

Impact of African Women in Community Development: The Women Wing of Awka-Etiti Improvement Union in Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Town Unions became fashionable in the context of the new socio-political and economic order that colonialism heralded for the people of Nigeria, from the beginning of the twentieth century. In the specific case of the Igbo, whose highest political authority did not go beyond the village assembly, town unions were indispensable vehicles for articulating and championing the Western-oriented developmental aspirations of the people. Like in the other facets of Igbo life, the particular configurations of the society did not allow women to be factored in the statutory organs of town unions until recently. In Awka-Etiti, the women wing of the town union known as the Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU) was not contrived until after seventy-four years of the existence of the union. Nonetheless, in its relatively short span of existence, the Women Wing of the union has taken developmental strides that go to showcase the salience of women in community development. They have built mini-industries, schools for both adult and tertiary education and have ensured the holistic betterment of the members and the community at large. Employing descriptive method of analyzing oral information gathered from knowledgeable respondents, secondary sources to aid oral witnesses, and thematic presentation of analysis, this study examines the efforts made by women under the auspices of the women wing of the Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU-Women Wing) in the area of community development. The study observed that it is a disservice of great proportions to believe that community development is possible without the input of women.

Keywords: *Awka-Ekiti Community; Community Development; Town Union; Women Wing*

JEL Codes: D02, D63, N97, Z13

Introduction

The study of women and women groups as agents of community development in Igboland in general, and Awka-Etiti in particular is a child of recent birth. The reason is not far-fetched; the history of Awka-Etiti as obtained in most communities in Igboland is replete with tales of male oriented activities spanning all aspects of life (politically, socially, culturally and economically). It does appear that most Igbo communities are framed along patriarchal lines. This explains the dominance of the male in the society. The women, on the other hand are generally perceived to be the 'weaker sex', subjective, and in most cases devoid of offering useful contribution in matters bothering on societal welfare. To this end, the tendency has always been to focus entirely on the male oriented activities. For example, major studies on the social political system have tended to always emphasize men's dominant roles in matters relating to social organization, descent system, politics and leadership and indeed ritual lore (Ndulue,

(1995). One consequence of this is that even when women's social presence in their community may be high, their sociological visibility is low (D'Souza, 2005). In other words, women are frequently and massively present within whatever is studied, but they rarely appear in the end products of it. This fundamental truth, though a hurtful reality was aptly captured by Theresa Souga as quoted by Michael Muonwe (2016);

A glance at our society leads us to conclude that the lived experience of African women is not always taken into account. Everything is in the hands of men: they have the power, it is they who have the right to speak, who enjoy respect, who have the right to take initiatives and they are often favoured by the law. Being a woman means silence, being brushed aside, suffering, and weakness.

Philomena D'Souza (2005) in concurrence with Souga's assertion laments thus:

History constitutes the recorded and interpreted past of human beings and civilizations. Along with men, women have always been actors and agents in history. Since women constitute half of humankind, they have equally shared its work along men. Yet, until recent past, history has been written by man, and what they have recorded is what men have done, experienced and found significant. They called this history, and claimed universality for it.

Nmah (2016) blames the above situation on patriarchy, a global system that favours male dominance. Nmah (2016) states that “though patriarchy takes different forms in different cultures, its fundamental beliefs is the same; the man is superior by nature, born to rule in all works of life, the woman, inferior, born to be ruled, to serve the man” and attend to all the needs of the male folk. Nmah’s submission aptly describes the Awka-Etiti situation where until 2008, the absolute governance of the town rested solely on the all-male exclusive Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU). One may ask: where is Awka-Etiti; which may perhaps sound like a village in Awka, the capital of Anambra State. Indeed, a lot of people have confused Awka with Awka-Etiti. Awka-Etiti is a community in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. It is situated about a kilometer from Nnobi along Nnewi-Nnobi-Awka-Etiti-Igbo-Ukwu-Ekwulobia Road. It is bounded by Ichida on the East, Nnewi in the west, Nnobi and Nnokwa North, Amichi in the south and Azigbo southeast.

