



Unsung Heroines: Tarok Women Contributions to the Socio-Economic Development of Their Land

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Abstract

This study celebrates the pivotal role Tarok women have played in the development of Tarok land, despite their often-overlooked contributions. The researcher conducted a qualitative study analyzing historical and contemporary data from various sources including books journal articles and interviews. Tarok women have been the backbone of the local economy, driving progress in agriculture, trade, and commerce. Through their entrepreneurial spirit and hard work, they have established thriving businesses, created employment opportunities, and stimulated economic growth. Beyond their economic contributions, Tarok women have also been instrumental in preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Tarok land. They have played a vital role in passing down traditional knowledge, skills, and practices to younger generations, ensuring the continuation of Tarok customs and traditions. Furthermore, Tarok women have been at the forefront of community development initiatives, working tirelessly to improve healthcare, education, and social welfare in Tarok land. Their selfless dedication to community service has had a profound impact on the well-being and quality of life of the Tarok people. This study aims to shed light on the remarkable socio-economic contributions of Tarok women, highlighting their agency, resilience, and determination. By recognizing and valuing their contributions, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable development of Tarok land, where women are empowered to reach their full potential and continue to drive progress for generations to come.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Empower Tarok Women, Socio-Economic Contributions, Development

Introduction

The Tarok is an ethnic group found in Plateau State, Nigeria, they are found majorly in Langtang North and Langtang South Local Government Areas of



Plateau State. They are also found in large numbers in Mikang, Kanke, Wase, Shendam, Kanam and Pankshin Local Government Areas of Plateau State. A good number of them are found in part of Tarawa State (Lar 2015) have a rich cultural heritage and a strong tradition of entrepreneurship and community development. However, the contributions of Tarok women to the development of Tarok land have often been overlooked. According to Nden (2013), “Tarok women are described as beautiful, very industrious, very conservative, independent and with great powers of endurance.” He further cited Cooper who stated that:

Tarok women are tall... with beautiful arms and shoulders that – European women might well envy. Like most African pagans, they carry themselves with dignity and grace, obtained by the custom, from earliest years of putting loads on their heads... Indeed, compared with the neighbouring tribes, in many respects they may well be proud of themselves, which undoubtedly they are the Tarok as a tribe are very clean in their habits, and the women remarkably so. This may be to the fact their husbands refuse to eat the food they have prepared if they had not washed. Twice a day, morning and evening, the babies have a bath.

Nden (2013) described the Tarok woman in the following ways:

1. They are very industrious and have no room for lazy girl or woman in the community. Women have their particular responsibilities in each season of the year. From early age they learn to handle and care for little babies, they learn to handle and care for little babies; they learn to handle the small hoe, grinding on the grinding stones, cooking, fetching water and firewood. They learn to take messages from one adult to the other and from their homes to their neighbours. They put long hours and hard work into their farms during the farming season. All the vegetables are solely women's properly.
2. Tarok women are capable and clever. They love their homes and children. Both male and female children are closer to their mothers than their male parents. Tarok women are hospitable and generous in sharing the little food they have.
3. They are musical people. They celebrate everything in songs and dance. They are motivators. During the time of intertribal wars the women



carried their wounded husbands on their backs for treatment. With women following closely behind, no man could run away from the war front. Any attempt was restricted by the women; such a runaway soldier was asked to come into a woman's womb to be born again.

4. They teach morals. Through songs, women encourage good habits and through it they discourage all forms of bad habits and laziness in the family any in the community. This attracts children to their mothers so much that both male and female were called by their mothers' names.

This study aims to shed light on the remarkable socio-economic contributions of Tarok women, highlighting their agency, resilience, and determination. Research has shown that women play a vital role in economic development and poverty reduction in Africa.¹ In Nigeria, women have been found to be active participants in the informal sector, contributing significantly to the country's GDP (World Bank, 2019). However, their contributions are often undervalued and unrecognized (Napbut, 2023).

This study builds on existing research on women's empowerment and socio-economic development in Africa, highlighting the specific experiences and contributions of Tarok women. By recognizing and valuing their contributions, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable development of Tarok land, where women are empowered to reach their full potential and continue to drive progress for generations to come.

