

GENDER AND LABOR ROLES IN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION IN ABAKALIKI, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of women as a significant source of labor in the building construction industry. While construction work is conventionally masculinized in much of Africa and elsewhere. In Abakaliki town, Southeastern Nigeria, women became the dominant labor force at building sites. This situation unsettles assumptions about gendered divisions of labor and invites a rethink of how women's labor is made visible or invisible in African history. Bringing their experiences into focus challenges stereotypes of women confined to domesticity and in sectors conventionally assumed to be the preserve of men or coded as male. Elsewhere in Nigeria and West Africa, women have been central in agriculture, trade, and petty commerce. The paper employed a combination of oral history and traditions with secondary literature data, as necessary for background information. A study like this contributes to debates in African and global labor history about women in non-traditional sectors, the informalization of urban economies, and the reconfiguration of gender roles under the economic changes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Keywords: Women, Labor, Construction, Rural, Urbanization, Abakaliki, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

From ancient times to the present, building and civil engineering construction has been a male-dominated industry and activity. In those times, women were known to assist their husbands, families, and communities in various community-building construction projects. They carried sand, bricks, and blocks, fetched water, and cooked food for the workers. Over the years, women have broken away from the stereotyped confines of domesticity. In modern times, they have entered white-collar professions such as teaching and nursing. They are venturing into the building and civil engineering industry, which is considered an absolute preserve of men and a "no-go area" for women. As a result, the building and civil engineering industry is no longer the exclusive preserve of men. Even though women are venturing into the previously male-dominated disciplines, the bulk of the women in building and civil engineering construction sites are engaged at the lowest level, as casual and unskilled hands, with all the inhuman exploitation it entails.

No doubt, women give a helping hand at some construction sites in some Nigerian towns. However, these are minuscule in number and hardly attract attention. Nevertheless, the Abakaliki scenario, an emerging urban centre in Nigeria, is starkly different. Here, women loitering in front of the Abakaliki Township Stadium (now known as Pa Oruta Ngele Township Stadium) and at Spera-in-Deo Junction, looking for employment, is a common sight. The sight of these women keeps one wondering what their menfolk would be doing. These women work as labourers on construction sites, granite quarries, and road projects, among other traditional jobs typically associated with men, from sunup to sundown. Hunger seems written over their faces; their breasts sagging, and their children firmly tied around their waists with dirty wrappers. They are strong women, and hardly would you see any of them robust. These women may be among the hardest-working groups one can meet anywhere. As early as 6 am, they arrive at their locations, armed with cutlasses, hoes, head pans, shovels, diggers, axes, and more, all waiting anxiously to work and earn money to feed their families. It is especially heartbreaking to see these women rush towards any car that stops by; they hope the driver is a prospective hirer. This paper examines the peculiarities of women's engagement in the building construction industry with a focus on women in Abakaliki, Nigeria. Women labourers in Abakaliki face labour realities determined by socio-economic conditions and employers. This study intends to empirically examine the working conditions of women labourers in the building construction industry in Abakaliki.

FRAMING THE INQUIRY: CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

The construction industry is globally recognized as a major contributor to a nation's economic development. The linkages between the construction sector and the rest of the economy are widely emphasized. However, today's building construction industry in Abakaliki, Nigeria, commonly employs women as laborers.¹ Most women in the building construction industry typically perform minor, non-technical, and unspecialized tasks. The women are hardly allowed to manage and supervise the construction site. This is because of inadequate skills and a lack of educational opportunities. Despite the reasonable earnings these women labourers earn from their work in building construction, they are not commensurate with the energy they put into performing their jobs, mixing concrete, and rendering services to masons.

Women almost dominate the informal sector of Abakaliki's economy, and this has had a significant impact on the state's economic development. Women are engaged in all sorts of labour (complex and simple), like petty trading, farming, and arduous labour in building construction projects.

Interestingly, this has made the women more pronounced and has led them to assume a dominant presence in most unskilled labour common in the town. It should be noted that the women who supply this labour come from rural areas to the urban city, as will be seen in the paper. This situation is worrisome and deserves scholarly attention. Hence, this paper aims to highlight the role of women in the building construction industry and the circumstances under which they work. It is hoped that the research will bring to public attention the often-overlooked contributions of these women to the rapidly growing economy of Abakaliki, the capital of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This fact has not received the research attention it deserves. There can be no doubt that women play a critical role in this regard. However, as stated earlier, those roles have not been brought to public notice for appreciation. As is commonly the case, when knowledge is lacking, unfounded speculation thrives. If such speculations are repeated often without challenge, people will accept them as factual, thus perpetuating ignorance. This paper refutes the common misconception that the construction industry is male dominated. It draws attention to the role women in Abakaliki have been playing in the infrastructural development of the capital city, specifically, and its catchment area generally, while revealing rural women's response to labour demands in urban areas. This research limits its scope to the Abakaliki urban core, an integral part of Abakaliki Capital Territory, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. It spans approximately two decades, from 1996, when Ebonyi State was created, to 2020. Since the state's creation, women have been actively involved in various aspects of its economy. For clarity, Abakaliki urban covers Abakaliki LGA and some parts of Ebonyi and Izzi Local Government Areas.

I utilized various primary and secondary sources to produce a coherent paper that aligns with the research's stated objective. The primary source was with a heavy emphasis on physical oral evidence from knowledgeable individuals and the women labourers (single participants and focus group interviews), who are the subjects of the study. This also included recordings of personal testimonies from individuals who have resided in Abakaliki for an extended period, as they have observed changes over time. Also, newspaper articles, government official publications, and communiqués were used in this research. The secondary sources comprise written texts (both published and unpublished), journal articles, newspaper reports, online sources, and other relevant literature related to the subject of study. It also combines qualitative data with descriptive narrative, as circumstances permitted, to provide a holistic picture.

The first explores why this phenomenon in building construction begs explanation and how it contributes to historiography. The second section gives a brief overview of women in Igbo society, spanning from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial period. In noting the demand and supply for

labour in Abakaliki, I examine in the third section the role of Abakaliki as an emerging urban centre in the building construction industry, as well as its growth and economic development. The final section examines women labourers in the building construction industry in Abakaliki.

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN IGBO SOCIETY FROM PRECOLONIAL TO POSTCOLONIAL TIMES

The Igbo-speaking people are in Nigeria's Southeast and South-South geopolitical zones. The Igbo culture is homogeneous mainly, although distinct subcultural variations exist among its subgroups. Igbo society promotes openness and equality, enabling competitive advancement and the rise of individuals to prominent societal positions without rigid monarchical structures.² Understanding the construction of gender roles for Igbo women from precolonial to modern times is crucial, particularly regarding the role of rural women in urban building projects. Women's history studies employ a gender lens and intersect with sexuality and feminist studies, examining diverse women's issues within a geographical context. Notably, the historiography incorporates non-Western perspectives, centering African women's experiences in the discourse.

Many writings have explored women's roles in gender and labour, with authors such as Chimamanda N. Adichie addressing feminism in Africa. Adichie depicts African culture as dehumanizing to women through the character Beatrice Achike, representing a typical African woman who endures abuse to conform to societal expectations. In contrast, the character of Auntie Ifeoma challenges these norms.³ While the research highlights traditional values, it also underscores African feminism as an essential space for women's empowerment and advocates male involvement. Scholars like Ada Azodo suggest that differing gender roles are not inherently inferior or superior but recognize that past negotiation methods have failed to resolve contemporary women's issues.⁴ To this end, proactiveness is the ultimate goal rather than gradual change to challenge constructed gender roles. Concern is less with the prosaic form which gender roles take but with how these roles adapt to global standards without destroying culture as "western one-size-does-not-fit-all feminism."⁵ This frames feminism as a tool for political engagement to combat poverty and challenge women's subordination. Di-feminist perspectives advocate for women's rejection of subordinate roles, viewing men as allies in achieving active participation in equity. While this approach might reinforce existing hierarchies, it could also symbolize strength rather than subjugation. Akachi Ezeigbo's snail-space approach analyzes how cultural prescriptions shape women's roles and suggests that reversing gender roles may not be an effective means of addressing women's

issues, contrasting with traditional feminist views that advocate equality through aggressive means.⁶ Ezeigbo's perspective promotes dialogue from a position of resilience rather than weakness.