In Awka–Etiti, women constitute more than half of the population and at such played not only complementary roles to their male counterparts but have equally been active participants in the making of their history, a fact not reflected in many literary texts on the town. Women in Awka-Etiti have been described as astute, strong, enterprising, and resourceful (Authors’ Interview His Royal Highness, Igwe Michael Ezeudenna, 2022). However, despite the commendable roles and continuous relevance of Awka-Etiti through various platforms in the community, the Awka-Etiti Improvement Union, which started in 1944, did not establish a women wing of the town until 2008. Women are involved in all the stages of community development process, beginning from the identification of felt needs, down to its execution and the evaluation of the projects. Most importantly, they assist extension workers via various government agencies and programs to penetrate the women folk in the community. (Author’s interview with Dr. Chinwe Olikaeze, 2019). Historically, several organizations have been formed in Nigeria independent of men’s influence, with membership exclusive to females. Although some of such organizations may borrow from the existence of a counter male association to evolve, as with most women wings of various town unions, there are others whose formations were completely independent both in structure and in function. Whatever the peculiarity, what remains outstanding and laudable is the strength of purpose by women towards building their own forte, notwithstanding.

Conceptual Clarifications

Community Development

There is no one universally accepted definition for the concept of community development. Many authors and professionals have offered according to their various backgrounds what they conceived as a working definition of the above concept. The United Nations (cited in Anyanwu, 1992) adopted the following definition: Community development is the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of nation and to enable them contribute fully to the national progress. Aptly applicable to Awka-Etiti, Bola and Bello cited in Obodoehi (2009) defined Community Development as a process of social action in which

people of the community organize themselves for the identification of their needs, planning and action to meet those needs with maximum reliance on their own initiative and resources, supplemented with assistance in any form from government and nongovernmental organizations.

Simply put, community development within the context of this study refers to the convergence and efforts of women in Awka-Etiti under the aegis of the group association - Women Wing; where they share ideas, pool resources (internally and externally) for the identified needs of the community.

Community

Is described to be a group of people living in the same place or having a particular thing in common (Oke, 2021). In this discourse, community refers to the people of Awka-Etiti origin, residing within Awka-Etiti and elsewhere.

Town Union

According to Eme *et al* (2012), town unions represent an association formed by the people of the same town, local government or even district as the case may be. It is also an agency of community through which innovations and development purposes are achieved for the community. Town unions are vital administrative units in Igbo land. They are elected governments at the grassroots.

Women Wing

A Women's Wing is an organization affiliated with an association or political party that consists of female membership or acts to promote women within the union, association or party.

In Awka-Etiti, Women's Wing refers to the association exclusive to women, a female affiliate of the town Union; Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU).

Evolution of Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU) Women Wing

Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU) was founded in April 1944, according to Emeka Asuzu (Asuzu, 1984). The formation of the union was borne out of the discovery of the happenings of that period. By the 1930s and early 1940s, Awka-Etiti traders had journeyed to Aba in Abia State, Onitsha in Anambra State and Zaria in Kaduna State where they took up residence. At these places, it was discovered that people from various southern provinces meet periodically and the representations in such meetings was on town union basis. The idea of such meeting appealed to Awka-Etiti indigenes residing in the mentioned cities who after deliberations and consultation consulted with the Elders Council of Awka-Etiti community. Sequel to this, all parties agreed on the need to organize a periodic meeting at the community level, involving the Elders, representatives from Aba, Zaria and Onitsha as well as village heads to discuss issues relating to the development of the town. In 1944, the meeting became formally inaugurated as the Awka-Etiti Improvement Union. Invitation was later extended to other major towns in Nigeria where people from the Awka-Etiti community resided. Such towns were directed to form a branch of the Union that subsequently became the basis of the representation at the general meeting held once in a year. This newly established union was an exclusive preserve of men. Thus, men represented the interest of women, children, and elderly in the community via the union both at home and in Diasporas.

