

Article

Exploring the Role of *Umuada Igbo Nigeria and In Diaspora* in Empowering Igbo Communities

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Abstract

Umuada are often defined as the powerful daughters of Igbo culture. In pre-colonial Nigeria, they were one of the most powerful, organized, and peaceful women groups in Igbo communities. They commanded a lot of respect and admiration from men and women alike as they were prominent in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the development of their communities. The advent of colonialism in Africa, particularly in Nigeria saw the systematic suppression and annihilation of the influence of women in their communities. The *umuada* were the most affected in Igbo land by the colonial institution. After Nigeria, gained independence, the *Umuada* culture was almost non-existent as many Igbo daughters for one reason or another migrated from their communities to the cities and for some, outside the country. But no matter where they were, Igbo women still craved that unity that once held them together and propelled them to get involved in the growth and developmental efforts of their communities. This led to the revival of the *Umuada* spirit among Igbo women through voluntary, non-governmental organizations; one of such organizations is the *Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora*. This study is an attempt to shed light on women's role in development in Igbo land and how Igbo women groups using the example of *Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in the Diaspora* draw inspiration from the traditional *Umuada* culture to involve themselves in the developmental efforts in their communities.

Keywords: *Umuada, Igbo land, development, women groups*

Introduction

Women have always been a crucially important part of Igbo society since pre-colonial times, during the era of colonialism, and long after colonialism. The paternalistic propensity of African culture, especially the Igbo culture, does not indicate the subjugation of women. Instead, women have always thought of ways to come together in solidarity and become change-makers and have always been at the forefront of addressing economic, political, and socio-cultural issues in Igbo land. This feeling of necessity to always come together to make their impact, I believe was one of the motivating factors for the *Umuada* culture.

The *Umuada Igbo* cultural group is one of the most organized, peaceful, and endowed women's groups in Nigeria. It is a respected socio-political setup in Igbo land and is regarded as an important component of Igbo tradition and existence. The name refers to women born in a particular community, married or unmarried, within or outside the natal community, and who trace their descent to the same patrilineal ancestors. This group of women was responsible for the maintenance of relative peace and order in pre-colonial Igbo land; their dedication and sense of obligation to their communities stem from a religious traditional belief that presupposes that these women possess direct links with the Earth goddess, *Ala*, and because of this belief, the *Umuada* were revered in Igbo land. They were indispensable and complemented the men's efforts in the development of their various patrilineal communities. They are bold, courageous, and resolute in matters



that affect their patrilineal communities; and they are mostly prominent in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the development of their various communities.¹

The era of colonialism came and swept the African continent and with its winds of disruption and destruction, the Umuada tradition was one of the worst affected by the Western-style colonial and post-colonial administrations. With colonialism, came the undermining and disregard of the capabilities of Igbo women in the political and economic spheres of society. They were deemed unfit to be involved in the administrative affairs of Igbo land in any capacity; hence they were relegated to the background and were made to focus just on domestic duties. With the coming of colonialism, several other factors followed which led to the decline of the Umuada tradition. Western education and culture, urbanization, the introduction of Christianity in Igbo land, and distant marriages as many of the women have married away to other villages, towns, states, and even countries all led to the dwindling of the recognition and respect of Umuada.

Despite the adverse external influences, the zeal and the instinct to contribute their quota towards the achievement of peace and development in their natal communities remain unshaken. Igbo daughters still strived and looked for ways to make their impact in their communities; Igbo women still craved to keep the Umuada spirit alive; they wanted a way of coming together and making their impact felt in their communities and they wanted to do this irrespective of the barriers of borders and distance. This zeal to serve and help their communities even long after colonialism led to the emergence of a lot of women groups. Women began to come together in solidarity to form unions and groups dedicated to serving and developing their communities and also thanks to the emergence of technology and easier communication, members of these women groups could be from any part of the country and world.

