within academia, the current condition of scholarship which documents women’s participation in West African and Atlantic commerce may be described as inadequate. This statement is even more valid when one examines the economic activities of women during the slave trade and in the period after British abolition in 1807. As a result of this neglect, there has been the persistence of the notion that these two critical socio-economic periods in West African and Atlantic history were the sole domains of European and African men. This paper seeks to redress this epistemological imbalance by showing that female entrepreneurs, though relatively few in number, played a significant role in West African and Atlantic commerce. It does this by examining the current state of research relating to the phenomenon of female entrepreneurs, and delineating some of the possibilities and directions that exist for the study of the “other” face of trading. Moreover, it is hoped that with future research, data may reveal how ideologies relating to class, gender, race, and ethnicity were apprehended and articulated in West African and Atlantic commerce during two significant socio-economic junctures.

The subject of female participation in slave trading and “legitimate” commerce, though relatively young, is not without precedent in African history. This subject has been investigated by scholars like
Bruce L. Mouser, George E. Brooks Jr., James F. Searing, Walter Rodney, Lucille Mathurin-Mair, and E. Frances White. The recurring motif that is evident in the works of these authors is the assertion that women’s roles were much more complex than has been previously understood. Instead of ascribing women with the sole status of victim, particularly of slavery and economics, they delineate women as nharas, signares, and senhors; in essence, women are now seen to be active participants within the commercial sector. The impact of this “epistemological turn” on scholarship has been immense. These authors have forced historians to reconsider issues relating to gender and enslavement, gender and the slave trade, gender and labour, and notions of “female delicacy.” Thus, the emergence of these works has revealed an inherent contradiction of West African historiography: on the one hand, these works have filled a definite epistemological void, while on the other hand they have revealed the shortcomings of West African economic history, particularly its failure to consider gender as “a useful category of historical analysis.”

There are a number of reasons that may be advanced as to why women were excluded from much of the earlier literature relating to slave trading, and by extension, “legitimate” commerce. The most obvious and first reason is the argument that historians, like everyone else, are “products of their societies.” Essentially, these societies created a binary where roles and behaviour are ascribed to individuals on the basis of gender. It was this ethos that shaped West African and Atlantic historiography. In this respect, therefore, it would have been difficult to imagine that the “public sphere” of the male trader could be intruded upon by women who were supposed to perform their duties within
Secondly, the numbers of women who participated in slave trading and “legitimate” commerce were significantly smaller than the numbers of men who did -- this can be seen through their virtual non-existence in slavers’ logs and other contemporary sources relating to these areas of commerce. It seems only natural, therefore, that researchers would have concentrated their energies on researching a topic for which there was more information, and for which the protagonists were more visible.

Finally -- and this point may be open to debate -- West African traders, both men and women, unlike their European counterparts -- John Newton, is one such example -- often did not leave written records like memoirs documenting their activities. In order to reconstruct their histories, therefore, historians like Brooks and Mouser have often been forced to be extremely innovative and persevering as data must be gleaned from “non-traditional” sources. Brooks, for example, examined Mãe Aurélia’s name in an effort to find “clues” that might reveal information about her life and economic status.

Along with having to face the “traditional” challenges that must be overcome by most researchers, tracing the activities of these “women of wealth” also presents one with challenges that have arisen because of the very nature of transatlantic trading, and the nature of the protagonists under investigation. For instance, the “pursuit of data” has often reinforced two significant features of transatlantic trade -- particularly the slave trade -- namely, that it involved the dispersal of peoples and the connection of various continents. In fact, the person who is interested in literature may be tempted to draw comparisons between this dispersal, and that of the data that lie scattered in several continents.
and countries, and documented in various languages. For instance, documents pertaining to the slave trade and “legitimate” commerce may be found in the Public Record Office and the British Museum Library in London, the Historical Society in New York, and archives in Barbados, France, and Sierra Leone. This suggests that there must be much collaborative effort between scholars if they want to reconstruct comprehensive histories.