Igbo women have played crucial roles in economic transformation across various historical periods, challenging rigid gender roles traditionally seen in society. They actively engage in roles that are neither strictly masculinized nor feminized in the economy, including rural occupations such as farming and trading, as well as urban roles such as those of merchants and entrepreneurs. Studies, such as historian Gloria Chuku's, focus on the "female principle" and highlight these contributions, as well as the underlying societal structures, including kinship and cosmology.⁷ Despite their significant involvement, there remains a disparity in status compared to men, as cultural perceptions often limit women's participation in governance and executive roles. The Igbo economy comprises agriculture, trade, and manufacturing, with regional natural resources shaping women's economic roles.⁸ Understanding these dynamics is essential for recognizing the complex contributions of Igbo women in various economic endeavours.

In pre-colonial Igbo society, dual-sex symmetry dominated, with gender roles defined by ability rather than biological sex.⁹ Despite a predominantly patrilineal structure, matrilineal subgroups existed, granting women critical roles, including those of female kings, priestesses, and producers.¹⁰ The traditional economy was centred on agriculture, with women playing a significant role in farming, food processing, and trade.¹¹ Farming was a prestigious occupation for both genders, and women contributed significantly to family food consumption by cultivating a variety of crops.¹² Although men's tasks, such as bush clearing, were physically demanding, women's roles, including weeding, also imposed considerable strain, challenging the notion that men typically engaged in the most arduous work. Overall, the economic importance of women has empowered their status within society. Women significantly contributed to non-agricultural industries in Igboland, engaging in crafts like soap, pottery, mat, and basket weaving. They showcased their skills through industries such as weaving, salt production, and pottery, with regions like Abakaliki recognized for these crafts.¹³ Salt production, particularly in Okposi and Enyigba, was traditionally women's domain, often influenced by cultural norms surrounding menstruation.¹⁴ Pottery, one of the oldest industries, was primarily held by women in various notable centres.¹⁵ Additionally, women played key roles in the textile and weaving industries, addressing market demands and participating in trade, which enhanced their socio-economic status and wealth; they even engaged in slave trading alongside men.¹⁶ Their entrepreneurial spirit and resourcefulness were crucial to advancing their social status.

The colonial period in Igbo land brought about essential changes that affected women, who were often overlooked in both pre-colonial and colonial governance systems.¹⁷ While women played crucial roles in peace and conflict resolution before colonialism, they faced political invisibility under colonial rule, highlighted by the absence of female warrant chiefs or staff members in the native court.¹⁸ The 1929 Women's War, analyzed by Misty Bastian, reveals women's strategic protests that challenged colonial policies, underscoring a struggle for gender roles amidst colonial authority.¹⁹ Broader conversations on how colonialism was closely tied to the construction of gendered identities and power relations position gender as foreign to African culture. Oyeronke Oyewumi, although for the Yoruba society, argues that colonial imposition of Western gender binaries disrupted pre-colonial Yoruba social identities based on seniority rather than biological sex.²⁰ Additionally, Victorian ideals of domesticity justified imperialism, with women missionaries navigating and exercising agency within male-dominated structures, as seen in their collaborations to establish educational and health services in Africa.²¹ Through their dual roles, missionary women both reinforced and subverted prevailing gender ideologies in their societies. For instance, Elizabeth Prevost asserts that "Women missionaries understood the revolutionary power of the gospel as a tool to subvert African and British patriarchies and create new avenues for leadership and reform."²² Colonial agricultural policy in Nigeria focused on export-crop production, often sidelining domestic food production, which was primarily managed by women. Despite minimal support from the colonial government, women actively contributed to the export of crops vital to the colonial economy and to their families' well-being. Colonial land laws further disadvantaged women by shifting land ownership exclusively to men, disrupting previously collective land practices.²³ This historical context illustrates how colonial policies reinforced patriarchal norms that still affect women's economic roles today.²⁴

Observing from these writings, it seems right to affirm that colonialism in Igboland, as in Nigeria generally, took no notice whatever of women. Colonialism in Igboland marginalized women by enforcing Western views on gender roles, diminishing their socio-political influence. Traditionally, Igbo society had a flexible gender construct that allowed women to assume male roles; however, colonial economic changes favoured men, limiting women's opportunities in modern sectors.²⁵ Although women's participation in agriculture persisted, they were largely excluded from export production.²⁶ The colonial era saw women retain a role in non-agricultural sectors. However, they became politically and socially invisible, lacking representation in governance, unlike in the pre-colonial period when they actively engaged in decision-making.²⁷ Women's evolving roles from pre-colonial to colonial times reflected both continuity and

change amid these imposed constraints. Postcolonial changes have significantly transformed the status and roles of Igbo women, fostering a push towards self-reliance and education as a means of assuming responsibility. Kenneth Omeje's work analyzes the ongoing gendered influence of colonial legacies, which manifest in economic dependency and cultural conflicts between Western and indigenous practices.²⁸ Colonial legacies now persist in various forms, including economic dependency, political instability, and cultural conflict between Western modernity and indigenous societies. Thus, a paradox of Western models of governance and African indigenous institutions. Women's formal education is now recognized as vital to societal contributions, rather than a "waste of resources." Igbo women are advocating for recognition, educational rights, and participation in the workforce. They are now leveraging the social capital (the resources available to an individual to improve their life condition) at their disposal. The formal education system has empowered many elite women, enabling them to contest patriarchal norms and enter politics.²⁹ Notably, during the Nigerian Civil War, women expanded their roles beyond traditional boundaries, actively supporting both sides of the conflict.³⁰ Today, many Igbo women have achieved high levels of education and hold significant positions across various sectors, including government, the military, and the civil service, challenging traditional gender roles and becoming primary providers for their families.³¹

In the capital city of Abakaliki, women have moved beyond the familiar engagements in petty trading, hairdressing, and similar activities to the grueling work of mixing concrete and carrying pans of concrete mixture at construction sites. This physically demanding job mocks masculine physical superiority pretensions. This unique labor force, specific to Abakaliki, is the focus of my research and is discussed in detail in the last section of this paper. More than anything, the rapid urbanization in the newly created state of Ebonyi, Nigeria, where Abakaliki serves as the state capital, has shaped the dynamics of women's work, which will be explored in the next section. This situates women's entry into construction labor within the broader context of city growth and change. The existing information from these studies provides a reliable basis to argue strongly that women play a vital role in the socio-economic development of rural communities in Nigeria. However, it omits the activities of women laborers in building construction in Abakaliki. From the foregoing, it is evident that no known researcher has previously explored the subject of the present research. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the role women play in shaping the Abakaliki economy. This shortcoming in the literature justifies my current effort.

LABOR DEMAND AND SUPPLY IN ABAKALIKI BUILDING CONSTRUCTION SUB-SECTOR

Abakaliki, the capital city of Ebonyi State in southeastern Nigeria, is located 82 kilometers east of Enugu and falls within the micro-ecological niche of the Cross River Valley sub-zone.³² It was the headquarters of the Ogoja province before the creation of the Southeastern State in 1967.³³ It became the capital of Ebonyi State in 1996. Abakaliki was graded as a Third-Class Township during the colonial period. It should be recalled that places such as Calabar, Opobo, Port Harcourt, Enugu, and Aba in the Eastern Province, where Abakaliki is situated, were graded as Second-Class Townships.³⁴ At the same time, Lagos remained the only First-Class Township. However, 18 years after the creation of Ebonyi State, the state capital was established in 1996, leading to significant growth and development.³⁵ The town attracted corporate agencies and private enterprises, including financial institutions and industries operating in Ebonyi State.³⁶ Employment in Abakaliki capital territory is categorized into junior, senior, management cadre, and contract staff. The majority of people in Abakaliki are unemployed due to the country's high unemployment rate.³⁷ Primary production activities in agriculture, mining, solid minerals, and commercial activities characterize Ebonyi State's economy. The economy is privately led with capital investment in rice milling. Industrial activities in Abakaliki are dominated by mining and agro-based firms, as well as by the hospitality, telecommunications, and financial services sectors. Building construction is one of the fastest-growing industries due to population growth and the need to provide office space for rapidly emerging firms.³⁸ In trade and commerce, Ebonyi State is well known as a center of commercial activity due to its location on the Trans-African Highway. Commercial activities in Abakaliki include telecommunication, banking, small- and large-scale trading, hawking, transportation, and laundry services.³⁹ However, these industries face several challenges, including insufficient funding, a shortage of skilled labor, inadequate government support, power supply issues, illegal collection, and levies imposed by government officials.