One such group who drew its inspiration from the Umuada tradition and was formed to contribute their quota towards the achievement of peace and development in Igbo land is the voluntary and non-governmental organization, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora. The organization represents an attempt by some daughters of Igbo land to re-enact the Umuada spirit and ideology in order to mobilize other Igbo daughters to channel their efforts, both individually and collectively, towards the maintenance of peace for the human and material development of their various communities and Igbo land generally. Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora was formed in 1998 in Enugu; and it draws its members from the seven Igbo-speaking states of Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and Rivers. Some of the objectives of this organization include; carrying out advocacy campaigns on issues, upholding widowhood rites, working towards the enthronement and sustainability of good governance, promoting agriculture, and creating awareness among women on the need to be peaceful for unity and national development. In other to achieve its goals, the group strategically positioned itself to take advantage of the various factors that negatively affected and diminished the

¹ Adaobi Okafor, "Women and Development in Igboland: A case Study of Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora Association, 1998-2018" (M.A diss., University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2020), 34.

progress of the traditional Umuada groups. Such include the Christian religion, Western education and lifestyles, distant marriages, migration to the urban centers and foreign countries, white-collar jobs, and modern political-administrative structures. Instead of seeing these factors as hindrances, the group instead saw these as opportunities and encouraged its members to draw from the virtues of the Christian faith, especially concerning moral and spiritual rejuvenation; equip themselves with Western education and enlightenment; take advantage of technological advancements that make communication easier, use earnings from their jobs to the benefit of their natal communities and get involved in moderating political administration at all levels.

The study utilizes the qualitative research method. The data for the study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include direct oral interviews and participant observation with members of the organization while the secondary sources were generated from published and unpublished works, including books and projects. Descriptively, the information obtained was critically analysed to achieve the objectives of the study which is to shed light on the fact that traditional Umuada culture plays an inspirational role in women's organizations in Igbo land – using the group Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora as a case study.

Concept of Development

Over time, development has gone through various changes and evolution in human history. A society without development would be seen as a society without any form of progress or growth. According to Pearson (in Abuiyada, 2018), development involves an improvement qualitative, quantitative, or both in the use of available resources. He also asserts that development does not refer to one particular perspective on social, political, and economic betterment; instead, it is a hybrid term for a myriad of strategies adopted for socioeconomic and environmental transformation from current states to desired ones². Development varies from person to person and therefore developmental goals vary from society to society; for instance, a society that has a population with mass unemployment will have different developmental goals from a society where most of its population is employed.

Societal development is all about improving the well-being of every individual in *society* so they *can* reach their full potential and in turn contribute to the progress and positive change in economic, political, and socio-cultural affairs of society. In a society where its people are struggling to have their basic needs met, it is almost impossible for these people to contribute to the growth and progress of the society because as this popular Igbo proverb goes '*ikolobia lijue afo, oyoo chiya mgba*' which means that a 'well-fed youth will challenge his god to a wrestling match'. In other words, the basic needs of citizens have to be met so that they are motivated to go out into society and contribute to its growth and development.

There is a direct linkage between the growth of an economy and the human

² Reem Abuiyada, "Traditional Development Theories have failed to Address the Needs of the majority of People at Grassroots Levels with Reference to GAD," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 9, no. 9 (2018): 115.

development of the same economy.³ Human development involves developing human capabilities and then using them for the economic growth and prosperity of society. At this point, it can be understood that societal development and human development go hand in hand as societal development leads to human development while human development also leads to societal development. Being aware of this concept of development has led to the awakening of the need for growth and progress in less developed countries such as Nigeria and this has led to the emergence of humanitarian organizations and institutions that have the primary purpose to aid with the human and social development of their communities. Where the government and leaders failed to prioritize development in communities, we have seen women at the forefront of these humanitarian organizations championing the progress and growth of their people and communities.

Women and Development in Igbo Land

Women constitute a larger percentage of most countries of the world and sometimes play men's traditional roles in their families especially when and where the husband is not around or deceased.⁴ African women since the pre-colonial times have been at the forefront, championing the development of their communities. In Nigeria and Igbo land in particular; apart from being responsible for the nurturing and upbringing of the children, the women also cook, farm, fetch water and fuel, and clean the home and community environment which are all contributions to the socio-economic development of the society. Even though women have also been key players in the growth and improvement of their communities, their contributions are often relegated to the background. The contributions of women are often not properly recognized, evaluated, or commensurately rewarded, even though they have been indispensable in the human and material development of their various communities, and more so for developing countries.⁵ Women themselves have improved their recognition over the years through vigorous and conscious efforts in organizing and articulating their concerns and in making their voices heard through prominent groups such as women's Non-Governmental Organizations with the hope of empowering themselves.⁶

In recent times however, we have seen an uphill climb in regards to women entering the workforce, being providers in their families, and playing leadership roles that used to be considered the traditional role expected of men. In Nigeria, Africa's largest and most populous country, more women are engaging in work than ever before. By 2011, more than half (57%) of women 15-64 years old were in some form of employment.⁷ The fundamental contributions of women in their households and national economies are increasingly acknowledged within Africa

³ Ene Blessing Ita, "Human Development in Nigeria," *International Journal of African and Asian Studies* 61, (2020): 40.
<https://doi.org/10.7176/JAAS/61-06>

⁴ Uche Azikiwe, "Women and Development in the Society" in A.U. Nkemdili Nonyelu and A. Obiajulu (eds.) *Contemporary Issues in Sociology* (Enugu: John Jacob Classic Publishers, 1997), 153-165.

