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WOMEN'S AUGUST MEETING (*NZUKỌ ỤMỤNWANYI N'ỌNWA ỌGỤST)* AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN NGOR OKPALA LGA, IMO STATE, 2019-2024

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Abstract
The Women's August meeting (*Nzukọ Ụmụnwanyi N'ọnwa Ọgụst*) is a significant sociocultural organisation in southeastern Nigeria. It brings women together to foster togetherness, mutual assistance, and community development. Although the gathering has long played an essential role in local communities, scholars have paid little attention to its impact on rural development. This study investigates how August Meeting associations assisted women's development activities in Imo State's Ngor Okpala Local Government Area from 2019 to 2024. The study used a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews with female leaders, focus group discussions in selected communities, and participant observation during August Meeting activities. The findings show that associations have played an essential role in strengthening community life through cooperative savings systems, healthcare outreach, educational support, sanitation activities, market assistance, and small-scale infrastructure projects. Using the Women Empowerment and Agency Framework, the study shows how women have used their collective strength to move beyond simply receiving welfare and actively contribute to their communities' development. Through these efforts, women have gained better access to resources, taken part in decision-making, helped resolve local conflicts, become more involved in community leadership, and strengthened informal systems of social support. However, inadequate funding, weak institutional support, political interference, and poor documentation of their activities limit their efforts. The study concludes that the August Meeting is not simply a cultural gathering but also an important grassroots platform through which rural women contribute to community development. It emphasises the necessity to recognise and support women's collective efforts as a valuable part of sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

Keywords: *August Meeting, Women Development, Grassroots Mobilisation, Women Empowerment, Ngor Okpala*

Introduction

The Women's August Meeting (also known as the mothers' summit) is a structured annual gathering for Igbo women living in Southeastern Nigeria. The Women's August Meeting strives to strengthen civil society and empower women at the grassroots level. It is a local women's organisation formed through familiar relationships, religious bodies, marketplaces, age groups, and villages or towns. These women's associations have worked toward social well-being and community development. They provide a means for collective

work and partake in rotating credit associations/commonly known as "*ajo*" or "*isusu*".[1] They also help educate members and provide health care support. Lastly, they arbitrate disputes within communities. Beyond economic roles, these associations also serve political and social functions. They influence local decision-making processes, negotiate community interests, and monitor leaders.[2] Scholars often contend that women's networks serve as Nigeria's most resilient informal social welfare apparatus. This is particularly true in rural communities where there is little state presence.[3] Their strength lies in their capacity to channel local social capital into concrete improvements like school infrastructure, clinic revitalisation, and sanitation programs.[4] *Nzukọ Ụmụnwanyi N'ọnwa Ọgụst* is one of the oldest annual conventions of Igbo women. The gathering takes place in August, when the demands of farming ease and many Igbo women, whether living in cities or abroad, return to their ancestral villages to reconnect with loved ones. Initially rooted in Christian women's prayer meetings and community welfare initiatives, it transformed into an organisation dedicated to communal strategic planning, development investment, and sociocultural engagement.[5] The gathering is structured into distinct parts in which women address local problems, raise funds for development, design social support initiatives, implement community rules, and form working groups to execute projects. Today, the August Meeting functions as a space for rural development in which women can take part in decisions that affect their communities. It also helps preserve traditions, dance, and identity.[6] Researchers have also identified challenges already built into the system, such as elitism, politicisation and competition, that may hinder participation. Despite being an advocacy group largely comprised of women, August Meeting's role as a development platform and a driver of socioeconomic change at the grassroots level in Southeast Nigeria has received minimal scholarly focus. Furthermore, academic discourse on women-led community development approaches remains underdeveloped, particularly regarding their longevity and

[1] P. E. Okeke-Ihejirika. *Negotiating Power and Privilege: Igbo Career Women in Contemporary Nigeria.* Centre for International Studies, Ohio University Press, 2004. p. 45
[2] M. A. Orisadare. *An Assessment of the Role of Women Groups in Women Political Participation and Economic Development in Nigeria.* Frontiers in Sociology, 2019, p. 3
[3] P. E. Okeke-Ihejirika. *Negotiating Power and Privilege:...* p.45
[4] I, Okorie. "Socio-Economic Impacts of the Igbo Women's August Meeting in Eastern Nigeria." *International Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Social Sciences*, 2024, p. 248
[5] M. U. Ohaegbuchi. "Women in Community Development: Interrogating the Role of Women August Meeting in South East Nigeria." *Net Journal of Social Sciences*, 2014, p. 45.
[6] A. Odoemena. Igbo Women's "August Meeting" and Re-entry into the Public Sphere in Nigeria: A Historical Sociology Perspective. *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa,* 2011.p.3.