Tarok Women are the female population of the Tarok ethnic group, residing in Tarok land, Plateau State, Nigeria. They are very industrious and have no room for a lazy girl or woman in community. Socio-economic contributions encompass the various ways in which Tarok women contribute to the development of Tarok land, including economic, social, and cultural aspects. Development refers to the process of improving the quality of life and well-being of individuals and communities, encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions. Entrepreneurship is the creation and management of businesses, organizations, and initiatives by Tarok women, driving innovation and economic growth. Empowerment is the process of enabling Tarok women to reach their full potential, exercising their agency, and making informed choices about their lives and communities.



Women in Tarok Traditional Religion

In Tarok traditional religion, women play a significant role in spiritual and cultural practices. The Tarok woman is very important in the Tarok traditional religion. The woman cooks and brews the wine that is used in the shrine. She does not go to the shrine but without her, nothing will be done in the shrine. She cooks and brews the wine among other things (Nden, 2013). Shagaya summerised the value of the woman in Tarok traditional religion thus: “The women cook food, brew local beer and take to the shrine. The ancestral spirits bless the women who have prepared the food and drink, and promise to solve their problems” (2005). It is very ironical that women are those that buy food, prepare the food and brew the wine that is taken to the *Orim* masquerades but the women are forbidden from seeing the same *Orim* that they feed and entertain. Lakan states that: “Each time masquerades (*Orim*) comes out, no woman or teenager was allowed to see them”. The Tarok women have no free will (1998).

They are revered for their spiritual power and ability to communicate with the divine (Nden, 2021). Women are also responsible for passing down traditional knowledge and practices to younger generations, ensuring the continuation of Tarok customs and traditions (Napbut, 2023).

Women's roles in Tarok traditional religion include:

- a. *Spiritual leaders*: Women serve as spiritual leaders and priestesses, leading rituals and ceremonies (Shagaya, 2005).
- b. *Diviners*: Women are skilled diviners, using their knowledge of herbs, rituals, and spiritual practices to diagnose and solve problems (Napbut, 2023).
- c. *Healers*: Women are respected healers, using their knowledge of traditional medicine to treat physical and spiritual ailments (Nden, 2021).

Despite their significant contributions to Tarok traditional religion, women's roles are often overlooked and undervalued (Napbut, 2023). This study aims to shed light on the important contributions of women in Tarok traditional religion, recognizing their agency, resilience, and determination.



Challenges Faced by Women in Tarok Land

Despite their significant contributions to the development of Tarok land, women in Tarok land face numerous challenges that hinder their progress and empowerment. Some of the challenges faced by women in Tarok land include:

- a) *Gender-based discrimination:* Women in Tarok land face discrimination and marginalization, limiting their access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making positions (Nden, 2021).
- b) *Limited access to education:* Women in Tarok land have limited access to education, which restricts their economic opportunities and perpetuates gender inequality (Napbut, 2023).
- c) *Economic exclusion:* Women in Tarok land are often excluded from economic decision-making and have limited control over resources, perpetuating poverty and inequality (Nden, 2021).
- d) *Cultural and social barriers:* Women in Tarok land face cultural and social barriers that restrict their autonomy and agency, limiting their ability to make choices about their lives and communities (Napbut, 2023). Blench (2005) stated that, “Tarok society is strongly patrilineal and have highly authoritarian attitudes towards women.”
- e) *Limited access to healthcare:* Women in Tarok land have limited access to healthcare, which exacerbates maternal mortality and perpetuates health inequalities (Nden, 2021).

These challenges underscore the need to recognize and address the gender-specific barriers that women in Tarok land face, in order to promote their empowerment and socio-economic development. Socio-economic contributions of women to the development of Tarok land.

Socio-economic Contributions of Women to the Development of Tarok Land

Women in Tarok land have made significant socio-economic contributions to the development of their community, despite facing various challenges and barriers. Their contributions can be seen in the following areas:

- a) *Agriculture:* Women in Tarok land are actively involved in agriculture, producing food crops and cash crops, and contributing significantly to food security and the local economy (Shagaya, 2005). Trade and



Commerce: Women in Tarok land are engaged in various trading activities, including the sale of agricultural produce, crafts, and other goods, generating income and stimulating economic growth (Napbut, 2023).

- b) *Entrepreneurship*: Women in Tarok land have established thriving businesses, creating employment opportunities and driving innovation and economic growth (Nden, 2013).
- c) *Cultural Preservation*: Women in Tarok land have played a vital role in preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Tarok land, passing down traditional knowledge, skills, and practices to younger generations (Napbut, 2023).
- d) *Community Development*: Women in Tarok land have been at the forefront of community development initiatives, working tirelessly to improve healthcare, education, and social welfare in Tarok land (Nden, 2021).