Despite the long standing of the town union in Awka Etiti, women were not involved in the activities of the union in any way. Ohia and Nzewi (2020) opine that this apparent anomaly could be attributed to the fact that the women groups in the town were so strong that there was no need for new ones. This situation remained so until the emergence of Mr. Peter Obi as the Governor of Anambra State who mandated all towns in the state to set a town union where there were none. In the same vein, the wife of the governor and the First Lady of the state, Mrs. Margaret Obi, asked for the inauguration of the women's wing of the town unions so that the Office of the First Lady could easily access women at the grassroots. This led to the creation of the women wing of Awka-Etiti Improvement Union in 2008 (Authors' Interview with Nkechi Unachukwu, 2018).

The above is one of the three versions that try to situate the origin of the AIU Women Wing. Another version of the origin of the group draws strength from Article 82 of the 2004 *Awka-Etiti Constitution* which states inter alia "there shall be established for the whole of Awka-Etiti a body for the administration of women. This body shall be known as A.I.U. Women Wing". While this constitutional specification laid the foundations for the eventual formation of the women wing, Nkechi Unachukwu, Chinwe Olikeze and a host of others maintain that it was the effort of the former First Lady of Anambra state, Mrs. Margaret Obi that brought to full realization the body as captured in the constitution. To authenticate her stance, Olikeze Chinwe went further to describe the processes that marked the evolution of the Women Wing. According to Chinwe Olikeze,

Mrs. Obi (the wife of the then Governor of Anambra State) and I in the company of other women toured the entirety of Anambra state, sensitizing women on the importance of having an organized socio-political body for articulating their needs... Some communities within that period already have women wing in place while it was absent in many other places including Awka-Etiti. In towns without such platforms, we encouraged them to establish one and we did the same here in this community. For effective administration and proper kick-off, the state government appointed me as the President- General of the Women Wing, both at the state level and here in Awka Etiti. (Author's interview with Dr. Chinwe Olikaeze,2018)

The third version however argues that the Women Wing is an offshoot of an age-long although extinct women group called Inyom Awka. Proponents of this version of origin uphold that the Inyom Awka was the precursor of the contemporary women wing. Respondents such as Ngozi Okechukwu and Catherine Okonkwo strongly argue that the Women Wing metamorphosed from the defunct traditional ancient Inyom Awka but massively innovated to suit the needs and demands of the modern women in the contemporary world. Catherine Okonkwo assert that the foundation laid by the Inyom Awka was what the women wing built upon. (Author's interview with Mrs, Catherine Okonkwo, 2019)

Carefully interrogating the three versions with available facts, this study submits that irrespective of variations, all versions have linked elements of credibility. First, there was an existence of a traditional organization, an umbrella body that housed the entirety of women in the community under the name *Inyom Awka*. The evolution of other women groups in the community such as Christian women organizations brought far reaching changes to the *Inyom Awka*. Although there was reduction in visibility and relevance, the *Inyom Awka* however, did not completely die off, as its seeds though fallow, laid in wait, for irrigation and regeneration. The provision of the Article 82 of the 2004 constitution of the community was an indication for a resuscitation of the association. The foundation laid by the defunct *Inyom Awka* and the constitutional call for a rebirth provided the much-needed fertile ground which became tilled and the Women Wing as obtained today was planted. Admittedly, Mrs. Margaret Obi was an aperture for the reawakening; the readiness and acceptability of the people to the full realization of the course cannot, be overlooked.

The Women Wing is made up of all married women from every kindred in Awka-Etiti. As stipulated in Article 82 No 2 of the *Awka-Etiti Constitution* "membership of the body is mandatory on all women married in Awka-Etiti" However, Ngozi Okechukwu noted that un-married mature female about Fifty-five (55) or sixty (60) years of age who have registered with the *Inyom Di* in her kindred is free to join the women wing (Author's interview with Mrs. Ngozi Okechukwu, 2019). The essence, according to Dorathy Agbanyim is to enhance inclusiveness and create emotional stability for all women of the community. The organization is structured to effectively accommodate representatives from the entire seven villages that make up Awka-Etiti in a rotational manner. Each kindred appoint two women –a chairlady and secretary –who represents them. At the village level, each of the seven villages either by election or selection has a leader usually referred to as the 'Mother/Mama'. She is the direct link between all kindred in her village or clan and the central body. Planning and executing entrusted duties at the village level are her sole responsibility. She liaises with the chairladies and secretaries of all kindred and in turn communicates the needs of her people to the central body.

