

# Mothers' Summit: The Igbo Women Model and a Nexus for National Development

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## 1. Introduction

In Nigeria, the "Mothers' Summit", popularly known as "August Meeting", is a concept common among women of the South East who are resident in Nigeria or indeed abroad. This meeting, usually organized during the month of August, is the exclusive preserve of married women. These Igbo-speaking women gather in their home towns in a grand meeting that lasts for days to discuss and deliberate on issues that affect them in common. The meeting is structured so that the women first meet in their villages and wards to articulate ideas based on community development. From the second day, they converge at the central venue where all the women of the town will commence the five-day heated and fruitful discussions that have helped in different ways to erect town halls, community health clinics, civic centres, secondary schools etc. "August Meeting" is a force to reckon with in Igboland: several communities now plan their communal activities to fall within the meeting period. Many state governments now partner with these women groups. The Igbo women have carefully designed this forum to ensure that peace and love reign in their communities and that they keep their dignity intact so as to give womanhood the pride of place it deserves in national integration and development.

This paper examines the workings of this women's group and makes recommendations to counter limitations discovered.

## 2. "August Meeting": Evolution

In Nigeria, there are three major ethnic groups: Hausa, Yoruba and Ibos. The Ibos live predominantly in South East Nigeria. They speak a common language: Igbo. Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo are the core Igbo states. Their unity arose out of common traditions of origin, worldview, cultural features and ties, and as a result of practical and integrated coexistence over centuries.

In Igbo communities, women have long had meetings of their own, and such congregations have been rightly emphasized as the base of women's political power in traditional Igboland (Allen, 1972).<sup>1</sup> These women's associations, which have pre-colonial and ancient roots, have given Igbo women strong and powerful political voices and symbolism (Dine, 1983).<sup>2</sup> The formal leadership roles by which women became politically significant in Igbo traditional communities are at two inter-related levels: the *Umuada* and the *Otu Alutaradi*. The *Umuadas* are daughters of the community who have married into other villages but retain their ties with their community of birth. *Otu Alutaradi* are wives of the men of the village who have come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Both groups maintain order, promote life and create consolidation, joy and solidarity for themselves and for the village community.

*Otu Alutaradi*, however, have had special influence. In many places they tried other women for stealing, committing adultery or even for speaking lightly to men about matters of childbirth or listening to the conversation of a husband with a co-wife at night. These women had the right to convict or to acquit and to levy fines on other women (Meek, 1937).<sup>3</sup> They would insist on their decisions and could go to any length to carry them out. They were the watchdogs of the constitution and their leaders promptly called a general meeting when anything appeared to be going wrong in the town. They would bring the matter to the attention of the elders, whose refusal to act could make the women leave the village *en masse* in protest. As a pressure group for the welfare of their

towns, the women had an effective method of communication. Palm leaves sent to fellow members were enough, especially when there was trouble. They continued to use this method during the colonial era, as shown during the Aba Women's Riot in 1929.

The concept of "August Meeting" is an initiative of the *Otu Alutaradi*. These are women whose common bond is their place of marriage. The transformation of *Otu Alutaradi* to "August Meeting" can be traced back to the colonial periods of mass urbanization which affected the Igbo social space along with most other parts of Nigeria, leading to the opening up of such urban centres as Enugu, Port Harcourt, Umuahia, Onitsha, Aba, Owerri, Calabar in the South East and elsewhere in Nigeria (Odoemena, 1997).<sup>4</sup>

Within these cities, women established various ethnic associations in a bid to provide some socio-economic security to the urban migrant and to also maintain a link with their rural communities. Through this arrangement, they were able to maintain "urban-rural linkage" for development. This is what became popularly known as the "Home and Abroad" meeting in Igboland ("Abroad" simply means one who lives outside Igboland). Convened once a year, usually during the Christmas period, this meeting was where issues of development and progress in the rural communities were discussed.