As a result of Abakaliki's growth and economic development, labor demand increased, necessitating housing and accommodation, as well as the construction of government buildings, public buildings (such as schools, worship centers, and hospitals), industries, and hotels. The implication is that the construction of these buildings stimulated the development of Abakaliki as an urban center. A striking feature of urbanization is the availability of public utilities and social amenities for an increasing population, including shelter (in the form of buildings). It should be recalled that when Abakaliki became the capital of Ebonyi in 1996, people

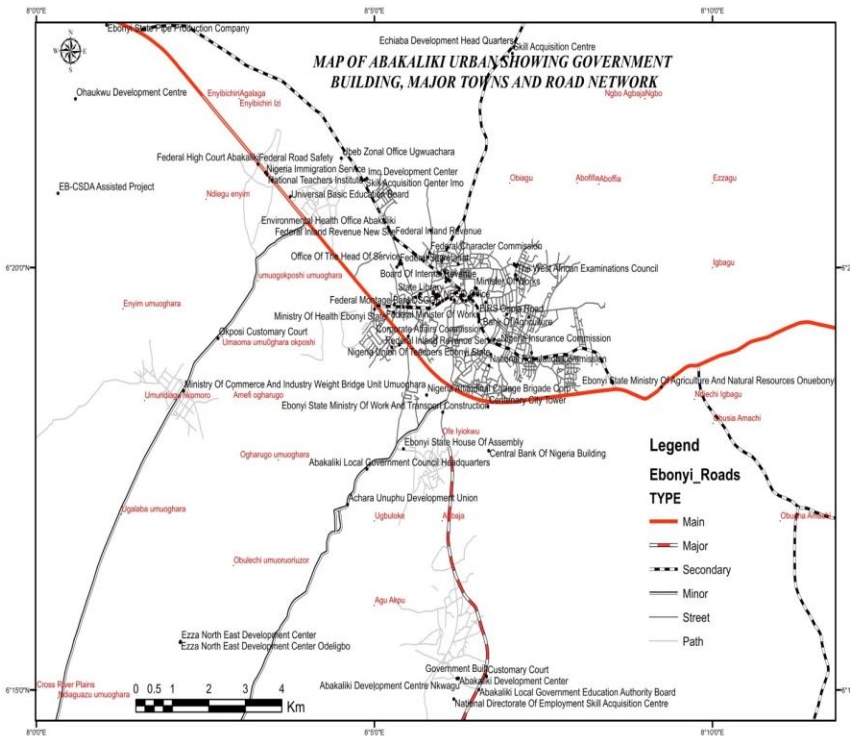
from different parts of Abakaliki, which they considered developed, hurried to seek better opportunities, leading to rural-to-urban migration.⁴⁰ As a result, building construction became essential due to population growth in the state capital. These buildings had to be placed to identify an area as an urban center. To address the challenges of housing and public building construction, the labor shortage necessitated women's participation in construction in Abakaliki. Many unemployed people viewed construction work as a means of earning a legitimate living, especially women who were unemployed housewives with little or no education, and those who lacked the financial means to start a trade. As Abakaliki's population grows, so does the demand for housing, creating a need for construction laborers.

The labor force in Abakaliki Capital Territory comprises skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers, as well as teenagers. Most of the labor force is engaged in agriculture, agro-based industries, hawking, and petty trading. The remaining population is engaged in mining and other self-employment.⁴¹ The evaluation of manual labor in Ebonyi State is informed by the state's socioeconomic status.⁴² At its creation, Ebonyi State lacked a sufficient number of educated indigenes—those who were readily available secured good government jobs. The non-literate ones became manual laborers and night watchmen. Many who attend higher education institutions secure good jobs upon graduation.⁴³ According to the states, former Commissioner for Finance Emmanuel I. Onwe, some implications of Abakaliki's emergence as an urban center have led to people moving into the city without a clear purpose. This means that some people would come to Abakaliki without a clear idea of what they intend to do, because of the common notion that there are prospects in the state capital. Consequently, some persons would engage in criminal activities and other social vices.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this, some individuals may also have come to seek favorable opportunities. In addition, the establishment of Abakaliki coincided with the depopulation of rural areas, as many people left villages for the city, which they regarded as a town. The implication was that there were too few farmers, resulting in hunger because insufficient labor was available to cultivate crops. Additionally, as people flocked to the state capital, cultural clashes became more frequent, and conflict-resolution strategies were put in place to mitigate tensions. It also fostered unity as people interacted with different groups and learned Igbo dialects; establishing Abakaliki as the state capital exposed many people to formal education.⁴⁵

Buildings of various types in Abakaliki cover approximately 12.7012 square kilometers of the city's space. The buildings encompass a range of structures, including residential, commercial, industrial, educational, religious, and miscellaneous facilities.⁴⁶ Several notable public buildings and

landmarks include the Ebonyi Forest Reserve at Effium, Ishieke Ndiegu Enyim, the Federal University located in Ndufe-Alike, Ikwo Local Government Area, the permanent site of Ebonyi State University, and the Military facility on Afikpo Road. In the Abakaliki core urban area during colonial rule, the type of housing for offices, officers, and their quarters was the bungalow. Their present locations include the Area Command Office on Ezza Road, the Native Court (currently located at the High Court premises), the Post Office, and the prisons, among others.

Figure 1: Map of Abakaliki Urban Showing Government Buildings, Major Towns and Roads.



Source (Ibujoe Map Production, Abakakili, 2018), quoted in Peace S. Basagi, “Challenges of Urbanisation in Abakaliki Urban, 1996-2021,” Unpublished B.A. Thesis, Evangel University Akaeze, 2021.

Subsequent development followed the pattern of bungalow rooming-type houses until 1960. In subsequent years, the development of storied flats and a few modernized buildings was spotted.⁴⁷ Recently, the old government buildings in Abakaliki have been replaced with modern structures, including the Governor’s Office, Government House, International Conference Center, and Abakaliki Township Stadium. Notwith-

standing, you may still find housing that is traditionally and culturally influenced. A village homestead typically consists of mud-built structures clustered in rural areas. Massive infrastructure developments have been underway in the urban center, including road construction, shopping malls and marketplaces, and trans-Saharan flyover bridges at the Presco and Spera-in-deo junctions, among others. Specifically, women laborers in building construction in Abakaliki work under the umbrella name of Building and Construction Skilled Artisans Association of Nigeria (BACSAAN), Ebonyi State Chapter.

Figure 1: ID Card of one of the female laborers registered under BACSAAN. Photo taken by the author with consent from the individual during field work for research purposes.



Working under a single registered organization suggests some level of coordination and focus by the women laborers in building construction in Abakaliki. Daily, except Sundays, they are easily located in specific areas of Abakaliki urban center, waiting to be hired. Their general points of congregation include a spot opposite Abakaliki Township Stadium (now Oruta Ngele Stadium), the Vanco by Ogoja-Afikpo Road intersection, St. John Okpoko-Oru, Spera in Deo, Ebebe Junction by Ogbaga Road, Ahiao-

fu-New Market, and Ugwu Achara after Mile 50.⁴⁸ In addition to various odd jobs at building sites, their main job is to provide concrete mixing and rendering services to masons and bricklayers.⁴⁹

Figure 2: Women Laborers in the job of Concrete Mixing in an ongoing building construction in Abakaliki. Photo taken by the author during field work on 10/30/2019



WOMEN LABORERS IN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION IN ABAKALIKI

Traditionally, women have been expected to fulfil roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives. Thus, they generally play essential roles in both societal and domestic affairs. This expectation has undergone significant changes as many women in African societies have engaged in various spheres of life outside the home over the past few years. Throughout Nigerian history, women have also generated household incomes from small businesses, craft making, house-to-house commercial exchanges, and thrift societies.⁵⁰ In Ebonyi State, women who participate as laborers at building sites are enslaved in a circle of poverty. They are subjected to

various forms of neglect, discrimination, and exploitation by their husbands most of the time. Most often, they are also subjected to different forms of violence by their male counterparts.⁵¹ Researchers believe that the history of violence against women is tied to the history of women being viewed as property and a gender role that makes them subservient to men.⁵²