At the central level the primary executive body is made up of nine (9) elected officers drawn up from the seven villages in order of seniority. The tenure of office is a single tenure of three years. Apart from the president-general, an elected officer can serve in different capacity in another regime. That is, a vice secretary in one administration can be re-elected as a president in another administration. However, the position is dependent on what is allocated to that village at that point in time. Again, any village that produces the traditional ruler (*Igwe*) of the community automatically relinquishes their tenure of presidency to the next village. General election is usually preceded by a swearing-in ceremony presided by the legal adviser of the women wing.

For continuity, inclusivity and enhanced growth purposes, the women wing has the following established sub-platforms.

Enlarged Executive: This is a body consisting of the nine elected executives both at central and branch level, former officers, and stakeholders. The major reason for the creation of this platform was for continuity in ideas and sustainability of projects.

Ezinne Awka-Etiti: A highly exalted office and title giving to an elderly woman of repute and strength of character. The position of an *Ezinne* is perpetual; thus, no two women can be titled at the same time. The demise of an *Ezinne* leads to the emergence and appointment of another. The appointment is solely based on the character and personality and not on social status or wealth. The appointment of an *Ezinne* is the a priori decision of the enlarged executive.

Starlady: This is also another feature of the enlarged executive. Star lady is a titular position accorded to the winner of the annual individual competition in Awka-Etiti. There are no generally stipulated terms and conditions for the competition or for winning it. The process of selecting and crowning a star lady is solely the discretion of the President-General and her executives. The Star Lady is nonetheless welcomed to attend the stakeholders meeting and equally make suggestions.

The women wing holds Executive Council (EXCO) meetings four times annually, but an emergency meeting can be convened when necessary. There is usually an annual summit scheduled for every first Friday in August. This summit equally serves as the general meeting although it takes on a more elaborate and celebratory look. During the summit, matters of common concerns are deliberated on. Awka-Etiti women both at home and in diaspora usually grace the summit dressed in their customary uniform of white blouse, red headgear and red wrapper. Features of the summit include football competition, talk shows, dance, match past competition among others. Members of the organization pay an annual due of fifty (N50), which serves as the major source of income for the group. Payment of this due is done at the kindred level after which the 'Mama' of each village collates and then submits with a well-prepared account to the central executives. Again, the organization raises funds during enlarged executive meetings. At enlarged executive meetings representatives from all the branches register attendance with a new piece of traditional wrapper that at the end of the day is auctioned and the fund realized channeled towards community developmental projects. On a broader note, the women generate money from donations made at annual summit and from well-meaning individuals both within and outside Awka-Etiti.

The President-General, Secretary and two women from another women's group called the *Ndindi* group represents the entirety of Awka-Etiti women at the A.I.U. general meeting and also at every meeting convened by the traditional ruler of the town. This arrangement ensures full participation and representation of women in the overall governance and decision-taking process in Awka-Etiti. At the state level, the President General attends state's summit, symposium and political rallies where she champions and projects the interest of the community. From the foregoing, one can appreciate the fact that the women wing is organized and structured in a manner that ensures the involvement of members at all levels.

Community Development Efforts of the Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (Women Wing)

The Women wing despite its late arrival to the scheme of affairs in the socio-political set up of Awka-Etiti have reinforced the view that women indeed are pillars of community and socio-economic development. The role of women in community development is crucial to the health of a society. As a powerful decision-making force in the home front, women are often more acquainted with needs of the people, this places them in a good position to analyze how best to improve the community. Again, membership to diverse groups and associations both at community and church level exposes the women to a deeper and better understanding of the workings of the human person and society in general. Extrapolating, women have an intimate relationship with life and its processes: birthing, nurturing and life sustenance that naturally predisposes them to process information, prioritize, and plan, differently from men. Thus, indices for measuring community development to women may differ from that of men. For women, community development entails a holistic process, in which the goal is the improvement of the society for everyone, most importantly the weaker members of the society.

