

## **A Critical Examination of the Role of Development Communication in Addressing the Marginalization of Women by Women (Umuada) in Igbo Land**

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**Abstract:** The presumed superiority of men over women in Igbo culture cannot be over emphasised. Because the laws guiding Igbo society were made by men, they favour the men at the expense of women. The women cannot inherit their fathers' property. They are accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands. Most of the times, the agents for carrying out these atrocious acts against women are the daughters of the family, popularly known as the 'Umuada'. In this paper, we focused on the role of this group in perpetuating the obnoxious practices against women in Igbo land and how Development Communication can be used to catalyse the needed change in attitude that will put an end to the discrimination of women against women and give them a better treatment in the scheme of things in the society. This is a theoretical paper that analyzed the role of communication in addressing the marginalization of women by women (Umuada) in Igbo land. The method of study included in-depth interviews and analysis of empirical works done in this area. This paper was anchored on Development Media Theory and Gender Theory of Womanism. One of the findings is that the main factor instrumental to the obnoxious widowhood practices of Umuada is our tradition and culture. Some of the recommendations include that the Igbo culture empowering Umuada to perpetuate evil on their fellow women should be revisited. Men who are custodians of our culture should take the lead in reviewing the culture. Inter-personal communication, group communication, mass communication and quite recently the new media should be used to condemn the evils of the widowhood practices perpetuated by Umuada Igbo. This will lead to the sustainable development of women in Igbo land and Nigeria in general.

**Key words:** Development Communication • Women Marginalization • Umuada • Igbo Culture

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The superiority of men over women has been a global trend. That is why Anyalebechi [1] posts that there is no human society where women are not discriminated against or marginalized. Buttressing this point, [2] cited in Anyalebechi [1] opines that the key point that leads to discrimination against women has its roots in the nature of our societies which celebrate men as being unique, stronger and fit for the public space while women are feeble and weak meant to stay within the confidence of the private space.

In Nigeria, women are discriminated against starting from the family, that is, why boys are not trained to participate in most domestic chores such as cooking, sweeping, fetching water and firewood which are exclusively for women [1]. As a matter of fact, in Nigeria

women are seen as property owned by their husbands. That is why [3] says that women have no custody of their children from their marriage in the event of divorce, making women in question an object of caricature and of less important to the society. Women no doubt are regarded as objects to be possessed. No wonder, the President Mohammad Buhari said that the place of his wife is in the kitchen and the 'other room'.

The superiority of men over women in Nigeria particularly Igbo land has led had to numerous harmful cultural practices. In line with this, Ifemeje and Umejiaki (2014) [4] posit that these harmful cultural practices include: legalized domestic violence, wife inheritance, payment and refund of bride price and marginalization of women's rights in dissolution of customary law marriage. Others include, female disinheritance, male preference syndrome, female genital mutilation (FGM) and

polygamous nature of customary law marriage and harmful widowhood practices which is the interest of this paper.

In his own contribution, [3] explains that: Nigeria has ratified virtually all international instruments as protection and promotion of gender rights and equality, but has failed to domesticate most of them including women emancipation.

It is therefore, expected that women should fight collectively in order to change their conditions. Unfortunately and surprisingly women called '*Umuada*' daughters of the family married outside perpetuate these obnoxious widowhood practices on their fellow women, thereby marginalizing them.

The concern of this paper therefore is to examine the factors that are instrumental to such inhuman practices and how development communication can be used to address the issue of marginalization of women by women (*Umuada*) in Igbo Land.

**Theoretical Framework:** This study is anchored on development media theory and gender theory of womanism. Development media theory was formulated by [5]. The theory harps on the use of mass media as agent of development and social change in any society. The media should be used to assist government by carrying out programme that will lead to positive behavioural change among the people. This theory came to existence as a result of UNESCO's MacBride Commission set up to address the domination of foreign news agencies/channels of communication on the developing countries of the world. The arbitrary, authoritarianism associated with information dissemination was the major focus of the development media theory. The theory postulates that press in some of the countries conventionally classified as developing countries needs to refocused their attention on communication that can fast-track development [5]

Development media theory also hinges its belief on communication approaches that influence attitudinal change, encourage development and community participation in ensuring that development are evenly distributed. That is why [6] reports that press freedom should be opened to restrictions in accordance with economic priorities, change in attitude and development needs of the people. The theory advocates that the media should assist in advancing the cause of development in their operational areas, because, development include social justice, harmonious relationship, peace building

that help in eliminating all harmful cultural practices in any society.