Women's participation in building construction in Abakaliki is not a recent phenomenon. This phenomenon predates the creation of Ebonyi State. The exact year or period during which this development began is not yet known. However, based on interviews with most women, it was observed that some laborers began their work even before Abakaliki was designated the capital of Ebonyi State.⁵³ Women are a tremendous, untapped resource in many developing nations. Abakaliki women are a stunning example of local beauty. Women participate actively in the construction industry. Usually, they outnumber men on building sites in Abakaliki and dominate the construction stage. They are generally employed as laborers or helpers at construction and building sites. This large army of women is at variance with the norm in other parts of Eastern Nigeria, where women are rarely involved in the tedious work of concrete mixing at building sites. Notwithstanding the tedium of their work, the women suffer unpardonable discrimination at work sites. They are commonly placed at the lowest level of job hierarchy, as unskilled workers and head-load carriers. They perform some of the most demanding tasks and are paid substantially less than men performing similar tasks, such as concrete mixing and bricklaying.⁵⁴

The oral interviews revealed that many women engaged in this job are primarily from the Ohaukwu, Izzi, and Ezza communities. The women are mostly from polygamous families where less attention is given to women and the girl-child. To survive in the construction industry and make their work easier, women, who are largely uneducated, operate in groups under different agents and leaders who connect them to available jobs. Besides, some women who work as laborers on building sites also work in quarry and road construction in the metropolis and the environs. These women come to the city from remote villages daily and congregate at central locations, such as Ogbaga Road, opposite the Abakaliki Township Stadium (now known as Oruta Ngele Township Stadium), Presco Junction, Spera-in-deo Junction, Mile 50, and the popular Vanco Junction, located opposite Zenith Bank on Ogoja Road.⁵⁵ These locations serve as meeting points for prospective clients, with the Ogbaga Road site, opposite Abakaliki Township Stadium, being the primary one.

Map 2: Showing Abakaliki City Center and some locations where women laborers congregate, such as Abakaliki Township Stadium, Vanco by Ogo-

ja-Afikpo Road intersection, St John Okpoko-Oru, Spera in Deo, Ebebe Junction by Ogbaga Road.



Source: Ify Nwaogazie, S Okonkwo, and Chukwuemeka, "Rainfall-Intensity-Duration- Frequency Modeling and Comparative Analysis of Developed Models for Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria", *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development* 4 no. 2 (2017): 776-783. www.ijtrd.com.

This issue of women participating in building construction as laborers is not new in Abakaliki. Cyril Odomanam, who runs a hotel business at Isikwuato Street and has spent over 30 years in the city (Abakaliki), said the issue of hiring Abakaliki women for manual labor is an old practice that is now becoming a culture. He believed that increased infrastructure investment—such as buildings, roads, and bridges—was responsible for the increase in the number of female laborers on construction sites. The emergence of Abakaliki as Ebonyi State's capital has spurred massive construction, which demands a variety of manual labor. Women responded to the pull and became involved as laborers at building sites. However, this development was unknown before the creation of the State. Before then, rural women were primarily engaged in other forms of manual labor, such as farming, selling firewood, and fetching water for pay for in-

terested residents. During those periods, some women requested food rather than monetary payment. These rural women were known to frequent the urban area of Abakaliki in search of household chores for some income, as part of their routine manual labor. The scenario has changed a lot to arduous manual labor. Most rural women who migrate to Abakaliki in search of work choose to mix cement and carry blocks, or cement, sand, and stone for a living.⁵⁶ Additionally, with the benefit of hindsight, it was discovered that a few women had already begun the job before Abakaliki was designated the capital of Ebonyi State.⁵⁷ Mary Oyinbe, a native of Izzi, lamented the attitude of their men towards their wives, saying the mad rush into marriage was the key reason why most of these women engage in this hard labor of concrete mixing. She said:

I own a provision shop here, but if I tell you what some of these female laborers are passing through in their various families, you will really pity them. I have seen a case where a woman with a nine-month-old pregnancy was carrying cement in the name of finding her daily bread. Look, it is not a laughing matter. It is better to marry a man whom we refer to as a foreigner in the land than our people. They don't value us (women), let alone care for us. Engaging in this hard manual labor has become a tradition of sorts among the people of Izzi and Ezza; it is either this job or one is forced to look for an alternative. But finding an easy, better alternative is almost impossible for someone from a poor background.⁵⁸

Mary's testimony makes it clear that most women are compelled to work as laborers on construction sites to earn a legitimate living because of their husbands' lack of care and the lack of alternative jobs. This is because most women lack the requisite skills to engage in other, less strenuous work. Moreover, most of them lack even an elementary education. Those who have acquired some skills lack start-up capital for a business venture, even for petty trading.

NATURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK: WHY WOMEN SERVE AS LABORERS AT BUILDING SITES

At construction sites in urban areas, it is common to see female laborers carrying bags of cement, blocks, and head pans of sand to earn a living. Although not skilled in construction, these laboring women are essential at such sites, as they complement the efforts of the professional workforce. In most other urban areas in Igboland, these jobs are typically performed by young men. Not so, in Abakaliki, the capital of Ebonyi State, where

women have virtually taken over, and young men are hardly seen performing these tasks.

The reasons why women engage in laborious work, such as concrete mixing and head loading, are numerous and varied. For instance, when interrogated on the motives behind their engagement in the hard labor at the construction site, many of the women attributed it to the harsh economic conditions and high poverty level in the area. This implies that it results from inadequate finances and the unavailability of skilled occupations suitable for women, such as machinists, plumbers, craftsmen, accountants, physicians, and software developers, which would have served as alternatives. Upon further investigation, most individuals who had acquired a skill reported that they lacked the capital to establish a business or the skills required to become self-employed. Hence, they have taken on casual work in building construction to save money that could enable them to establish their own business or advance their skills. Thus, the women in this engagement view it as a quick way to tackle hunger, alleviate poverty, and save money for other domestic needs, such as caring for their children.

Figure 3: A Group of female laborers gathered waiting to be hired for work for the day at the Abakaliki Township Stadium. Photo taken by the author on field work on 08/15/2020.



Most of these women engaged as laborers in building construction were found to have a common challenge of marital problems. Almost all the women are married, mostly into polygamous families; a few are single women, and others are widows. The married women engaged in this arduous work have families and responsibilities to cater to. This could support the claim that most women went into the job either to support their husbands or take full responsibility for providing for their families, especially in polygamous homes, which are predominant in the area under

study. Evidence shows that women are denied the right to a say about whom they would marry or who would marry them.⁵⁹ As a result, when women are married, their husbands often deny them financial support for proper feeding and childcare. In this circumstance, most women will work as laborers on building sites.⁶⁰ In reality, though, the majority of the husbands in most instances struggle against biting poverty that inhibits their ability to cater for their (supposed) wives. For example, some men, as husbands, are poor subsistence farmers, artisans, and unskilled laborers.⁶¹

Significantly, some of these female laborers bear the heavy burden of not only feeding their families but also sponsoring their children's education and the general well-being of their immediate families.⁶² For example, a teenage girl who identified herself simply as Edith stated that she took the job because she had recently lost her father and had no one to care for her. Her mother could not afford to pay her school fees or buy her textbooks. Nor could she properly care for her younger ones, either. She had to assist the family by working, which she said is financially more advantageous than farming. She said the job is always available, unlike agriculture, which is seasonal. A 19-year-old, Promise Nweke, a single woman and native of Igbeagu in the Izzi Local Government Area, relies solely on manual labor to support herself, her younger children, and her ageing grandmother.⁶³

It is also worth noting that many of these women who work as laborers on construction sites have little or no formal education. Most did not attend primary school; those who did attended only partway, and those who proceeded to secondary school stopped at the Junior Secondary Level at best.⁶⁴ Interestingly, of more than 20 women involved in concrete mixing, only one finished secondary school. She could not secure a relatively decent job because she had not acquired the vocational skills necessary for employment or self-employment.⁶⁵ A 27-year-old Elizabeth Nworie, the third wife to a 40-year-old Izzi man, in sharing her experience, regretted ever getting married into a polygamous family. Her husband either could not or would not cater to her needs. Elizabeth does the job because she is not educated enough to get a white-collar job. However, she must find the strength to work and make ends meet.⁶⁶

BENEFITS OF WOMEN LABORERS IN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION

Kesiah Awosika submits that the working conditions of short-term workers are not only debilitating but also as punishing as they are precarious. She is of the view that the use of women laborers violates established labor ethics in Nigeria. However, this may be; it is sometimes suggested that the benefits of short-term jobs constitute the price of progress. From this

perspective, short-term jobs enhance job flexibility, which, in turn, is an essential precondition for economic progress. Short-term labor is flexible because laborers do not always work in a single location and can easily transition from one job to another. However, this has the demerit of being susceptible to undue exploitation of the laboring women.⁶⁷ Women laborers on construction sites do very back-breaking work. The gains of women laborers in the building construction industry are visible, particularly in their families. For instance, most of these women laborers use the money they earn from their jobs to meet family needs, such as feeding the family and paying children's school fees. Some even use the proceeds from this job to pay laborers who work on their farms. One significant benefit of this type of job for women is the instant pay they receive at the end of each working day. A casual worker may not have to wait for the end of the week or month to accept payment for work done, as in the case of a farmer who endures periods of clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, and probably selling the produce before reaping the reward for her labor. Payments are not made through banks, which requires valuable time in queues to collect funds.