The idiosyncrasies of the European power involved in trading also determined the quality and quantity of documentation that may be available to the intrepid researcher. In fact, this notion was posited by Brooks who noted that the Portuguese tended to be poor record keepers. When writing about the nhara Mãe Aurélia Correia, for instance, Brooks noted that,

> For all her indubitable importance, very little information is available concerning Mãe Aurélia, and almost every documentary reference concerns her relationship with [her husband] Caetano Nozolini. This is owing partly to the fact that Portuguese records were sporadically kept when they were kept at all, and partly to the circumstance that Mãe Aurélia and Nozolini were slave traders and hence sought to conceal many of their commercial activities.

In this quotation Brooks also revealed another factor that could have an impact on the availability and nature of sources: namely, how data could be manipulated to disguise events, thus distorting the historical narrative. Arguably, however, this manipulation of data is in itself significant, because as this act tries to hide the actual event, it at the same time serves to illuminate it.

The problems with data that have been identified suggest cogently that investigative techniques and methodologies from various disciplines and professions may have to be employed. For instance,
social historians have often asserted that “non-conventional” sources, when used in conjunction with 
more traditional sources, can be quite revealing. The case for the use of these kinds of sources 
becomes even stronger when one considers that “if ordinary people left few narratives of their lives, 
innumerable documents of great diversity[ bear] traces of those lives.”¹⁴ Moreover, these “traces could, 
with care and expertise, fit together into skeletal histories of a great many lives.”¹⁵ Thus, oral data, the 
“trope of the Talking Book,”¹⁶ letters, evidence from court testimonies, funerary architecture, and 
monuments,¹⁷ for example, are some of the sources that could be used in order to reconstruct the 
historical narrative of these “women of wealth.”

The application of a gendered lens to West African economic, social, and political history has 
had a profound impact on the “truths” that “were held to be self-evident” within African scholarship. 
Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the area of women’s participation in slave trading and 
“legitimate” commerce. Consequently, one of the legacies of this gendered analysis has been the 
implication that “grand narratives” should be replaced by more “inclusive” histories -- a task that can be 
achieved by employing conventional and unconventional methodologies, and by searching non-
traditional sources. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that although the task may be formidable, it may 
not be impossible to reconstruct this area of women’s history.

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Endnotes

Claire C. Robertson & Martin A. Klein (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983),


7. The “ethos of female delicacy” has been addressed by Dianne Dugaw in “Female Sailors Bold,” (p. 35), but may also be seen as the organising theme of several articles in *Iron Men, Wooden Women. Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, eds. Margaret S. Creighton & Lisa Norling (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

8. This phrase has been borrowed from the title of Joan W. Scott’s article “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (December 1986): 1053-75.

9. The terms “public” and “private” sphere have been used in Women’s History to explain society’s emphasis on binding women to the household (private sphere) by underscoring their domestic and maternal duties. By contrast, men were seen to inhabit the more “serious” and “important” world of politics and economics -- the public sphere.


11. Some of these documents include Colonial Office and Foreign Office records, and information on commercial, navigation, and administrative affairs.

12. The Nigerian Hinterland Project, “international” conferences, and university seminars that stress an “Atlantic approach” are examples of projects that have stressed a collaborative effort, especially in terms of the sharing of resources and personnel.


15. Ibid., 32.


17. The importance of monuments as a source of historical data should not be discounted. Oladipo Yemitan highlighted the importance of this when he noted that “memorials of the great woman [Madame Tinubu] are . . . not hard to find,” and identified Tinubu Square and Tinubu Street in Lagos as “constant reminder[s] of the mark the noblewoman made in the political and commercial life in Lagos,” Madame Tinubu. Merchant and King-Maker, Oladipo Yemitan (Ibadan: University Press Limited), 74. A similar idea was echoed by Brooks who stated that “Mãe Julia’s reputation as a leading member of the [Bijago] community was commemorated by a public Square, Largo Mãe Julia . . . ,” Brooks, “A Nhara,” 299.