Gender Theory of Womanism was first coined by Alice Walker, an American poet. Womanism arose during the early mainstream feminist movement, which was mainly led by middle-class heterosexual white women advocating for social change in the form of women's suffrage. Gender theory of womanism postulates that gender based inequality and class-based oppression is inimical to the development of womanhood and as such need to be checkmated. According to [5], this theory reflects feminist ideology which is compatible with the social realities of the women in Africa as a very exceptional cultural environment. On this premise, both theories are relevant to the study because gender theory of womanism has the capacity to positively affect the society by publicizing and condemning all harmful cultural practices being perpetuated by *Umuada* in Igbo land. Also the development media theory will address the issue of using *Umuada* to facilitate developmental projects in Igbo land.

#### **Conceptual Clarifications on Contributions of *Umuada* Igbo to the Development of their Society:**

In every society, people belong to various groups that predispose them to make one form of contribution or the other to the development of their society. In Igbo land the role and contributions of *Umuada* to the development of their society is very glaring. Accessing the formidable role of this socio-cultural organization, [6] write that the tradition and modern contributions of *Umuada* in any community make them to be no "pushover" in the political, economic, religion and social life of Igbo nation. Acknowledging the powers of women before the arrival of our colonial masters, [5] is of the view that long before the arrival of colonialism, women have been powerful part of Igbo society. The term *Umuada* means all indigenous daughters of a given community. Buttressing this claim, Maduagwu (2012) asserts that in essence, all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town and whether old or young; single or married; divorced or separated, all enjoy equal rights within the group.

[5] reports that the Igbo is a patriarchal society, but in spite of this, the association of indigenous women of some Igbo communities known as *Umuada* continues to exert influence in their patrilineal homes even after the exchange of identity through marriage. Analysing the type of respect often accorded to [5] further asserts that

the Igbo society generally places a relatively high premium on indigenous women popularly known as *Umuada*.

[6] argues that *Umuada* intrude in the affairs of state and can impose sanctions which may include heavy fines and other measures to make someone comply with their whims and caprices. This assertion further shows that the *Umuada* has the capacity of disciplining any erring members of the society and make sure he or she obeys the norms and rules guiding the society. Considering the role *Umuada* play in their respective homes, Obioma [7] is of the opinion that women are traditionally the heart of the home, procurators and caregivers of the house. Their efforts as farmers, civil workers, professional and managers of human welfare are central to the ability of households, communities and nations to tackle the resulting crisis [6]. [5] outlined the judicial responsibilities of *Umuada* to include; settlement of disputes among members, quick identification of issues involving offending wives, resolving conflict of physical fighting involving members and finally, punishment of a wife who attack her mother in-law.

In terms of peace building in Igbo land, *Umuada* also make significant contribution to ensure peace in their communities. Accessing the role of *Umuada* Igbo in building and maintaining peace in their various communities, [5] succinctly notes that by implication, the *Umuada* in their role often bridge the gap and/or mediate between disputing parties to maintain peace and ensure that various individuals and groups needs are accommodated. Corroborating the views of [5],[2] reports that; *Umuada* in their various paternal families in Igbo land act as peace-makers, equalizers, equilibrium distributor, joy-givers, consolation-materials, radiators and tranquilizers in their families.

In wealth creation, the *Umuada* Igbo have made their mark in making valid contributions in acquisition of wealth.[2] posit that gone were the days when *Umuada* Igbo answer '*Oriaku*' (wealth consumer). Today, they partake in the struggle for the acquisition of wealth (*Okpata aku*). In various homes in Igbo land, women struggle to support their husbands in running the home, laying helping hands to meet the basic needs of their home. This rightly corroborates a saying that a woman is she who can take the place of everyone and no one can take her place [2]

**Meaning of Widowhood:** Adebowale [8] asserts that widows can be described as stones at the base of a lake; followed all the time with suspicious gaze, while wicked

gossips trail their movement. Oreh (2013)[9] is of the view that widows' afflictions are partly natural and man-made, natural because death is beyond any human control, while widowhood practices are inflicted by man. [9] affirms that a woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share, shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. [9] quoting Boulding (2009)[10] believe that widow is like a melancholy bird that sits wailing all night, increasing her distress without redeeming features. [9] observes that widowhood involves a physical break in the family relationship and it is ranked by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life.

According to [6] if a woman's husband is no longer alive, she automatically resigns into a group of marginalized, powerless and voiceless being called widows. A widow is not only marginalized, she is also deprived of almost all her social rights, happiness among others. [9] reports that the transition from wifhood to widowhood happens so abrupt that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to widow.