In 2020, a laborer at a building site was paid daily, with the amount depending on the type of work performed and the type of building. For instance, 500 NGN (five hundred Nigerian naira) is charged for a bag of cement concrete mixing. However, charges regarding the story building depend on the decking level. A fee of 500 NGN is charged for ground concrete mixing; approximately 600 NGN for the first decking; 700 NGN to 800 NGN for the second decking; and 1,000 NGN or 1,200 NGN for the third decking, depending on the negotiating power of the women involved and the site engineer. Some women can mix and pour five to six bags of cement daily, at 500 NGN per bag. Pouring concrete during building construction has a different payment schedule/rate. This depends on how many bags of cement one can mix with concrete and carry to the designated location.⁶⁸ This implies that women earn an average of 2,000 NGN per day, corresponding to an average weekly income of 8,000-10,000 NGN. This roughly translates to 32,000 NGN-40,000 NGN per month for four weeks. This is significantly higher than the earnings of some lower-grade white-collar employees. However, the female laborers received this pay before the COVID-19 pandemic and were paid only if they secured employment for 4 to 5 days per week. For instance, a 27-year-old Ebere, who works at an ongoing construction project on Mile 50 road, narrated the following mode of payment:

A job like mixing cement with stones is paid for by the number of bags you can finish in a day, and each bag is valued at 500 NGN. My duty as a laborer on this site is to mix cement, sand, and chippings in

the required ratio, and then carry the mixture to where the builder (mason) will use it.⁶⁹

Figure 4: A Woman Laborer climbing the ladder to serve mixed concrete to a Mason Man at the ongoing construction of New KpiriKpiri Ultra-Modern Market, Abakaliki. Photo taken by the author during field work on 02/08/2020



Following the easing of the COVID-19 lockdown in October 2020, women laborers now charge between 2,500 NGN and 3,000 NGN per day. As of the interview, they charge 1,000 NGN for a bag of cement during concrete mixing, compared to 500 NGN before the Coronavirus pandemic; 1,200 NGN for the first floor, and 1,300 NGN for the second and upper floors.⁷⁰ On the bricklayers' side, they are paid an average of 3,500 NGN to 4,500 NGN daily and charge 35 NGN to 50 NGN per block, depending on their negotiating power.⁷¹

Many of the laborers use their earnings to support their families. In many cases, women are fully responsible for feeding their families, including their husbands, paying school fees, and ensuring their children's overall well-being. This is so because most often, husbands of such women have no tangible means of livelihood. Some women also use their earnings to pay laborers to work on their husbands' farms. Thanks to the efforts of these women, their children have been able to acquire some level of education, even up to secondary and university levels. One of the

women purchased a cell phone, an item most rural women consider an unaffordable luxury. From their savings, some can cater for themselves during the baby-nursing period following delivery, when they cannot return to their usual jobs.⁷² They also use their earnings to settle their debts, avoiding embarrassment from creditors. Josephine Ngozi Chima, formerly a textile trader who later became a laborer, borrowed 120,000 Naira in 2015 from Microfinance Bank. She used her savings from laboring at a building construction site to settle her debt by the end of 2016.⁷³ From her earnings, another woman laborer could build a mud house (Nkpufuluru).⁷⁴ Chinyere Akpu, also a laborer, said she was following in her mother's footsteps, who had worked as a construction laborer. She gave the following narrative:

My late mother was a laborer in the 1980s. She saved and used her money judiciously. She could pay my school fees from her laborer's proceeds. During my wedding, she gave me a huge sum of money, bought me clothes, and things like a fridge and a bed. She did all these with her laborer's savings.⁷⁵

Women laboring on construction sites in Abakaliki contribute in their own small ways to the town's infrastructure development, particularly in building construction. It should be recalled that, with Abakaliki emerging as an urban center and becoming the state capital, labor demand in building construction became a pressing necessity, driven by population growth. These women responded to this labor demand by offering services in the construction of government-owned, public, and private buildings. In this way, they have contributed their quotas to the development of Abakaliki. Among the notable building projects where some of these women have worked as laborers are: St. Peter's Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, Kpirikpiri, Ebonyi State Government House, Abakaliki International Conference Center, Ebonyi State University Campus (Permanent Site), Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo (AE-FUNAI), Oruta Ngele Township Stadium, Margaret Umahi International Market, New Kpirikpiri Ultra-Modern Market (See Figure 5), Ochudo Estate, Ecumenical Center, etc.⁷⁶ For over 30 years, some of these women have worked as laborers on private property construction projects within and outside the Abakaliki metropolis. This implies that, in addition to government buildings, a small number of these women have worked as laborers in private buildings, thereby contributing to the development of Ebonyi State.⁷⁷ However, these benefits are not without their challenges.

Figure 5: Women Laborers mixing concrete in an ongoing construction of the New KpiriKpiri Ultra-Modern Market, Abakaliki. Photo taken by the author during field work on 09/07/2020



Figure 6: Group of Women Laborers fetching concrete at a construction site, Mile 50 Area, Abakaliki. Photo taken by the author during fieldwork on 09/04/2020



CHALLENGES FACED BY THE WOMEN LABORERS

From issues examined so far, it is evident that women laborers in the building construction industry in Abakaliki face challenges that fall into two identifiable categories. First, there are issues of long working hours, poor working conditions/environment, and working during pregnancies, which are social/cultural problems that these laboring women face. Second, there are those facing the job: mixing concrete during the rainy season, awarding contracts for building projects to companies outside the state (Ebonyi), and having difficulty communicating with the women laborers on the building sites. For difficulties facing women, the issue of divorce is a significant obstacle that women laborers in building construction in Abakaliki encounter. For instance, many of these women are married to illiterate men who consider marital relations as merely a source of sexual pleasure with no corresponding responsibilities. As a result, it appears that some men do not cater to these women and their children. Thus, the men prefer to separate from their wives rather than cater to their needs. Inadequate care is another factor that some of the husbands of these women laborers exhibit towards their wives by way of beating and intimidating the wives, even in everyday family conversations, which may finally lead to divorce. The implication is that women who are victims of this circumstance would eventually be left with no option other than to join laborers in building sites, since they are usually not educated enough to have a more decent job.⁷⁸

Generally, most Abakaliki men are polygamous. The men often leave their wives to fend for themselves and their children. To this end, the women resort to intricate work, such as mixing concrete on building sites, to earn badly needed money to care for their families, including their husbands. Polygamy tends to confer scarcity value on a man vis-à-vis his wives, who would compete among themselves for the man's special attention. Thus, the women go the extra mile to make money and make their husbands happy. Whenever this competitive scenario arises among the wives, some husbands exploit it to relax, thereby abdicating their family responsibilities to their wives.⁷⁹ Sometimes, even after providing for their families and fulfilling their marital obligations, some husbands would still take on additional wives, including close friends and relatives. As Maria Bernard lamented:

I do not get anything from my husband whenever I am pregnant, but immediately my baby starts weaning, my husband becomes romantic again. Generally, some of our husbands show love and care mainly to their wives who do not have children, simply because bearing children comes with more responsibility, which they virtually avoid. In

most cases, some of our husbands only care for their wives and avoid responsibilities to avoid having children.⁸⁰

Another challenge facing women is accelerated aging due to job-related stress. Women who engage in physically demanding jobs, such as mixing concrete, lifting head pans, and climbing ladders with buckets of cement on their heads at the construction site, tend to age faster than their biological age would suggest. In addition, daily contact with cement often irritates women's skin. One result is the premature onset of wrinkles, a symptom of early ageing.⁸¹ Protracted working hours: Working an average of eight hours a day for four days a week leaves most of these married women with little or no time to attend to their children's upbringing and other family chores.⁸² It is common knowledge that neglect, lack of attention, and parental care can harm a child, such as leading to delinquency in society. The long, stressful hours at their workplace make it impossible for the women to improve themselves through formal education or skill acquisition.⁸³

Poor and strenuous working conditions are among the challenges faced by women laborers in the building construction industry. For instance, these women are most often not provided with any safety kits, which exposes them to various injuries at the work sites. This challenge is compounded for women by the heavy workloads they face on construction sites. Additionally, close observation reveals that they rarely have a balanced diet. The implication is that poor nutrition will eventually lead to a weakened immune system, increasing susceptibility to illness and disease. On construction sites, many women prefer to eat only "hard food," such as garri and fufu (Akpu), with soup to sustain them while working.⁸⁴ A good number of them have to take analgesics to reduce pain in their head, waist, back, and joints.⁸⁵ Notwithstanding this challenge, they have no regrets about doing this job, as it is preferable to being a beggar or a parasite on their neighbors.