The "Home and Abroad" meeting was the forerunner of the "August" Meeting. With time, the "Home and Abroad" meeting stopped and the women settled for "August Meeting" only (Uwalaka, 2006).<sup>5</sup>

## 2.1 Why August?

Women meeting during the month of August can be traced to the 1940s, when the Church Missionary Societies saw fit to devise a way to give women a voice in the affairs of their community. Ideally, August is a month of rest, when people are free from all kinds of labour (Nzuko, 2008).<sup>6</sup> Most schools in Nigeria are also on long vacation so teachers are free from school work. Celebration of the new yam festival, a major cultural event in Igbo land, usually occurs during this month.

So August is an important month for all Igbowomen living within and outside Nigeria. It is a period when they gather together to articulate ideas, projects and programmes to be executed for the wellbeing of their communities. They do not joke about it. Once it is June, they begin to plan and prepare. Even those in America and Europe also make their own plans and send delegates to attend and bring them feedback from the proceedings (Nzuko, 2008).<sup>7</sup>

## 3. "August Meeting", Concept and Practice

"August Meeting" or "Mothers' Summit" is designed to better the lot of:

- Women
- The Church and
- The Community

Through this forum, with its seminars and workshops, women have the opportunity to know everything they need to know about womanhood and how to chart new courses of action where these are needed. The gathering gives women the opportunity to be integrated into their community development projects, and having women as stakeholders and not mere observers helps guarantee a speedy and steady community development progress.

### 3.1 Mode of Operation

“Mothers’ Summit” is hierarchically structured and organized on both rural and urban fronts. The summit commences at the ward level. This is where brainstorming sessions on the year’s project originates. As the Catholics are in their own meeting, so are the Anglicans. Ideas generated at the ward level are brought to the church where they are reviewed and harmonized. On the last day of the meeting, Protestants, Pagans and Catholics usually come together to harness their various proposals for the common good of the community. They will choose one central project that will benefit all, irrespective of individual religious beliefs (Eziakor, 2009).<sup>8</sup> While all these discussions are going on, the men look in from time to time to see what goes on and offer words of encouragement when necessary .

The meeting lasts as long as one week, depending on locality. Several communities plan some of their annual activities to fall within the meeting period in order to make the best use of the presence of the large number of their daughters and daughters-in-law from “abroad”. Communities usually benefit in one way or other from the various initiatives the “abroad” women’s groups bring home from their different places of abode (Onwuchekwa, 2009).<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 Membership / Attendance at Meeting

Membership comprises all married women in a community. Attendance is compulsory: absenteeism is seriously frowned on, with permission for non- attendance granted only on grounds of ill-health, childbirth or bereavement. When such permission is given, absentees remit their dues through their zonal representatives. Election of officers is done every four years except in emergency situations.

### 3.3 Method of Fund Raising

Community development projects are financed through:

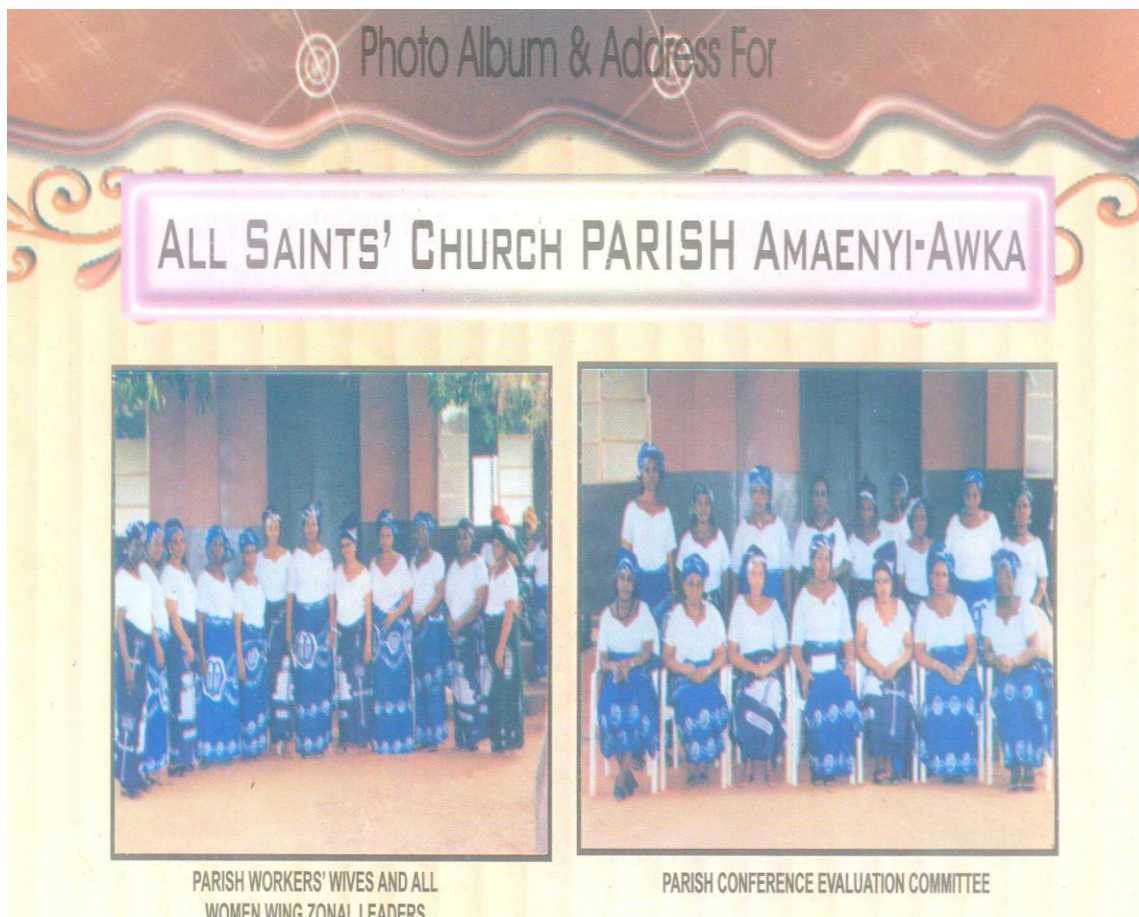
- (i) Annual Dues
- (ii) Levies
- (iii) Donations
- (iv) Fines
- (v) Sales
- (vi) Income from money-yielding ventures
- (vii) Endowment
- (viii) Investiture

Investiture is bestowed on men and women of high standing. Selection is based on men and women of outstanding achievement and also on women whose husbands or children are well-to-do. Titles conferred on such occasion include *Ezinne* (Sweet Mother), *Eziada* (Worthy daughter), Mother of Faith, Golden Mother, Patron, Ambassador, etc. The recipient will as a mark of appreciation give the Association quite a large sum of money. Financial support also comes from family members, friends and well wishers of recipients.



### 3.4 Achieving Equality among Women

Shortly after its inception, some women tried to turn the event into a jamboree where they could display their wealth and affluence. This was prevented by the introduction of a dress code for the meeting days in order to ensure uniformity and to encourage both rich and the poor to participate fully in the meetings. It is now the norm for all women attending the meeting, regardless of status, to follow the dress code, which comprises a white blouse from "China" fabric above a uniform Ankara wrapper (see below).



### 3.5 Community Development Project / Activities

Igbo women have helped in different ways and at different times to erect town halls, community health clinics, civic centres, secondary schools, Skills Acquisition Centres and so on. At Nkwelle Ezunaka, the first secondary school was built by women via the “August Meeting”. Some of the projects the women established are profit yielding ventures such as Cana House and the Emmaus House at Awka, Anambra State (pictured below).





Chancel decorated by the women



All Saints Parsonage by the Women.



Hall / Nursery School built by the women



Women bungalow building project in progress.

Many state governments, non-government organizations and civil rights groups are now partners of “August Meeting”. As a result of the large turnout of women for this gathering, governments utilize the opportunity to sensitize the women about government policies as well as efforts made by state government to improve the lot of women. They also use the occasion to remind women about their roles in the family and in national development. Speaking at last year’s mother’s summit in Anambra State, Mr. Peter Obi, the Governor, reminded the women that they are the rock of the society and that a home with well-empowered women would translate to a happy home and by extension to a stable society.