#### ***Umuada* Igbo and Harmful Widowhood Practices:**

The widowhood practices in Igbo communities are an age long phenomenon. The practice of harmful widowhood has been in existences even before the advent of colonialism in Africa. Widowhood practices according to Nwoga [11] is described as sets of expectations as to the actions and behaviours by the widow, actions by others toward the widow and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of death of her husband. Later phase of these practices may include issues of inheritance, the state of the widow and marriage or remarriage of the widow.

Describing the inhuman nature of the practice in most Igbo communities in Nigeria, Nnenna and King [12] write that harmful widowhood practice is an obnoxious, inhuman treatment and violence against women as a result of the death of their husbands. [12] further disclose that in some Igbo communities when the husband dies his wife is regarded as assets that can be inherited by her husband's brothers or relatives. Some are forced to have sex with another man for cleansings before the burial of her husband; most widows also undergo some kind of oath to prove their innocence in the death of their husband. Disclosing the involvement of *Umuada* in implementation of these harmful widowhood practices [12] asserts that *Umuada* play a prominent role in implementing these obnoxious cultural practices like forceful shelving of widows hair after the burial of her husband.

Accusing women of perpetuating such dehumanizing act against their fellow women, [7] argue that women do not only condone such gender-based violence but also perpetuate them by enforcing traditional laws and customs that infringe on the human and reproductive rights of widows and other women. They further assert that as a result of cultural and religious norms, superstition, fear and traditional resistance to cultural changes, women still condone such violence and seem to be complacent.

In the words of Onwuejogwu [14] *umuada* are women who often take advantage of their fellow women husband's death to victimize them. He further asserts that women take widowhood period as a time for vendetta, it is therefore women fighting women and therefore, they must collectively stop the practice for the benefit of every woman. Widowhood practices in West Africa are considered part of cleansing rituals designed to remove the bond that links a living spouse to a dead one [12]. The involvement of *umuada* in these cleansing and dehumanizing practices gives major concern. They (*umuada*) participate in executing and encouraging the practice under the guise of cultural rights and belief is what still surprises many. On this premise, [12] lamented that for the widow, a woman who has just been bereaved of her husband, death stings, strips her bare and exposes her to humiliating physical and psychological violence; often in the name of culture, usually by those who should console her and support her in her time of bereavement turns out to be the one victimising her the more.

Despite the level of education of members of *Umuada* in most communities in Igbo land, this practice is going on unabated, that is why [12] emphatically noted that;

The existence of the *umuada*, a group of women who supposed to provide a platform to stop the infliction of violence against women during the mourning period often take part in the process. With education, one would think that incidences of abusive cleansing ritual would be reduced, however, educated women continue to practice it.

### Case Studies

**Ozubulu, the Headquarters of Ekwusigo Local Government Area Of Anambra State:** According to Catholic Diocese of Nnewi in [13] the following are major dehumanising widowhood rites and practices in Ozubulu, the headquarters of Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State; drinking washings from husband's corpse, crawling over husband's corpse, a widow not having a bath until after eight market days, a widow sitting on a bare floor during the period of mourning, a

widow having to cry aloud to the hearing of the all the villagers, restriction of woman's movement, loss of right of inheritance, *umuada* insistence of shaving the woman's hair and wife inheritance or forced marriage to the close relatives of her husband.

**Ogidi Town, in Idemili Local Government Area:** In Ogidi town ([www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com)) reports that the deadline for mourning period for widows is approximately one year. Within this particular period the widow sits on the bare floor for four weeks and her hair is scraped. The widow is not allowed to talk, laugh, shake hands, greet people, cook or exchange pleasantries. She is forced to wear an attire called (*Ogodo upa*), that is, "mud cloth" after seven weeks, she removes the "mud cloth" and wears the *ikpim* that is, a pitch black mourning dress for the rest of the year.

**Nanka town, Orumba Local Government Area:** In Nanka town, widowhood practices have little difference; the widow is not allowed to see her husband's corpse. Whether you are a Christian or not, any widow that flouts these important widowhood rituals and customs ceases to exist. Another aspect of their practice is that the widow is forbidden from selling or buying any wares from any member of the community. The widow is avoided by all men including the members of her husband's family ([www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com)). The practice in Ogbunka Town, still in Orumba South Local Government Area is not in any way different, a widow is asked to stay behind the doors immediately her husband dies ([www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com)). The *Umuada* forces her to observe the routine wailing from morning till night for many days. This widow is in turn expected to provide the *oku awa* i.e. yam meal with a chicken for the *Umuada* every day during mourning period.