These socio-economic contributions of women to the development of Tarok land are a testament to their agency, resilience, and determination. By recognizing and valuing their contributions, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable development of Tarok land, where women are empowered to reach their full potential and continue to drive progress for generations to come.

Major Findings

The contribution of Tarok women to education is quite overwhelming, considering the fact that Tarok land is an agrarian society. The contributions include: The paying of school fees, and welfare of their children. Sunday Fadip Gomo (Oral interview) points to the researcher as a product of a woman because his mother was responsible for his education. According to Ponyak Nandang, the women “pay school fees.” In fact, more than 75% of the respondents positively agreed that women teach their children, pay school fees and have admiration for education as most of the private schools are owned by women. Respondents were unanimous in mentioning Prof. Mary Lar, Mrs. Esther Wazhi and Mrs. Esther Bali as proprietress of schools in Langtang. For instance, Aunty



Mary Schools (Nursery, Primary and Secondary) are owned by Prof. Mary Lar (Oral Interview) (Napbut, 2023).

The education by Tarok women snowballed into the following:

- a. *Bible Translation*: The Tarok people were used to the Hausa Bible. However, the Bible has been translated into Tarok language. Prof. Mary Lar was instrumental to the translation of the Bible to Tarok. The first part translated to Tarok language was the New Testament which was put to use in the early 1980s. 100% of respondents agreed that Prof. Mary Lar was the brain behind the translation (Shagaya, 2005).
- b. *Tarok literature and literary activities*: Literature have been published in Tarok language courtesy Prof. Mary Lar. According to 100% of respondents, she is responsible for the publications of *Nre nkun Tarok* volumes 1-3, *Tarok Story* books and the *Tarok Hymn* book (Shagaya, 2005). “Tarok mothers train their girl children in school. Through the sacrifice of *Mbai-lele*, the mother of Prof. Mary Lar, her daughter (Mary) schooled and became the first principal in Northern Nigeria and the first female professor in Northern Nigeria” (Longtau, Oral Interview 5th January, 2020). The education of Tarok women is recognised in the training of their girl children through teaching them how to grind on the grinding stone while singing. They taught their children how to be good wives and mothers. 100% of the respondents agreed their grinding, storytelling and folktales are means through which the Tarok women inculcate moral values into their children (Napbut, 2023). For their teaching abilities, Rev. Selbut Longtall (oral interview) stated that “Tarok women are the main vehicle for maintaining Tarok language.” Prof. Juliana Mwafil (oral interview) pointed out that the Tarok women were very instrumental to the establishment of the first community school in Plateau state. It was known as Langtang Community Secondary School, “popularly known in Tarok as comm,” which was established in 1970. It is now Secondary School Langtang. Women contributed by fetching water, making gruel *kunu* and also cooking for the community as they worked (Napbut, 2023).



Respondents were unanimous in pointing at Prof. Patricia Lar as a mobiliser and motivator for girl-child education in Tarok land. Her advocacy has encouraged and stimulated many girls and even married women to go back to school.

Politics at an earlier stage was considered the exclusive right of men. However, there were very strong women who were involved. Rev. Dr. Selbut Longtal (oral interview) said, “Shirmmicit Zhenbin and Amina were powerful politicians and mobilisers. They give men money to contest elections.” In fact, to show that politics was an exclusive right of men, the late Emancipator and first civilian governor of Plateau State (Chief Solomon Daushep Lar) labeled a popular woman known as “Majo” a prostitute because she attempted to participate in politics. But the Emancipator, after some times and much awareness of the game of politics, apologised to her (Prince Ramson and Prof. Juliana Mwafil, Oral interview) (Napbut, 2023).

The temporary setback and interplay of patriarchy did not deter women from politics. 100% of respondent believed that the participation of Tarok women into politics has brought better dividends of democracy to Tarok land even more than their male counterparts. Prominent among Tarok women who participated and are into active politics include: Mrs. Esther Wazhi, Mrs. Jummai Datyem, Hon. Dinah Lar, Hon. Beni Butmak Lar, Hon. Joyce Lohya Ramnap, Late Hon. Martha Tonga, Late Nanna Nansoh and Hon. Lohfe Dashe. The contributions or dividends of democracy brought by individual women include: Hon. Dinah Lar who was responsible for the electrification of Tukun (Chief Ndam Gambo, Oral interview). Hon. Esther Wazhi as a Local Government Transition Committee Chairperson achieved the following in Langtang North Local Government Council; provision of vehicles for the Nigerian Police, provision of water tankers and water reservoirs in areas facing difficulties of water supply and supply of educational materials to schools within the Local Government Areas (Napbut, 2023).