He also announced that the state government had secured 100 million naira in a Faith Based Micro Credit loan which will be disbursed to women to empower them in their various businesses. Similarly, wives of state governors have introduced a micro credit scheme accessible through co-operative societies supervised by the Ministry of Women Affairs.

#### **4. A Landmark Achievement of “August Meeting”**

Igbo women have blazed a trail: through the wisdom and tact deployed in the “August Meeting” they have destroyed age-long gender-based violence against widows in Igboland. The process started in Ozubulu Town in Anambra State and later spread to every part of Igboland. Dr Amobi Ilika captured the incidents thus:<sup>10</sup>

1. Between January and June 2000, four major conflicts and events precipitated the Catholic Women’s Organisation’s interest in and action on widowhood practices. On one occasion, a widow was alleged to have maltreated her husband and not taken good care of him on his sick bed. The *Umuada* accused her of being responsible for her husband’s death, and ruled that if the woman was contesting the accusation, she should prove her innocence by drinking the washings of her husband’s corpse. If she refused to drink, she would be ostracized and dragged along the streets to her father’s house. This is an accepted traditional practice. Another option was for her to crawl over her husband’s corpse. The female relatives of the widow and some CWO members at the funeral resisted this and conflict ensued.
2. Another case involved a young widow working in a bank in Lagos. She was required to restrict her movement and not go to work for six months. She was to be in the village, confined to the compound in mourning dress. The widow explained that she would lose her job and disrupt her children’s schooling in Lagos. The community sanctioned her for not mourning her husband for the customary duration. The *Umuada* fined her the sum of 10,000.00 naira and compelled her to stay at her father’s house for one month as a punishment.
3. In the third event, the *Umuada* refused to shave the head of a widow because they alleged that she did not show enough sorrow at her husband’s death, conversing freely and even smiling with sympathizers. It was taboo for a widow to laugh or look cheerful when her husband had not been buried. She was given the accustomed punishment for the misdemeanor, since not having one’s hair shaved is a sign of not mourning the dead husband and is feared as attracting the his spirit’s wrath towards the widow and other members of her family.
4. The fourth event concerned a widow who died six months after her husband’s death. The Christian community gathered for her burial and funeral, but other village members resisted and insisted that the woman should be thrown into the evil forest without being mourned

since she had committed an abomination by dying before the end of the traditional mourning period.

#### 4.1 Preparation for Community Action

The central executive of the CWO in Ozubulu Town held six meetings between July and December 2000, during which they had brainstorming sessions on how to eliminate malpractices against widows in the town. They identified the principal rites and practices dehumanizing widows as the following:

1. Forced drinking of washings from the husband's corpse to exonerate the wife from accusations of killing her husband.
2. Forced crawling over the husband's corpse for the same purpose of exoneration.
3. Not being allowed to have a bath until after eight market days (one month) when she would be led to the river at twelve midnight to bathe .
4. Having to sit on a bare floor during the period of mourning.
5. Having to cry aloud to the hearing of the villagers almost all nights throughout the first month of mourning to demonstrate grief and that she misses her husband.
6. Being restricted in movement to market, church, social events for the one year period of mourning.
7. Loss of any right of inheritance if she has no male child.
8. Compulsory fasting on the day of her husband's burial.
9. Punitive refusal to shave the widow's hair by the *Umuada*.
10. Long mourning and restriction period.
11. Wife inheritance or forced marriage by close relatives at the end of the mourning period.
12. Stigmatizing a widow who died within the mourning period and refusing her corpse burial rites.

The women observed that women are the victims, perpetrators and enforcers of the sanctions, the patrilineal daughters (*Umuada*) being the key perpetrators and enforcers. Often prejudiced against their dead relations' wives on account of past disagreements or misunderstandings, they see the widowhood period as a time for vendetta. The women's group reasoned that *Umuada* are not faceless people but fellow women, and an *Umuada* in her father's village could one day be a widow in another village. Women victimizing women must stop for the benefit of every woman. The women's group also identified fear and superstition as another obstacle to eliminating harmful practices, for example beliefs that the spirit of the dead husband's spirit hovers around and might be malevolent if the widow did not conform to traditional rites. The women resolved to tackle this issue through prayers and by keeping widows company to strengthen and encourage them, educating them that the beliefs are mostly superstitious.