the systems that underpin them.[7] Empirical data on how these groups secure funding for survival and build connections with established bodies is notably lacking.[8] Additionally, integration between women's community groups and statutory bodies at the local government level remains notably deficient. This points to institutional collaborations and gaps in policymaking.[9] Challenges like this call for an assessment of the sustainability and results the August Meeting model has created in development. With this in mind, Ngor Okpala explores the connection between women and community development via *Nzukọ Ụmụnwanyi N'ọnwa Ọgụst.*

Theoretical Framework

Naila Kabeer's Women's Empowerment and Agency Framework assesses women's empowerment by examining their access to critical life decisions, control over resources, and decision-making authority across social, economic, and political domains. The core idea is self-governance and the power to drive change. The August Meeting offered these women opportunities for engagement beyond simple social interaction. At the August meeting, women show their agency by raising funds, coordinating collective efforts, and negotiating with local authorities. Move beyond "development." The Women Empowerment Framework (pictured below as a ladder or continuum) helps you measure how much change has occurred in women's lives by assessing: from meeting fundamental material requirements like food, water, healthcare, and income to gaining access to resources such as education, land, credit, and infrastructure to developing a critical understanding and challenge of gender oppression, including cultural norms and patriarchy, to actively participating in local decisions and project implementation, and finally, to women's capability to set priorities, finance endeavours, and autonomously govern at community, household, and political levels. The agency framework evaluates an individual's or group's capacity to act on their own behalf. Agency can be understood in three ways. First, it refers to women's ability to take action and achieve goals that better their financial situation, resulting in practical actions and measurable consequences.

[7] S. C. Nwankwo, "Mainstreaming Women August Meeting in Southeastern Nigeria towards Community Development." *Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies,* 2021, p. 60.
[8] M.U. Ohaegbuchi. "Women in Community Development: Interrogating the Role of Women August Meeting in South East Nigeria." *Net Journal of Social Sciences*, 2014, p. 48.
[9]E. Chukwu and Grace Agbo. "Policy Gaps in Grassroots Integration: Informal Institutions and Local Government Frameworks in Southeastern Nigeria." *Journal of Policy and Development Studies,* 2022, p. 56

Second, it is about inner strength, which includes women's self-esteem, confidence, emotional and mental resilience, and ability to make decisions and steer their lives. Third, agency refers to women's ability to navigate, resist, and oppose restricted or repressive social institutions, particularly those created by patriarchal norms and uneven power relations.

The frameworks also enabled the study to explain the actions of the August Meeting by comparing them with what empowerment frameworks ought to look like. Consequently, the case study's contribution was not limited to recounting the occurrences at the August Meeting from 2019 to 2024. It analysed why and how women were able to bring about development for themselves in Ngor Okpala. Using this method, the study can determine how participation in August Meeting activities and events led women in Ngor Okpala to gain financial independence, social status, leadership skills, and empowerment.

Ngor Okpala: Overview

Ngor Okpala, one of Imo State's largest Local Government Areas (LGAs), shares borders with three Imo State LGAs to the north: Owerri North, Owerri West, and Aboh Mbaise LGAs; and Rivers State's Ikwerre and Etche LGAs to the south. Ngor Okpala, one of Imo State's largest Local Government Areas (LGAs), borders three Imo State LGAs to the north: Owerri North, Owerri West, and Aboh Mbaise LGAs, and Rivers State's Ikwerre and Etche LGAs to the south. These geographical advantages, combined with its proximity to Owerri and Port Harcourt as commercial centres, naturally shape the LGA's economy and population, resulting in widespread migration and the return of its inhabitants. Its administrative centre is Umuneke Ngor, and it includes autonomous communities such as Umuowa, Elelem, Obiangwu, Alulu, Ntu, and Amala,[10] as well as Imeriewe and Upe. At the 2006 national census, the LGA had a population of 159,932. Subsequent population estimates have projected an increase to over 180,000 inhabitants based on the observed rate of rural expansion.[11] According to the 2022 population forecast. Ngor Okpala has a population of 219,400 in a total area of 523.1 km², resulting in a population density of 419.4/km² and a 2.1% growth rate from 2006 to 2022. The people of Ngor Okpala are predominantly farmers. Farming, along with local trade