⁵ UN Women, *Emerging solutions for Gender Equality 2018*, (New York: UN Women HeForShe Movement), accessed January 7, 2019, <https://www.heforshe.org/files>2018-10>.

⁶ Kingdom Sunday Mboho, "Women and Socio-Economic Growth in Nigeria: A Development Strategy," *AKSU Journal of Administration and Corporate Governance* 1, no.1 (2020): 73.

⁷ Mboho, "Women and Socio-Economic Growth," 74.

and by the international community mainly because of their energetic efforts to organize, articulate their concerns, and make their voices heard.⁸

Umuada Culture through Time

According to Oreh (in Amaechi, 2018), Umuada refers to women born in a particular town, married or unmarried, who trace their descent from the same patrilineal ancestors.⁹ The Umuada tradition exists in almost every part of Igbo land which is the south-eastern region of Nigeria. In the pre-colonial times, Umuada represented one of the tools in the government of traditional Igbo setting, they were considered to be holy, indispensable, and powerful; and they complemented the men's efforts in the development of their various patrilineal communities. The Umuada group is a pressure group that plays an immeasurable role in the community and they are so powerful that at times they can enforce decisions that nullify those previously taken by the male folk.¹⁰ In pre-colonial society Igbo women were highly respected and gender relations were based on equality and non-discrimination; they were not inferiorized, nor powerless; neither were they marginalized in the traditional setting.¹¹ Igbo women during those days enjoyed certain privileges and recognition; power was balanced between men and women in the socio-political and economic affairs of the community and women had a considerable level of autonomy and independence in the Igbo society where their opinions were held in high regard. The Umuada were responsible for the maintenance of relative peace and order, their moral crusade, economic development, social welfare, disciplinary, political advisory, and dispute resolution activities positively rubbed off on every aspect of people's lives and ultimately helped to ensure that their various communities remained on a steady path of sustainable development.¹² It is safe to say at this point that the Umuada culture has been a propelling force in the development of Igbo land in the southeastern part of Nigeria.

With the invasion of colonialism in Igbo land, men usurped most of women's traditional social and political rights. Colonialism also came with the attempt to water down, uproot, and destroy the influence of women, and in particular, the Umuada culture was greatly affected. Igbo women became divested of their traditional institutional power by the colonial policies, which marginalised women, perpetuated by the Igbo male elite and reinforced by the inherited Christianity [...] since those traditional structures which formerly protected women have been undermined by colonialism and Western Christianity. Igbo women no longer have

⁸ M. Tinuke Fapohunda, "Gender and Development: Challenges to Women Involvement in Nigeria's Development," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 2, no. 6 (2012): 14.

⁹ Chidi M. Amaechi, Obinna U. Muoh, "Women and Development in Africa: Urbanization and the Role of Umuada in Igboland, Southeast Nigeria," *Asian Women* 34, no. 1 (2018): 92, <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2018.03.34.1.85>.

¹⁰ Ifeyinwa Emejulu, Mmesoma Umeagudos, "Changing Patterns in the Role of Umuada in Igbo Social Formations," *Socialscientia Journal of the Social Sciences and the Humanities* 4, no.4 (2019): 74. <http://www.journals.aphriapub.com/index.php/SS/> accessed 20th February 2024.

¹¹ Joy Onyesoh, "Umuada: A Sociopolitical Institution for Peacebuilding and Conflict Management in Nigeria," *Open Edition Journals*, (2021): 140, <https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.4675>.

¹² Amaechi, Muoh, "Women and Development," 93.

a collective political bargaining power for defending themselves.¹³

This period of colonialism brought major changes to Africa in general and Igbo land in particular especially as it concerned the role of women in the socio-political affairs of their communities. Women were stripped of their vital roles in communal and socio-political development which was done through the introduction of a new colonial administrative system that excluded women from communal political affairs and decision making. Even though the colonial system was designed to limit the influence of women and water down the Umuada culture, the Umuada spirit still bound these women and brought them together to fight the colonial administration and clamour for change. Hence, the Aba women's riot of 1929 was a clear example of women coming together to fight an oppressive form of government and administration which eventually influenced the abolishment of the warrant chief system.