Hon. Beni Butmak Lar, a member Federal House of Representative representing Langtang-North and Langtang-South Local Government Areas achieve much as respondents were unanimous in numerating her achievements. The following are ascribed as dividends of democracy to Tarok land courtesy of her. Her achievements include the following: Women and youth Empowerment,



Agriculture, Water Supply, Education, Environment, Health and Sport, power and Employment (Napbut, 2023).

Beni Lar Empowered women and youths through training of 400 women in various skills; Training of youth in different skills at the industrial fund with trade test certificate; Provision of vocational and micro credit loan scheme for women in Langtang North and South in conjunction with AUNTY MARY Literacy scheme. She established a centre for youth empowerment to promote self-employment and income generating skills among the youths in Wallang, Langtang North, and skills such as Carpentry, Mason, Tailoring, Hairdressing, Mechanic, Welding and GSM repairs; Facilitated the training of youths Langtang South on computer literacy, up to Diploma Level, as well as training of Langtang South youths in (I.T.F) Jos.; Training of women and youth with start-up packs in PRODA; Training of women and youth with start-up packs in NABDA; Training of women and youth with start-up packs in FIIRO; Skill acquisition Training for women and Youths with start-up packs in NILEST; Training of youths in shoe making and other leather products in NILEST; Training of youths in various skills including auto mechanic , solar panels and others in NARICT and She has done numerous disaster reliefs within the constituency (Napbut, 2023).

Beni Lar established the following agricultural scheme: Established a Youth Agricultural training scheme in December 2007. The goal is to encourage youths to be self-employed through Agriculture and dry season farming; Register and sponsored Fadama cooperative groups in 32 wards of the constituency with PADF in 2008; Liaised with the British High commission to incorporate Mban FADAMA users association, that is, Mban community in Langtang North for dry season (irrigation) farming in her constituency and that of Jemkur community in Langtang South; Personally donated many water pumps to farmers to serve the same purpose to 8 districts to promote dry season farming; Annual supply of all year round fertiliser to farmers and Annual supply of other farm implement to farmers (Napbut, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the pivotal role that Tarok women have played in the development of Tarok land, despite their often-overlooked



contributions. Through their entrepreneurial spirit, hard work, and selfless dedication to community service, Tarok women have driven progress in agriculture, trade, and commerce, preserved and promoted the rich cultural heritage of Tarok land, and improved healthcare, education, and social welfare in Tarok land.

Women are the backbone of the local economy and have been instrumental in driving progress in various sectors. Similarly, highlights the critical role that women have played in preserving and promoting Tarok customs and traditions, stating that Women have been the custodians of Tarok culture and have played a vital role in passing down traditional knowledge, skills, and practices to younger generations (Napbut, 2020).

This study has also highlighted the agency, resilience, and determination of Tarok women, who have overcome various challenges and barriers to make significant socio-economic contributions to their community. As emphasized by (Kabeer, 2005), Women's empowerment is critical for achieving equitable and sustainable development.

By recognizing and valuing the contributions of Tarok women, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable development of Tarok land, where women are empowered to reach their full potential and continue to drive progress for generations to come.

Recommendations

1. *Recognition and Valuation of Tarok Women's Contributions:* Efforts should be made to recognize and value the socio-economic contributions of Tarok women, highlighting their agency, resilience, and determination.
2. *Empowerment and Capacity Building:* Initiatives should be implemented to empower Tarok women, building their capacity in areas such as entrepreneurship, leadership, and community development.
3. *Inclusive Development:* Development strategies should prioritize the inclusion of Tarok women, ensuring their participation and benefiting from development initiatives.
4. *Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage:* Efforts should be made to preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of Tarok land,



recognizing the vital role Tarok women play in passing down traditional knowledge, skills, and practices.

5. *Community Development Initiatives*: Initiatives should be implemented to improve healthcare, education, and social welfare in Tarok land, building on the selfless dedication of Tarok women to community service.

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