[10] Imo State Government. Annual Socio-Economic and Infrastructure Report. Government Printer, 2020.
[11] J. Okoye. *Demographic Dynamics and Growth Projections in Imo State Rural Communities*. Star Press, 2021. p.340

and small-scale entrepreneurship, is the main occupation in Ngor Okpala.[12] Beyond agriculture, Ngor Okpala is home to craftsmen who practice traditional ceramics, weaving, and wood carving. Similar to other rural communities in Nigeria, Ngor Okpala faces major infrastructure problems such as lack of access to paved roads, healthcare, reliable energy, and drinking water, which have increasingly led to the development of community-driven alternatives to strengthen livelihoods through collaborations or the formation of associations and unions, especially those led by women.[13] Agriculture-related stress, rural-urban migration, and other economic trends impact these women-led projects.[14]

It was not until the advent of British colonial rule that things slowly started to change. Western-style education and Christianity were introduced, which began to erode old traditions. Colonialism changed Ngor Okpala's way of life by weakening traditional leadership and the rule of law and laying the foundation for the bureaucratic systems that would soon follow[15]. Since Nigeria became independent, and more specifically after the creation of Imo State out of the old Owerri County Council in 1976, Ngor Okpala became one of its administrative subdivisions. Today, Ngor Okpala is Imo State's largest local government area by land size. The Local Government Area consists of 28 autonomous communities, 11 wards, and five court areas. Since then, the community has experienced vibrant politics, from competing for grassroots leadership positions to debating what autonomous local governments should be and how to maintain evolving governance alongside cultural traditions. Currently, Ngor Okpala is an administrative centre and a cultural hotspot in Imo State. Ngor Okpala is transitioning from a culture with strong traditional institutions to a local government facing the challenges of modern-day politics and development. This is just a thumbnail description of what the Igbo ethnic group has experienced in Nigeria's southeast. The debate over how autonomous the local government should be when faced with development opportunities shows a people trying to use their rich history to their advantage and seize available opportunities. The people of Ngor Okpala are mainly Igbo-speaking people. Traditionally, they are palm produce farmers, cassava farmers, and yam farmers. However, with the advent of modern society, trading and working

[12] A. Iheme. *Economic Activities and Rural Livelihoods in Imo State*. University of Nigeria Press, 2016. p.97
[13] World Bank, Nigeria: The Community-Led Approach that is Helping Inclusive Development
[14] N. O. Anyoha and M. C. Chikaire. "Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Rural-Urban Migration of Youth in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria." *International Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development*, 2021, p.55.
[15] Okafor, Emeka. *The Evolution of Igbo Community Associations: From Fellowship to Institutional Governance*.

for the government have also become common because Ngor Okpala is located very close to big cities. Before these structures, the political landscape consisted of a network of self-governing communities, with leadership vested in an Eze (traditional king) and other organisations of elders and titleholders. The historical narrative of Ngor Okpala includes the rich heritage of the pre-colonial Igbo community and the subsequent changes brought about by colonisation and its aftermath. Oral history within the community states that Ngor Okpala originated from the town of. The community of Ngor developed a profound sense of pride, leading to its people being bestowed the distinguished title of "Nwa Ngor Eze-Ogboro," meaning "prince or princess of the Ngor royal dynasty." People from the town of Ngor Okpala are known to be "brave warriors". This is why the saying goes, "*Onye je Ngor nga chi jiri*," suggesting that no one would dare commit misdeeds at night in a land inhabited by the ever-vigilant people of Ngor. Ngor Okpala also has a rich history, which is explored through its long-standing customs and celebrations. The Akaraka Ngor festival, a communal meal signifying unity for the people of Ngor, remains a vibrant tradition. It is a major festival in which neighbours unite by passing a jar of palm wine back and forth to various natives to promote positive ties. The influence of Ngor Okpala's dual identity as the "FOOD BASKET" and the village of the "Brave Warriors" on its development has been a subject explored by many authors and news outlets, including Jossy Nkwocha's work, 'A Historical, Cultural, Political, and Socioeconomic Analysis of Ngor Okpala Nigeria '.[16] Christianity is the most widespread religion. The community is generally patrilineal, so indigenous women's groups like the August Meeting are particularly vital for exercising feminine power.