With colonialism brought to an end, Igbo women craved to keep the Umuada spirit alive; the spirit of coming together and making their impact felt in their communities and they wanted to do this irrespective of the barriers of borders and distance.

Umuada Factor in Women Organizations

Women groups have existed in Igbo traditional society since time immemorial. Unfortunately, among the traditional women organizations in Igbo land, Umuada remained the worst affected by the Western-style colonial and post-colonial administrations.¹⁴ Igbo women craving that support and unity that once held them together and propelled the development of their communities looked and worked towards reviving the Umuada spirit among women in their communities. In addition to the effects of colonialism and post-colonialism on the influence of women in their communities, certain other factors led to the decline of the Umuada culture in Igbo communities; such as migration where women due to marriage or other reasons had to leave their hometowns to far away cities or sometimes they even had to relocate to different countries; women increasingly joining the workforce which meant less time for other extracurricular activities. Even with these present challenges, Igbo women still clamored to find a way to come together so that they could make positive changes to their communities and contribute their quota to society's development.

Women groups in Igbo land often draw inspiration from the Umuada tradition and this tradition provides the ideological basis for the establishment of these women organizations. One such women's organization is the Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora which is a non-governmental socio-cultural organization that was formed by daughters of the Igbo ethnic group for the protection of the rights of women and children. According to Lolo Kate Uzoamaka Ezeofor, the President General of Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora,

In reality, especially with regard to the zeal and approach, there is not much difference between the traditional Umuada groups and our association. It is

¹³ Onyesoh, "Umuada", 142-143

¹⁴ Okafor, "Women and Development in Igboland", 35.

the same zeal that propelled the Umuada and women generally, during the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 that is also driving us.¹⁵

Traditional Umuada has always championed the empowerment of women and the girl child and this is also true for this women group Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora. It is a women's organization formed to organize women in Nigeria to participate in the process of advocacy on issues such as girl child education, women and youth empowerment, girl child and women inheritance.¹⁶ This can be seen in their active participation and involvement in the protection of gender and human rights and intervention against abuses; sensitization training on family planning, reproductive health, and rights; campaigns and demonstrations against the abduction of school girls, among others. It is the level of success recorded by the organization in these areas that provided a leeway to its involvement in the activities of some international agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).¹⁷

The Umuada has historically served as a forum for women to voice their concerns, needs, and desires.¹⁸ The same can be said for the organization Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora which consists of a group of Igbo women who come together as a collective to speak and act on their hopes and plans for their communities. As Igbo daughters, this is a space where we can come together to share our concerns and brainstorm ideas that we have to improve our communities; our voices are more impactful because under this umbrella of Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, we are hundreds of women speaking with one voice.¹⁹

As pressure groups, Umuada defended and championed the rights of the oppressed, especially in the face of arbitrary and obnoxious policies.²⁰ A good example of this with the group Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora is the group's rescue mission in favour of a widow in Anambra state who was accused by her late husband's kinsmen of stealing her own child because they maltreated her, collected the child she had for her late husband and expected her to leave the family without the baby. Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora championed the widow's cause until the court ruled in her favour and handed the child back to her.²¹ In the words of Lolo Kate Uzoamaka Ezeofor,

We now go to the villages to tell the women, even if you don't have a child, you have a right; if you have daughter(s), your daughter(s) inherit your husband's property and that's what we're pushing.²²

¹⁵ Lolo Kate Uzoamaka Ezeofor, President General, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, Interviewed at Enugu on 23rd June, 2020.

¹⁶ "About Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora", Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://www.umuadaigbonigeria.com/#:~:text=Founded%20in%201998%20by%20Lolo,and%20women%20inheritance%2C%20promotion%20of>

¹⁷ Mrs Kate Chibuzor, National Secretary, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, Interviewed at Enugu on 23rd June, 2020.

¹⁸ Onyesoh, "Umuada", 137

¹⁹ Mrs Ifeaoma Ogbu, National Administrative Secretary, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, Interviewed at Enugu on 23rd June, 2020.

²⁰ Amaechi, Muoh, "Women and Development," 94.

²¹ Mrs Beatrice Chukwu, Member, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, Interviewed at Enugu on 23rd June, 2020.

²² Ezeofor, interview.