**In Ezira and Nawfija:** The widow is put in a cage; she is not allowed to sit on a mat or mattress inside her "cage". According to these people, the widow is most vulnerable to physical pains inflicted on her by vicious mourners, who are in the habit of throwing their whole weight on the victim, in the guise of deep sympathy. The widow wears either black or white for seven months at the end of which, she wears another dress for the remaining five months that is neither black nor white.

**In Akili-Ogidi town, in Ogbaru Local Government Area:** Widowhood practices are the same as in Ogidi town except that, "the widow does her evening crying shift through the *onu ntapa*, that is, a chink in the wall. She

must also be facing the west, throughout the first twenty eight days after the burial. Because of civilization however, the working class widow is allowed to return to work after the short bereavement leave granted her. However, no widow is allowed to step out of her husband's compound on her own feet. She must be carried by a man out of the compound to enable her go to wherever she going.

**The Role of Development Communication in Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices in Igbo Land:** Development driven communication does not solely depend on economic, political and social development, rather it involves social emancipation from certain cultural practices that impedes human development. In line with this thought, Quebral [15] reports that development communication is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that make possible grater social equality and the large fulfilment of the human potentials.

**Methodology:** The study adopted qualitative method in carrying out its investigation. Data were gathered from secondary sources basically from libraries, internet sources, relevant articles, periodicals and books. Interviews were also conducted to buttress the secondary sources.

**Discussion:** On who 'Umuada' Igbo are, all those interviewed agreed that *Umuada* in Igbo land are daughters of a kindred married out to other villages or Communities. This is in agreement with the submission of [14].

They also posit that *Umuada* Igbo are custodians of sanity and good moral behaviour among the kindred members and act as arbitrators in cases of disputes and they pronounce sanctions on the guilty members. They also settle disputes between their brothers and their wives in the family/community. At times they render financial help to members of the family or community. They also wash the dead bodies of their relatives. This is in line with the observations of [2].

Despite the fact that the *Umuada* in Igbo land play positive roles in their families/kindred, they also perpetuate evils against their fellow women particularly when they lose their husbands in death. Responding on why *Umuada* do this, all those interviewed agreed that *Umuada* maltreat their brother's wife who loses her husband in death in the name of burial rites. The evils perpetuated are more pronounced if a wife is suspected to

have contributed to the death of her husband directly or indirectly. At times *Umuada* use that opportunity to maltreat their sister-in-law who they have had scores to settle with. Another reason why *Umuada* perpetuate evils against fellow women is because Igbo culture vested such powers on them.

Responding on what can be done to solve this problem; Dr. Njoku said in an interview that husbands should write their wills before their death forbidding such evils to be meted on their wives when they die. On her own part, Mrs. Nwele said that the church should embark on a serious crusade against this obnoxious culture. In responding to the interview questions, Mrs. Orogwu said that people should organise seminars and conferences in which such issues should be addressed. Dr. Nwosu added that the *Umuada* should be empowered emotionally so that they can be useful to themselves and their families. By so doing, they will not attach importance to the obnoxious widowhood practices. Dr. Njoku said that *Umuada* should be made to know by the entire society, the limit of their power and authority.

On how communication can help to solve this problem, Dr. Innocent Nwosu suggested that enlightenment programmes should be put on radio and television to educate the people. He added that there should be workshops and face-to-face communication programmes to readjust peoples' beliefs and attitude toward *Umuada*. Corroborating this fact, Mrs. Orogwu said that people should be communicated through conferences to stop such evil acts and that proceedings of such conferences should be on radio and television. Furthermore, Dr. Obianika said that communication will definitely help to enlighten the public on the dangers of allowing the public and *Umuada* to arbitrary handling of issues to the maltreatment of their fellow women. Available alternative approaches in modern society should be made known by enlightenment to enable communities employ such approaches in handling family matters.

## CONCLUSION

Going by their giant developmental strides within the family/kindred and Igbo land as a whole as highlighted in this paper, *Umuada* Igbo have the potentials to make positive contributions to national development.

The paper also revealed that the main factor instrumental to the obnoxious widowhood practices of *Umuada* is our tradition and culture. So, development communication which is the role of communication in developmental processes can be used to address the

issue of marginalisation of women by women in Igboland. This can be achieved when men who are custodians of our culture take the lead in reviewing the obnoxious culture. Such awareness should be created through face-to-face communication, group communication, mass communication and also the new media.

From the foregoing discourse, *Umuada* Igbo should be encouraged by all in the society to use their potentials positively in the interest of all. This implies that all women should unite themselves in fighting their common goal which is the marginalization of women by the male dominated society.

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