Interestingly, even during pregnancy, whether in the sixth or eighth month, these women continued to work from dawn to dusk, saving money to cover the costs of childbirth and care, as well as antenatal expenses. In less than two months after birth, the women would again return to the building sites to resume their laborious job with the newborn babies strapped to their side. Doing such hard labor during pregnancy could put both the expectant mother and the baby at risk. During nursing, they usually go to the site with an underage daughter to care for the baby while the mother is at work. Some pregnant women laborers are known to have delivered their babies at the construction site. When this happens, out of joy, the owner of the building site would decide to voluntarily take care of the woman's immediate needs and those of the newborn baby.⁸⁶ The

rainy season challenges these women laborers because downpours damage the mixed concrete. In this condition, the site engineer prioritizes the timing of the building project, with no consideration for how these women succeed in mixing the concrete and delivering it to the appropriate floor or decking under the rain. The women are compelled to work under these circumstances because their pay is based on the number of bags of cement mixed into concrete during the concrete flooring and decking.⁸⁷

Another challenge facing women is the recent shift by the state government and other corporate agencies to award building contracts to construction companies outside the state, such as Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Lagos. Construction companies now bring their laborers to their project sites. This reduces the number of manual jobs available to casual laborers, the group to which Abakaliki belongs. In addition, increased state government taxation is reducing the volume of building construction in Ebonyi State, in general, and in Abakaliki in particular. As a result, job opportunities for women are declining.⁸⁸ This makes job creation minimal because prospective landlords are now tactfully suspending their building projects, waiting for the next political dispensation in 2023, when they expect taxation to be reduced.

Controlling these women is often challenging due to a language barrier, especially when the building project supervisor and the masons are not fluent in the Izzi dialect of Igbo. While interrogating one of the mason men about their working relationship with the women laborers, it was observed that the language barrier is a significant challenge on some building sites. Also, some supervisors have witnessed casualties among these women that could have led to fatal injury or death.⁸⁹ This implies that women laborers engaged in building construction have a higher risk of workplace injury due to their fragile nature as women. It was equally observed that the services of women as laborers in building construction are not as fast and reliable as those of men or young boys. This makes the mason men take it easy on them, since they are females who need to be tended to.⁹⁰ Be that as it may, it was observed that these women are easier to manage, less troublesome, less criminally minded, and prepared to accept lower pay than the men.

Job satisfaction is derived from evaluating the job's characteristics as people's feelings about different aspects of their jobs. Job satisfaction expresses the extent to which people like or dislike their job and the degree to which they feel positive or negative about various aspects of their jobs.⁹¹ Job satisfaction among women is of great importance to their families, society, and employers because it helps determine the extent to which employees enjoy their work. When queried if they are satisfied with the job of concrete mixing, it was observed that the majority of these women laborers, if given the opportunity, would prefer to engage in other en-

deavors such as tailoring, hairdressing, commercial farming, and petty trade in garri, grains, groundnut, palm oil, crayfish, etc. It was evident that the women would be willing to leave the concrete-mixing job if they could be aided or sponsored into other positions beyond their current engagement.⁹² Unfortunately, the women lack the educational qualifications to be employed in less arduous and better-paying jobs.

CONCLUSION

Based on its analysis, this paper establishes that female laborers primarily mix concrete and render for masons (bricklayers) at construction projects. It was observed that women in the study area are excluded from certain occupational categories due to both formal and informal barriers to entry. These barriers include a lack of education, inadequate technical training, cultural and traditional constraints, and outdated labor laws. These traditional constraints deny women the educational, economic, and, to some extent, political power necessary to actualize their innate potential. The paper examined the issue of women laborers in building construction in Abakaliki and discussed factors that encouraged women to engage in concrete mixing and rendering for bricklayers. Challenges encountered by women laborers and their implications for women, their families, and the construction industry were also examined. It is observed that most women take up this job due to the state's poor economic conditions and their husbands' inability to provide for their families' basic needs regularly. Interestingly, most of these women seeking jobs on building sites are married, and it is evident that family responsibilities compel them to undertake this arduous task of alleviating the poverty of their various families. This reality could support the claim that most of these married women unavoidably support their husbands and take care of their families, especially in polygamous homes. Many women have learned one skill or another, while a few have acquired no skills. Those who have acquired skills often lack the capital to start businesses or further develop their skills. Hence, they enter the construction industry as concrete mixers to earn and save money.

My findings also reveal that aside from poverty and unemployment, poor or lack of education and necessary skills, family responsibilities are the top primary reasons why females engage as laborers at building sites. The rest, who have no particular skill, have found construction site work in their neighborhoods as a quick way to use their natural strength to earn money, bypassing the need for skill training or education. Some claim it is a fast way to make and save money, enabling them to start a business or acquire new skills. The education gap is not peculiar to Abakaliki women alone; it is a common phenomenon in all states in Igboland.

Obviously, the women laborers face enormous challenges despite the money they make from their laborious engagements. For instance, most women complained of the tedium and stressfulness of the jobs. Some others complain of pain throughout their bodies, especially in their joints, after their day job. Some of these women undertake the arduous jobs even when they are pregnant. In the process, they put their health at serious risk and even that of their unborn babies. Another challenge the women face arose from the former David Umahi administration's government policy of awarding contracts to construction companies outside the state. Such companies bring their workers outside the state, thereby denying local workers employment opportunities. This situation reduces job opportunities for women laborers in Abakaliki, thereby stalling their chances to earn badly needed money for family upkeep. Interestingly, according to local building contractors who employ laborers at the site, these women are easier to manage, less troublesome, less criminally inclined, and more willing to accept lower pay than their male counterparts. The site supervisors who do not speak the Izzi dialect of Igbo have difficulty communicating with the women laborers who speak only Izzi. It was also observed that the language barrier poses a significant challenge for site engineers who do not speak the Izzi dialect, which the women predominantly speak. Aside from this, carrying head pans or buckets of mixed cement to the second, third, and even fourth floors of a building under construction inflicts a heavy physical toll on the women.

The study argues that, in general, all the women involved in this hard labor are very dissatisfied with their work and long to do any job other than laboring on building sites. They are willing to do petty trading, tailoring, and hairdressing. However, financial constraints and the absence of other viable alternatives make it impossible for women to engage in less stressful engagements such as petty trading. Because of this, the women have had to stick to concrete mixing. This job requires young people with appropriate stamina, not ageing persons, as some women are. This study, therefore, emphasizes the need for the government to formulate policies that encourage young women to acquire the necessary education and skills to obtain less-stressful, less physically demanding jobs.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the building construction industry, previously a male-dominated sector, is evolving into a more gender-friendly sector in Abakaliki. The creation of Ebonyi State in 1996 has, to a considerable extent, influenced and regulated the conditions under which various forms of labor have emerged and are operating. Women now claim that "what a man can do, a woman can do even better". Although women are entering the building construction industry, they are often assigned to the lowest levels of the job, which presents obvious challenges despite the financial benefits. The amount the women earn

from concrete mixing, paid per bag of cement, appears reasonable because they earn almost the same amount as the bricklayers (mason men) are paid daily. However, despite the reasonable amount these women laborers earn from their engagement in building construction, it is not commensurate with the energy they put into performing their jobs, mixing concrete and rendering services to masons.

