sup>Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (1973): 422

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 423

---

and that the scheme was yet to be completely effective.<sup>97</sup> Pullen accused market women of sabotaging and frustrating the efforts of the government deliberately to make profits from the black market. For instance, it was obvious that consumers preferred buying foodstuffs from the black market over the government selling centres because they considered the products and foodstuffs from the black market to be better quality and unadulterated. This was confirmed by Oyemakinde, who noted that about two-thirds of Lagosians got their foodstuffs during the Second World War years from "flourishing parallel markets".<sup>98</sup> However, it could be gainsaid that if two-thirds of Lagos consumers purchased their food from established market vendors, with whom they very likely had ongoing relationships stretching back years or decades, such an arrangement should hardly be described as informal or underground activity.

There was also a raid by the women in the market. With the apparent official miscalculation, the market women organised themselves and their powerful and influential dealers to intercept the lines of supplies that the government tried to monopolise through legislation and sell directly to buyers on the queue.<sup>99</sup> In controlling overcrowding and street hawking in the city, it was suggested that all unemployed people in Lagos should go back to their villages and hometowns<sup>100</sup> and that children under 14 years of age be prohibited from attending the official markets.<sup>101</sup> None of these suggestions, however, succeeded when implemented. Hence, this also led to the colonial police parading the market. In addition, women also took up the selling of sex for diverse reasons, including access to food and security. Prostitution was used chiefly by younger Nigerian women as a supplement to employment in both the formal and informal sectors. Little reports that there were young women who worked during the day as "seamstresses and in shops and offices [...] and dress smartly in European clothes," but they also engaged in prostitution at night by

---

<sup>97</sup> Olumuyiwa Okuseinde, "Managing Urban Food Crisis: The Lagos Foodstuff Marketing Scheme, 1943-1946," in *Urban Transition in Africa: Aspects of Urbanization and Change in Lagos*, (ed.), Kunle Lawal (Lagos: Pumark Nigeria Limited, 1994), 70-74.

<sup>98</sup>Wale Oyemakinde, "The Pullen Marketing Scheme: A Trial in Food Price Control in Nigeria, 1941-1947," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (1973): 422-423

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 422

<sup>100</sup> NAI, Ije Prof 1, 3045, Resident, Ijebu Province to Secretary, Western Provinces, 26 July 1945

<sup>101</sup> NAI, Ije Prof 1, 3045, Resident, Ijebu Province to Secretary, Western Provinces, 26 July 1945, NAI. 52 DCI 1/1 4037/S 44/C.9 Deputy Controller, Native Foodstuffs to Director of Supply, 25 Jan 1944

---

soliciting clients in bars, clubs, and restaurants visited by members of the upper class, in the process acquiring Europeans and wealthy Africans as patrons.<sup>102</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined the Nigerian women during the Second War. It interrogated the experience of Nigerian women during the wartime period and how they survived it. It revealed the experiences of the women in the country prior to the commencement of World War II and demonstrated that women have been very active in all forms of trade. It also demonstrated how the women of Nigeria, especially the market women, were affected by the outbreak of the war. So far, it has revealed that women in colonial Nigeria were confronted with myriads of challenges ranging from economic hardship to restriction from trading during wartime. Economic restrictions, high inflation, and shortages during the Second World War followed the economic burdens of the interwar years. Women involved in local production and the processing and sale of foodstuffs were hit especially hard by economic restrictions. It demonstrated that the livelihood of the women was affected seriously by the wartime economic policies and the threat of the Second World War, and the wartime economic policies translated into agitations and protests on the part of women whose standard of living was affected by the price control scheme. It can be said that the experience of the Nigerian women as necessitated by the foodstuff price scheme remains the turning point in the history of trade that later transpired in the history of women in what was known as the underground economy (black market).

---

<sup>102</sup> Kenneth Little, "West African Urbanization as a Social Process", *Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines* 1, Cashier 3 (1960): 96.