August Meeting *(Nzukọ Ụmụnwanyi N'ọnwa Ọgụst)* and Women Development in Ngor Okpala

Nzukọ Ụmụnwanyi N'ọnwa Ọgụst is one of the biggest women's yearly homecoming meetings in Southeast Nigeria. Although now a dominant socio-political and economic organisation, it traces its origins to a mix of pre-colonial female organisations, colonial missionary movements, and post-Civil War reconstruction efforts. Igbo women have always had strong political and social organisations that predate the current homecoming movement now known as the August Meeting. The August Meeting traces back to traditional Indigenous

[16] J. Nkwocha. *NGOR: A Historical, Cultural, Political and socioeconomic* Analysis. Igbo Heritage Foundation Publishers, 2014. p.14

women's tribal groupings, such as the "*Umuada*" (Daughters), which represented women born within a specific village, and the "*Otu Alutaradi*" (Wives). *Otu Alutaradi* means women married into the community. Daughters also refers to women who hold titles/positions (spiritual/political) in their birth/village communities. These defined groupings make up the August Meeting. Within Igbo villages, married women organised themselves into groups to safeguard their welfare and maintain order. Historically, women convened often, but these gatherings were typically local. The August Meeting introduced the concept of "Home and Abroad," which sends women from cities back to their villages annually. [17] These formal gatherings trace back to church-affiliated groups in the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, groups like the "guilds" linked to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) existed. The ladies' guilds began teaching women how to improve their domestic skills and study the Bible. The woman most credited with bringing these women together before the Nigerian Civil War was Mrs V.V.I. Okoye. She led the Catholic Women's Organisation (CWO) in Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province. She motivated women to gather once a year to find ways they can better the church and community. y.[18] The migration of Igbo people to larger cities for jobs prompted women to form "abroad" networks to stay in touch. They soon agreed that August was the ideal time to return to their hometowns and meet en masse. August is perfect because the intense farm labour of planting is finished and the major harvest is not yet underway, giving women a short break from work. This timing conveniently coincides with the New Yam Festival (*Iri ji*) and the end of the school year for students, making it an ideal period for mothers to bring their children home for celebrations and to contribute to their communities.

After the Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970, the August Meeting embraced a dynamic, aggressive approach to development. The war devastated Igbo country, destroyed infrastructure, and left many men economically displaced; women filled the role of rebuilding the community. The meeting shifted from purely religious/social gatherings to community development; women raised money to build town halls, civic centres, schools, and health centres in areas with little government influence. The union established a uniform (Ankara/gorge) to help reduce classism, and it is the only known historical identifier of the

[17] V. Ejike. "Oramedia as a Tool for Women's Mobilisation for Community Development in Southeast Nigeria." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 2025, p.45.
[18]K. U. Ezeofor. "Annual August Meeting … p. 25.

August conference. When the union formed, members decided that women would wear a set of dedicated attire at monthly meetings so the wife of the doctor in Lagos would not be seen as better than the wife of the local farmer. During these early years, "abroad" ladies (city returnees) would flaunt expensive fabrics/materials at lavish meetings, intimidating "home" women (those in the village).[19] The August meeting is more than just a gathering of ladies; it is a parliament. Women's August decisions override men's on issues of communal harmony and development projects. Today it remains one of the most powerful examples of indigenous feminism and grassroots democracy in Africa. The August Meeting of Ngor Okpala is an eagerly awaited, meticulously orchestrated event held throughout the first few weeks of August. This is when all married daughters (Umuada/Umuokpu) from far and near travel back to their father's house to meet with their co-wives (Umunwanyi Di) to discuss and implement communal plans.[20]

Economic Empowerment

Women who attend the August meeting have access to a variety of programs, including cooperative societies (savings), thrift programs, small-scale women-centred micro companies, and marketing grants. Through these programs, women learn to save money together to support each other's businesses and meet community needs.[21] Specifically, women pooled funds for neighbourhood commerce initiatives. They offered seed money to micro-entrepreneurs and developed rotating credit associations where participants could grow their grassroots businesses. Community savings and loans are an example of grassroots development. Community members identify needs and craft solutions, not outsiders. These loans show how development can happen from the bottom up. These actions also show how local communities can take charge of their own development and put practical solutions into action.[22]

From the Women Empowerment and Agency Framework perspective, economic participation gives women financial independence, decision-making power, and social status within the community. Investing in and benefiting from cooperative societies allows women to