Based on the activities of female laborers in Abakaliki, it is persuasive to posit that these women are among the hardest-working groups not just in Ebonyi State, perhaps also in all the Igbo-speaking areas of Eastern Nigeria, if not Nigeria as a whole. Besides, it is essential to note that most of these women laborers are Ezza women from outlying districts of Abakaliki main town, who return home at the end of the day. For instance, as early as 7 am, the women are already seated at their locations, armed with their work tools such as cutlasses, hoes, head pans, shovels, diggers, axes, and more, all waiting anxiously to be hired to work for money with which to feed their families. It is a very pathetic sight to see the women rush towards any car that stops close to them, presuming that it signals the arrival of a prospective hirer. Sadly, some days, some of the women do not find somebody to hire them, and they have to go back to their starving families, empty-handed. Some of them, who come from as far as various Ezza villages and other contiguous areas of Abakaliki town, would have no money for transport back home. Such people are forced to take the most menial job available to earn money for their return journey. Some have to trek home, even when they are very hungry and physically exhausted.

Given the immense contributions of the women in the areas of providing manual labor at building sites and providing physical, psychological, and social comfort to their families, the women can be proudly said to be a key factor in the socio-economic development of the state capital of Abakaliki, with special regard to its infrastructural development. Indeed, as Chioma Agwu puts it,

The Abakaliki woman is industrious and a hustler. The Abakaliki woman is a man. She does not depend on anybody. She would not let her family starve. She is willing to do whatever it takes to feed and care for her family. She is willing to trek from the deepest part of the state to the capital to do menial jobs. She is willing to ride bicycles from whatever distance to get to that job that feeds her family. She is willing to jump onto a truck and sit in the trunk of vehicles, provided she is working and will be paid.⁹³

Additionally, the preference for manual labor over mechanical plants in building construction is likely to persist for some time; therefore, the

challenges identified – education and skill acquisition, stigma and discrimination, and safety and health hazards – must be addressed. The laboring women need to live everyday lives. So long as they work to earn a living and support their families, we must consider how these challenging jobs, such as lifting bags of cement, mixing, and carrying bucket loads of concrete, affect them. The pertinent questions to ask at this point are: First, how does the job affect their childbearing status? Second, how does it affect their ageing? These questions await further research.

Worried by this situation, therefore, it may not be out of place to call on the state government to enact a law to protect women from the hazards of on-site jobs. Since women have broken out of the conventional stereotype and entered the building and engineering industry, deliberate policies and steps must be implemented to address the identified challenges confronting women. Steps should include promoting female education, particularly in professional tertiary courses. Women who have acquired modern skills should be assisted in establishing their businesses through loans and other empowerment programs. Therefore, the government, stakeholders, and concerned individuals need to create inclusive job opportunities for all, especially women, so that they are not left with only the option of taking on hard, punishing jobs. Additionally, skills-acquisition programs should be made available to people, especially women, to mitigate the impact of such laborious work.

In the same vein, in a situation where the Ebonyi State government and corporate agencies decide to award building contracts to construction companies outside the state, there should be an agreement between the State government and the construction companies to use a certain percentage of people of Ebonyi State origin as workers and laborers for the job. With this, female laborers could also participate in the job and earn some money to support their families. There is also a need for the Ebonyi State government to reconsider the high incidence of taxation in the state to avoid its adverse effect on businesses. This would encourage individuals and agencies to pursue various endeavors and take on different roles. This would reduce the scarcity of employment for women laborers and enable them to earn money to meet their basic needs. Finally, these women should be encouraged to establish their productive small-scale enterprises through loans and skill acquisition opportunities. They could contribute more meaningfully to the socio-economic development of Abakaliki and Ebonyi State as a whole. The implementation of these should extend the standard norm of gender reforms in West Africa, where more state-initiated movements are driven by political calculations rather than a sincere effort to reverse gender inequality. In this regard, Ludovic Lado argues that changes are driven by foreign pressure, including adherence to international standards such as the Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It is misleading; instead, it should be created from below or based on the native meanings of gender relations.⁹⁴ The imposition of Western-derived gender equality ideals risks introducing reforms such as "hegemonic modernity" that overlook local cultural and religious contexts.

NOTES

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¹ N. Mba. "Women and Politics in Colonial Nigeria" (Symposium on the Impact of Colonialism on Women in Nigeria. Women's Research Documentation Center, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan October 1989), 16-18.

² Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.

³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (Nigeria: Alogonquin Books, 2003).

⁴ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed., *African Feminism in the Global Arena: Novel Perspectives on Gender, Class, Ethnicity, and Race* (New Jersey: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2019), 32.

⁵ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed., *In African Feminism in the Global Arena*, 22-23

⁶ Akachi Ezeigbo, "Unity in Diverse Indigenous Feminisms," in *African Feminism in the Global Arena: Novel Perspectives on Gender, Class, Ethnicity, and Race*, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed. (New Jersey: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2019), 57.

⁷ Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 34-42. Onwuka N. Njoku, "Women in Traditional Igbo Economy," in *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio Economic Change*, 105-117.

⁷ Onwuka N. Njoku, "Manufacture and Trade in Igbo Culture," in *Topics in Igbo Economic History*, eds. Onwuka Njoku and Obi Iwuagwu (Ikeja: First Academic Publishers, 2008), 47.

⁸ Obona E. Elem, and Nweke N. Eugene, "Women and Socio-Economic Development in Rural Communities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria: An Assessment," *Scholarly Journal of Business Administration* 8, no. 2 (2019): 38, www.scholarly-journals.com/SJBA. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976), 30.

⁹ Nkiru Nzegwu, "Gender Equality in Dual-Sex System: The Case of Onitsha," *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 7, no. 1 (1994): 73-95.

¹⁰ Onwuka N. Njoku, *Ohafia: A Heroic Igbo Society* (Okigwe: WHYTEM Publishers), 2000.

¹¹ V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), Chpt. 2; Njoku, "Women in Traditional Igbo Economy," 105.

¹² Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939), 21; Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 47.

¹³ Paul U. Mbakwe and Michael A. Chigbo, "Manufacturing Industries and Crafts in Ohaozara, Ebonyi State before 1960," in *Topics in Igbo Economic History*, eds. Onwuka Njoku and Obi Iwuagwu (Ikeja: First Academic Publishers, 2008), 158; Okpan K. Oyeoku, "Igbo Women and the Plastic Arts," in *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio Economic Change*, eds. E. J. Otagburuagu and A. E. Afigbo (Nsukka: Institute of African

Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2008), 125. Abakaliki is an Igbo pottery-producing area alongside other eastern Nigerian towns such as Afikpo, Anambra, Awgu, Awka, Nsukka, Okigwe, Onitsha, and Umuahia. It is interesting to see how he explores the ways these values can be incorporated into modern techniques to enhance the status of the potters, who are all women.

¹⁴ Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 58-59; Njoku, "Women in Traditional Igbo Economy," 112. Firstly, only women could fetch and evaporate the brine. Secondly, menstruating women were prevented from fetching the brine. The women had to go nude or almost naked to the lake. Thirdly, only women from the salt-producing communities of Okposi, Uburu, and Enyigba were empowered to fetch salt water. Fourthly, a woman initiated into the association of salt producers was allowed to fetch salt water. The pottery industry was restricted to female slaves or women of servile ancestry, and it was an abomination for a man to engage in pottery making.

¹⁵ Njoku, "Women in Traditional Igbo Economy," 114.

¹⁶ Richard. R. Henderson and Helen K. Henderson, *An Outline of Traditional Onitsha Ibo Socialization* (Occasional Publication No. 5, Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, 1966), 4-5.

¹⁷ Adiele E. Afigbo, "Igbo Women, Colonialism and Socio-Economic Change," in *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio-Economic Change*, 1.

¹⁸ George T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Lagos: University Publishing Co., 1982), 68.

¹⁹ Misty Bastian, "Vultures of the Marketplace: Southeastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women's War) of 1929," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Susan Geiger, Nakanyike Musisi, and Jean Marie Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 260-281.

²⁰ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 67.

²¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 167.

²² Elizabeth E. Prevost, *The Communion of Women: Missions and Gender in Colonial Africa and the British Metropole* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 45.

²³ Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 114 and 115.

²⁴ Ezra Chitando et al. *Gendered Spaces, Religion and Migration in Zimbabwe: Implications for Economic Development*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022).

²⁵ Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, 6 and 7.

²⁶ Ndubueze L. Mba, *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), 9.

²⁷ Ikpeze, "Women in Political Economy of Igboland," 176.

²⁸ Kenneth Omeje, ed., *The Crises of Postcoloniality in Africa* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2018).

²⁹ Felicia Ekejiuba, "Social Capital, Social Mobility and Changing Status of Igbo Women," in *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio-Economic Change*, 43.