In ancient Igbo societies, traditional Umuada worked closely with patriarchal institutions to help with developmental projects and open more doors of connections and opportunities. They believed in cooperation and collaboration with men and other male groups to improve the community's situation. Lolo Kate Ezeofor recounts that when she got the inspiration to create this organization, she and some other Igbo daughters visited the Ohanaeze Ndigbo to ask for their support and blessing as they ventured into their new project.²³ She believes that their support and approval would aid in the success rate of the women's group's developmental efforts. This can also be seen in the running of the women's group Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora; in as much as it is a women's group, they work hand in hand with men in the execution of their development projects in Igbo land. According to Mr. Gerard Otu, an associate of the women's group on their developmental projects, I worked with the association to set up and operate maize and cassava farms in Ufuma, Anambra State in the 28 hectares of land allocated to the organization by the Anambra State government where it grew and produced large portions of maize and cassava.²⁴ This farm no doubt helped to boost the community's economy and improve the lives of the people in the community.

Conclusion

This study explored how the Umuada culture continues to inspire Igbo daughters. It examined how this influence manifests through women's organizations, using the Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora organization as a case study.

The traditional role of Umuada in Igbo communities was significant and multifaceted. In pre-colonial Nigeria, Umuada was considered one of the most powerful, organized, and peaceful women groups in Igbo communities. They were responsible for maintaining relative peace and order, engaging in peacebuilding, and conflict resolution, and contributing to the development of their various communities. The Umuada were revered in Igbo land and were believed to possess direct links with the Earth goddess, Ala. They complemented the efforts of men in the socio-political and economic affairs of the community. Additionally, they played roles in moral crusades, economic development, social welfare, disciplinary actions, political advisory, and dispute-resolution activities. Overall, the Umuada were seen as indispensable and powerful figures in the traditional Igbo society.

Colonialism had a significant impact on the influence of Igbo women, particularly the Umuada. With the advent of colonialism in Africa, including Nigeria, the traditional roles and influence of women in their communities were systematically suppressed and undermined. Igbo women, including the Umuada, were marginalized and excluded from political and economic spheres of society by the colonial administration.

Colonial policies divested Igbo women of their traditional social and political rights, leading to a decline in their influence and power within the community. The colonial system excluded women from communal political affairs and decision-making processes, relegating them to focus solely on domestic duties. This

²³ Ezeofor, interview.

²⁴ Mr Gerard Otu, Associate, Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora, Interviewed at Enugu on 23rd June, 2020.

marginalization of women, including the Umuada, was perpetuated by the Igbo male elite and reinforced by the introduction of Western Christianity.

Largely, colonialism led to the undermining of traditional structures that formerly protected women, resulting in a loss of collective political bargaining power for defending themselves. Despite these challenges, Igbo women, inspired by the Umuada spirit, continued to strive for unity and involvement in communal development efforts even after the colonial era.

Colonialism may have tried to suppress and annihilate the influence of women in their communities but the suppression was only momentary because the Umuada spirit continues to live on among the Igbo daughters and expresses itself when they come together in women groups where their impact can be felt more in their communities. Since women can be naturally nurturing, they also extend this nurturing side of themselves to their communities by getting involved in communal developmental efforts, be it socio-politically, economically, or culturally.

Traditional Umuada culture has shown that there is strength in numbers and that women coming together as a unit to pursue collective goals in their communities, oftentimes yields greater results. This is one of the motivating factors that inspire Igbo women to come together as a collective under the umbrella of non-governmental organizations such as the Umuada Nigeria and in Diaspora where Igbo women are able to impact their communities in the areas of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, championing and actively participating in the empowerment of women and the girl child, defending the rights of the oppressed and also collaborating with other men organizations to make sure that their impact in the growth and development of their communities is felt.

Women since pre-colonial Africa and Nigeria, in particular, have always strived and involved themselves in the development of their communities and they continue to discover more effective ways to get involved in communal activities despite the challenges of distance and time and this just emphasizes the fact that women have and will always be change makers.

Some of the objectives of the Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora organization include carrying out advocacy campaigns on various issues related to women's rights, girl child education, and empowerment; upholding widowhood rites and traditions; working towards the enthronement and sustainability of good governance in Igbo communities; promoting agriculture and agricultural development; creating awareness among women on the importance of peace, unity, and national development; intervening in cases of gender-based violence and human rights abuses; sensitizing women on family planning, reproductive health, and rights; and collaborating with international agencies and organizations to address gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

These objectives reflect the organization's commitment to promoting the welfare and development of women and communities, both locally in Nigeria and among the Igbo diaspora.

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