Against this backdrop, the Women Wing has consciously since inception articulated plans that embraced inclusivity of all women in the society. First, the association keeps an open hand in connecting and embracing the less privileged, the vulnerable, widows, and the indigents of the community. The association encourages financially stable women at individual levels to offer financial and moral support to the weaker members of the community by helping in paying their membership dues, driving them down to meetings and summits and offering other forms of assistance when called upon. Collectively, the Women Wing has in place an empowerment and scholarship programs for the indigents and less privileged in the community. According to Nkechi Unachukwu, from 2008 to 2018, the women wing had empowered over (50) fifty widows and granted scholarships to scores of Awka-Etiti

indigenes. At the beginning of every academic session, the women through the association undertake a send- a -child -to -school campaign by donating school items such as books, school bags, stationaries, and uniforms to many children. (Author's interview with Mrs. Nkechi Unachukwu in 2018)

The Women Wing has also made visible efforts towards curbing teenage pregnancies and girl-child marriage by organising sensitization talks on the importance of early-child education. Again, the Women Wings via medical outreach programmes have donated wheelchairs, clutches, hearing aids, reading glasses to the physically impaired people in the community. They communicate the needs of the people to the state government who most times utilize the Office of the President via the association to cater for those needs. This has led to series of empowerment schemes, financial aids, and supply of other materials such as sewing machines, *garri* milling machines, palm oil extractor amongst others to the community. The women wing under the sponsorship of the former state government of Anambra State, Mr.Peter Obi, facilitated religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem for under-served groups in Awka-Etiti community. The Women Wing have continually offered emotional and mental-health support to the abandoned, including those widowed and elderly by paying occasional visits to them. According to the current President-General of the association, Hon. Dorathy Agbanyim,

We make out time to visit women who for one reason or the other (age or health) are unable to attend social or religious functions. We spend ample time conversing with them, we also assist them with food items and help them out with house chores. We equally seek their wise counsel and prayers. In one of such visits, one called me back and said, "thank you for making me feel alive again". To me, no form of physical development can equate the fulfilment I got from those few words.

In a similar vein, the Women Wing had equally embarked on substantive physical projects such as the building of a sachet water factory, a *garri* processing mini-industry and a poultry farm. These ventures by providing employment opportunities for people have in no small measure improved the lot of not just the women but also the indigenes of the community. In the early years of her formation under the leadership of Dr. Theresa Okafor, the association instituted a place for adult education in the community. Explaining how these projects affects the lives of the members and the community at large, Ohia and Nzewi submits that.

Although, Awka-Etiti are not known to be *garri* producers, the *garri* processing factory has provided employment for those who work at the factory to help in the processing. There is also less wastage of agricultural product as women now turn their excess cassava to *garri* and subsequently sell them. The women have also established a poultry farm...it has helped to bring down the prices of poultry and improve protein intake of families in Awka-Etiti. Many women who had worked in the poultry are now independent poultry owners. The AIU (Women Wing) is thus an agent of positive change. (Ohia and Nzewi, 2021)

In furtherance, AIU -Women Wing promotes and champions activities that enhance cohesion and integration between and amongst members. This is evidenced in the two major annual events of the group- the football competition and the general summit that follows suit. The impact of these events in fostering of unity and progress of the group and the community at large cannot be overemphasized. It has become a beautiful sight to behold women of diverse socio-economic and political status run round the pitch while their members cheered them from the sides in a bond of sisterhood. The enthusiasm and gaiety displayed by the women during match past competition at the summit remains unrivalled. Such moments define and lead to a better appreciation of the essence for the formation of women groups. It brings to the fore, the core values and ideals on which women organizations are premised.