Of the identified malpractices, the women's group reasoned that the issues of right of inheritance and wife inheritance (items 7 and 11) were core cultural practices embedded in customary law. Since opposition to these might jeopardize chances of reform, they excluded them and focused on achieving the following:

1. Reducing the mourning period to six months.
2. Reducing confinement to home to one month.
3. Giving widows the option of wearing black or white as mourning dress for not more than six months (although the prohibition on wearing necklaces, earrings or coloured dresses was maintained).
4. Abolition of rules stipulating not bathing and ritual bathing.
5. Abolition of any requirement for widows to drink washings from the dead husband's corpse.

6. Full burial rights for widows dying within the customary mourning period.
7. Shaving of the widow by Christian women as soon as her husband is buried, so as not to allow the *Umuada* the opportunity to victimise her or prescribe fines.
8. Agreement that widows should comport themselves and avoid sexual activities while mourning their husbands.
9. Penalties for breaches of these recommendations.

Envisaging opposition, the women tactfully conferred upon the more outspoken males such titles as patron of CWO. Through this inducement, they won them over. They also met with parish priests and religious leaders to solicit their support; consulted with the town union leaders via the CWO members in the town union executive; and went to the traditional ruler of the town and his cabinet and presented their request.

## **4.2 Successful Outcome**

During the 2001 women's general assembly, the proposal for reformed widowhood practices was presented and was endorsed. Thereafter the women set up a taskforce to monitor implementation throughout the zones. From the evaluation report in December 2001, there was a hundred percent compliance in all areas. The women were able to contain opposition coming mainly from older men and women who saw the reform as an affront on their traditions.

In a ripple effect, this reform was before long adopted in all parts of Igbo land and translated into legislation on the states of Anambra Enugu. The Anambra State legislation, *Malpractices against Widows & Widowers Prohibition Law, 2005*, is even more comprehensive than the recommendation in making provision for the inheritance rights of a widow without a male child and guaranteeing the custody of her children as well as the welfare of her dependent relatives. It set financial penalties and jail terms for offenders.

## **5. Problems/Setbacks**

Successes recorded by these women groups have, however, not been achieved without opposition. Setbacks and obstacles have included paucity of funds; cultural barriers; opposition from *Umuada*; power tussles; poverty; illiteracy; partial participation from the working class; ignorance; and non-participation by Pentecostal Brethren.

### **5.1 Suggestions for Improvement**

The following recommendations are based on perceived problems:

1. Improved funding from the state government is needed, possibly in the form of a soft loan, micro finance credit facilities etc. Economic empowerment of these women will make them more able to contribute financially to community development.
2. The central executive should appoint liaison officers to work with the Ministry of Women Affairs and wives of state governors so that government is better informed and does more to support and act on the activities of these women's groups
3. Advocacy visits are needed to make those women who are not members of this gathering more aware of the crucial role women play in the shaping of their society.

4. To eradicate illiteracy and a sense of inferiority, especially among rural dwellers, all stake holders, both rural and urban, should be involved. Adult education centers should be established and adequately financed by the state government to enable the rural poor to share in this programme.
5. More women, up to the 35% recommended by the Beijing Platform for Action, should be appointed to public office and strategic position in the government ,so that they can participate effectively in the decision-making processes.
6. Effective machinery should be put in place to facilitate the domestication of all the international conventions on the rights of women which Nigeria has ratified.

## **6. Conclusion**

“Mothers’ Summit”, popularly known as “August Meeting”, is an example of grass root mobilization of women towards community development through self-help. Through it, women have fought against cultural malpractices against women attracting government intervention resulting in legislation in some instances.

Many Igbowomen participate in the “August Meeting”, but some, such as the “born again” Igbowomen, are yet to embrace the idea. The gathering is, however, popular and appears set to continue: if given the necessary support and encouragement, it may assume new dimensions in the future.

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