

Interest Groups

In some traditional societies women had considerable autonomy in such areas as farming, trading, markets, and female rights of passage. In these areas, women's groups made and enforced rules and regulations. Igbo women of Nigeria wielded effective sanctions not only over their own membership, but over the entire community. Interestingly, their sanctioning procedures were transformed into political weapons that led to riots and rebellions against colonial rule.

'Sitting on' or 'making war'

In precolonial Nigeria, Igbo women's base of political power lay in their own gatherings, of which there were many kinds. These gatherings performed a wide range of social, economic, and political functions. The gatherings that performed the major role in women's self-rule, and which articulated their interests as opposed to those of men, were the village-wide meetings of all adult women based on common residence, which under colonialism came to be called *mikiri* or *mitiri* (from 'meeting') (Van Allen 1972: 169-70). *Mikiri* played an important role in women's daily self-rule, serving as a forum where they could air complaints about people breaking the rules. Women were used to protecting their own interests as farmers, traders, wives, and mothers, and if their requests for compliance with the rules were ignored, the offender was first warned and asked to mend his or her ways. If compliance was not forthcoming, then other tactics such as strikes, boycotts, force, and 'making war' were used.

For instance, if a man had mistreated his wife, she might employ the collective sanction, 'sitting on a man' or 'making war' against him. She would give a shrill cry, which brought other women to her compound. If they agreed with her complaint, the other women would settle on a time to meet at her husband's compound. The women dressed in the same attire: their heads were bound with ferns, symbolizing war, and their faces were smeared with ashes; they wore short loin cloths, and carried sticks wreathed with young palm fronds. The sticks supposedly invoked the power of the female ancestors. They gathered at the offender's compound, usually at night, where they danced, sang derisive songs outlining their complaints, banged on his hut with their pestles, covered it with mud, and in extreme cases, destroyed it and 'roughed him up'. This raucous behavior was kept up until the man repented and promised to mend his ways. 'Making war' was the strongest sanction women had for punishing wrongdoers and for enforcing compliance with their rules and judgments. It was regarded by the community as a legitimate institution.