Amazingly, these well thought out activities thawed the clandestine enmity that pervaded the community following the forty (40) years chieftaincy tussle. The feeling of oneness expressed by the women had further motivated many daughters of the community to fund and execute huge capital-intensive projects in the community freely and single-handedly. In 2018 and 2019, Princess Ngozi Okaka funded the renovation and rehabilitation of the maternity ward, general ward, and surgical theatre of Fatima Hospital. She equally revamped the Community Primary Health Centre Nkolofia, Awka-Etiti. In 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic threw the world into a global lock down, the organization ensured the safety and economic sustenance of her members through the sharing of palliatives of cash and food items. (Authors' interview with Mrs. Dorathy Agbanyim in 2021) Similarly, wealthy, and influential women during

summits heartily share gifts such as food items, wrappers, and money to members of the association in a show of love and support. The privileged women among them also readily contribute through donations to the organization in support of projects

It is important to however state at this juncture that the summit, which is the highlight of the annual activities of the group, featured events that are beneficial to the personal development of the members, the community, and the world at large. It is at the summit that talks and teachings on topical issues bothering on health, children's welfare, girl-child development and empowerment, gender issues, domestic and intimate partner violence are discussed. Here, the executives through the President-General invite experts from diverse fields to teach and impact the women with the necessary knowledge needed for the changing times. For instance, at the last summit of August 2022, the women were enthralled with lectures and teachings on Domestic Violence; causes and solution by the chairman of the occasion, Prof. Ifeyinwa Emejulu an expert in Gender and Women's Studies, alongside Hon. Amaka Obidigbo the current Chairman of Idemili South Local Government Area, Anambra state. One of the authors of this paper witnessed the two events mentioned as it was expedient in gathering information needed for the current study.

From the above, what have been readily established is that women in Awka-Etiti under the aegis of AIU -Women Wing and within the few years of their existence have shown that women possess such personal excellence and intelligence and can attain heights of true humanity and happiness. The organization since 2008 has continued to act and be an intermediary between the rich and the poor, the government, and the masses. To this end, Theresa Okafor summed the group up thus,

The formation of the women wing is one of the best things to have happened to women in Awka-Etiti in recent times. Although an evolving association, the prospect of growth and bigger achievements is evident. It is a unifying force, pretty much needed for further advancement of the cause and course of women and our community at large. And you know women are the bedrock of the society... (Interview with Dr. Theresa Okafor, 2019)

Conclusion

No doubt, women in Awka-Etiti through the aegis of the AIU- Women Wing have showcased the extent women are determined in retaining relevance and importance in the community beyond religious posturing. The association although borrowed the tenets and ideals of the defunct *Inyom Awka* anchored mainly on cohesion and co-operation among women in Awka-Etiti, however, adopts a broader outlook and a more encompassing *modus operandi* aimed at fulfilling the needs and demands of the contemporary African women and in line with modern day realities. The greatest achievement of the women wing goes beyond the physical projects they execute; it radiates on the human capacity development shown forth via an enhanced sense of sisterhood inherent amongst members. Amazingly, women who were originally a collection of individuals born elsewhere by virtue of their membership to the organization became bound together in a unified sense of a group identity. Notably and as extrapolated from the foregoing, the organization has done remarkably well despite her late arrival to the scheme of affairs. The achievements of women wing notwithstanding, there are nonetheless challenges which to a very large extent have hampered not just the smooth workings of the organization but also their efforts towards all-round development. Some of these challenges include lack of adequate finance for the execution of capital-intensive projects, illiteracy, low level of education especially among rural women, patriarchy and cultural stronghold, inter-gender rivalry, discriminatory laws and constitution, interdenominational rivalry among others. Although these problems present a clog in the wheel of the women wing, what is women in general and the AIU women wing are not just important in developmental strides of the community or organization, they are innately and actively the heart of all forms of development, irrespective of the constraints.

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Interviews:

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- Authors' Interview with Dr. Chinwe Olikaeze, c68years, Civil Servant, First Interim President General Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU) Women Wing. (February, 2019)
- Authors' Interview with His Royal Highness, Igwe Michael Ezeudenna, C 68 years, Obi of Awka-Etiti (January, 2022)
- Authors' Interview with Nkechi Unachukwu, c60 years, Secretary, Awka-Etiti Improvement Union (AIU) Women Wing, interviewed at Awka- Etiti (August 2018).
- Authors' Interview with Hon. Dorathy Agbanyim, 61 years, President General AIU Women Wing, interviewed at Onitsha (November, 2021)
- Authors's Interview with Dr. Theresa Okafor, c68years, University Lecturer and Emeritus President Women Wing, interviewed via phone (August, 2019)