³⁰ Egodi Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007); Nina Mba, "Igbo Women and Politics (Nationalist and Post Colonial)," in *New Brides, More Hopes: Igbo Women in Socio-Economic Change*, 94-96.

³¹ This does not intend to give credit to women as breadwinners. Nevertheless, it accounts for the fact that males and females, due to changing economic circumstances of the society, are sharing family responsibilities. Read further to see yearly statistics on how this has increased over time, refer to the Labor Force Survey in the National Bu-

reau of Statistics, Demographic and Health Surveys from 1900 to 2018. Qualitative studies include WIEGO-Women in Informal Employment data.

³² Uchenna Anyanwu, *Treading the Rough and Tumble Field: Oral Tradition and History in Northeastern Igboland* (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2005), 17-23; Saul B. Cohen, ed., "Abakaliki," *The Columbia Gazetteer of the World. 1: A to G* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

³³ "Abakaliki," *Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th edition*, ed. Hoiberg, Dale H (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2010), 7.

³⁴ Ononiwu A. Oparah, "Urban Development in Owerri, 1900-1960" (M.A Dissertation, University of Ibadan, 2015, 57).

³⁵ NITP, *The State of Urban and Regional Planning in Nigeria*. (Abuja-FCT: A Publication of the Nigerian Institute of Town Planners (NITP), 2014), 12. Quoted in Oparah, "Urban Development in Owerri, 1900-1960".

³⁶ "Abakaliki," *Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th edition*, "7.

³⁷ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 10-18.

³⁸ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 24-25.

³⁹ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 24-25.

⁴⁰ Esther Nwite, interviewed by author, September 2, 2020, physical interview. Mrs Nwite is a Civil Servant and the current head of the Town Planning, Abakaliki Capital Territory Development Board.

⁴¹ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 10

⁴² U. Idam, interviewed by author, January 13, 2020, physical interview.

⁴³ C. Nwaeze, interviewed by author, January 13, 2020, physical interview.

⁴⁴ Physical interview with Emmanuel Onwe Barr. Onwe has held political positions, including serving as Ebonyi State Commissioner for Finance from 2005-2007.

⁴⁵ Enyinnaya Agwu, interviewed by author, August 21, 2020, physical interview. He has lived in Abakaliki for over thirty years and operates as a cotton Trader.

⁴⁶ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 2.

⁴⁷ Interim Report, *Abakaliki Capital Territory Master Plan*, Section 3, 20-23.

⁴⁸ Field Work, Abakaliki, 31 January 2020.

⁴⁹ Field Work, Abakaliki, 2 November 2019.

⁵⁰ U. Idam, physical interview by the author.

⁵¹ Chioma Agwu, interviewed by author, August 7, 2020, physical interview.

⁵² E. Bbaale. "Female Education, Labor Force Participation and Family Size in Nigeria" (African Economic Research Consortium, Nairobi, Kenya, 2010).

⁵³ Mary Ada Levinus, interviewed by author, November 2, 2019; Maria Bernard, interviewed by author, September 4, 2020; physical interview; Goodness Eze, interviewed by author, August 7, 2020; physical interview; Chioma Agwu and Esther Nwite, physical interview.

⁵⁴ Field Work, August 4, 2020. The author made these observations at the ongoing New Kpirikpiri Ultra-Modern Market.

⁵⁵ Field work, 15 August 2020.

⁵⁶ Cyril Odomanam, quoted in Nabob Ogbonna, "Abakaliki: Where Women Engage in Hard Labour," *Daily Times*, April 24, 2016, 2.

⁵⁷ Mary Ada Levinus, Goodness Eze, Maria Bernard and Esther Nwite. The author conducted all physical interviews.

⁵⁸ Mary Oyinbe, quoted in Nabob Ogbonna, "Abakaliki: Where Women Engage in Hard Labour to Earn a Living," 3.

⁵⁹ In most cases, the condition these women find themselves in by not allowing them to make an informed choice during marriage appears to be more of societal forces than tradition, which is now turning into a culture.

⁶⁰ C. Nwaeze, interviewed by the author, January 16, 2020, physical interview; Blessing Agbo, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2020, physical interview.

⁶¹ Ogechi Igwe, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2020, physical interview.

⁶² Ngozi Okeh, interviewed by the author, September 4, 2020, physical interview; Ego Nwauduma, August 7, 2020, physical interview; Chinyere Onyiro, interviewed by the author, August 4, 2020, physical interview.

⁶³ Edith Okeh, interviewed by the author, January 15, 2020, physical interview; Promise Nweke, interviewed by the author, January 15, 2020, physical interview.

⁶⁴ Josephine Ngozi Chima, interviewed by the author, September 4, 2020, physical interview. She is the Women Leader of the State Women Leader, *Building and Construction Skilled Artisans Association of Nigeria* (BACSAAN), Ebonyi State Chapter.

⁶⁵ Ogechi Igwe, physical interview with the author.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Nworie, interviewed by the author, January 15, 2020, physical interview.

⁶⁷ Kesiah K. Awosika, "Nigerian Women in the Labour Force: Implications for National Economic Planning," in *Nigerian Women and Development*, eds. F. A. Ogunsheye et al (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 2010), 369-383.

⁶⁸ Josephine Ngozi Chima, Maria Bernard and Ego Uwauduma, all physical interviews by the author.

⁶⁹ Ebere Ishiala, interviewed by the author February 8, 2020, physical interview.

⁷⁰ Gerald Nwadike, interviewed by author, October 13, 2020, physical interview.

⁷¹ Martin Idam Ogbonnaya (Mason/Brick Layer), interviewed by the author, second physical interview, October 12, 2020.

⁷² Mary Nwibo, interviewed by the author, June 2, 2020, physical interview; Ukamaka Okoh, interviewed by the author, August 7, 2020, and Mary Ada Levinus, physical interview.

⁷³ Physical interview with Josephine Ngozi Chima. In narrating her ordeal, she joined because of an incident in Onitsha where she lost her textiles worth 120,000 NGN, which she had borrowed from the Microfinance bank. She lost the money to a potter (wheelbarrow pusher) who vanished with the goods while crossing the road and couldn't locate the person again.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Omaka, interviewed by the author, was physically interviewed on September 4, 2020.

⁷⁵ Chinyere Akpu, interviewed by the author on June 2, 2020, physical interview.

⁷⁶ All physical interviews by the author of Esther Nwite, Josephine Ngozi Chima, Mary Ada Levinus, Maria Bernard and Enyinnaya Agwu

⁷⁷ Enyinnaya Agwu, physical interview by the author.

⁷⁸ J. P. Nwenu, (Retired Civil Servant), interviewed by the author, January 22, 2020. Physical interview.

⁷⁹ Josephine Ngozi Chima

⁸⁰ Maria Bernard, physical interview by the author.

⁸¹ Goodness Eze, physical interview by the author.

⁸² Chinyere Onyiro, physical interview by the author.

⁸³ The implication is that some of the women laborers in building construction who have acquired skills, in reality, may not have time to devote to it. As it is often said, "practice makes perfect".

⁸⁴ Mary Ada Livinus and Josephine Ngozi Chima, physical interview by the author

⁸⁵ Ebere Ishiala and Blessing Agbo, physical interview by the author

⁸⁶ Augustina Ogeh, interviewed by the author, June 26, 2020, physical interview, and Ebere Ishiala, Blessing Agbo, physical interview by the author.

⁸⁷ Augustina Ogeh and Mary Ada Livinus, physical interview by the author.

⁸⁸ Josephine Ngozi Chima, physical interview by the author.

⁸⁹ Martin Idam Ogbonnaya (Mason Man/Brick Layer), interviewed by the author, February 8, 2020, first physical interview. Most of them don't understand the English language because of their strong affinity with their Izzi native dialect of the Igbo language.

⁹⁰ Martin Idam Ogbonnaya, physical interview by the author. Having worked in Enugu, Aba, Anambra, and Afikpo, Ogbonnaya said seeing women working as laborers in building construction is uncommon in these areas. Hence, to him, women laborers are common in the Abakaliki building construction industry.

⁹¹ A. Aminu, "Determinants of Participation and Earnings in Wage Employment in Nigeria" (A Final Report submitted to African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), Nairobi, Kenya, 2010).

⁹² Chinyere Akpu, Ukamaka Okoh and Chinyere Onyiro, physical interview by the author.

⁹³ Chioma Agwu, physical interview by the author.

⁹⁴ Ludovic Lado, *The Politics of Gender Reform in West Africa: Family, Religion, and the State*, 1st ed (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 39.