[19] K. U. Ezeofor. "Annual August Meeting Draws Women to Villages." *Interview by Vanguard News. Vanguard*, 15 Aug. 2018, p. 16.
[20] J. Okoye. *Documenting Grassroots Transformation: The August Meeting in Retrospect*. African Women Studies Review, 2022, p. 50.
[21] Alozie Chinyere (widow); 50 years, farmer and businesswoman, member of the August Meeting group in Umunam. Interviewed on 24 April 2025
[22] A. Sussie. *Igbo Women in the Diaspora and Community Development in Southeastern Nigeria*. Lexington Books, 2018.

empower themselves and others financially.[23] Women's committees provide an accountable, transparent, locally controlled way to manage and allocate pooled resources. Within the Community-Driven Development Model, these committees collectively decide who gets grants, oversee fund management, and set repayment plans. This ensures development priorities reflect real needs.[24] Ultimately, the August Meeting encourages women's economic contributions, fostering widespread prosperity within communities. The economic empowerment initiatives shaping Ngor Okpala Local Government Area in Imo State are implemented through NGO-backed commercial farming and grassroots cooperatives, not direct government intervention. Success stories, the donors supporting them, and the beneficiaries themselves tend to be concentrated within particular value chains and community frameworks. Women-headed households constitute the largest beneficiary group. Economic empowerment projects in Ngor Okpala focus on three major demographics and are implemented using a range of strategies:

Agri-Incubation Model Beneficiaries (Women-Led Households and Youth)

They focused on women, female heads of households with young children, and youths aged 18-35. The approach was carried out through the LIFE-ND (Livelihood Improvement Family Enterprises Project for the Niger Delta) project; successful farmers (incubators) mentored beneficiaries (incubates). Commercial poultry farming is thriving in Umuowa Community, with beneficiaries earning at least ₦200,000 monthly. The strategy invests in incubates and helps them bridge the gap between initial capital and business knowledge through a profit-sharing program.[25]

Collective Bargaining Model–Beneficiaries (Cooperative Societies)

This model benefits every local registered group outside our women's committee, such as "The Aladinmma Multi- Purpose Cooperative Society" located in Umukabia Ogodo. It is also tailored to help members of agricultural cooperatives, which today make up 47.7% of the population in the area. Cooperatives can pool funds and open doors for members to access bulk farm inputs such as fertilisers and quality, improved seed, while also creating unified marketing

[23] N. Kabeer. *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment.* Development and Change, 1999, p. 420
[24] World Bank. Community-Driven Development: Assessing Accountability, Local Control, and Sustainability. World Bank Group, 2020.
[25] Livelihood Improvement Family Enterprises Project for the Niger Delta. About LIFE-ND: Building Sustainable Livelihoods and Empowering Rural Communities.

channels that cut out middlemen. Co-ops not only help members pool funds, but can also serve as a platform for thrift and credit (*Isusu*). This model's collaboration ensures members have a financial community with access to loans and opportunities to grow income.

August Meeting Model & Beneficiaries (Rural Women General)

At the August meeting, women from each autonomous village that makes up Ngor Okpala create a powerful top-to-bottom economic and social forum. They use this forum to agree on collective taxes and secure extra donations from well-wishers to implement small-scale community projects that directly impact their people's lives, such as rebuilding town markets and drilling wells. By directing finances and decisions through local entities, the August Gathering helps to retain communal ownership of growth efforts while also establishing a major, albeit unofficial, space for women to participate in public governance. Outside groups and charitable players benefit from this setup: work done through the gathering has formed alliances with district and global entities, such as the LIFE-ND initiative co-funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).[26] Locally, philanthropists and politicians are stepping forward to assist. Dr Chima Amadi, widely known as "*Mazi Gburugburu*," and other key Ngor Okpala residents supply corporate finance and development support through routes such as the Jude Juliana Foundation.[27] Non-governmental organisations are also highly involved, particularly groups like PIND (Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta)[28] and the Centre for Social Awareness and Ethics (CSAAE)[29]. Government authorities are also involved. Federal entities such as the Border Communities Development Agency (BCDA) are targeting grassroots resources for talent acquisition and asset allocation.[30]

Education Support

[26] Livelihood Improvement Family Enterprises Project for the Niger Delta. About LIFE-ND: Building Sustainable Livelihoods and Empowering Rural Communities. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development / IFAD / NDDC, 2023.
[27] Jude and Juliana Foundation. "Dr. Chima Matthew Amadi: Philanthropy and Community Development in Ngor Okpala."
[28] Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta. "Veronica's Story: From Subsistence to Commercial Farmer"
[29] Centre for Social Awareness, Advocacy, and Ethics. *Grassroots Empowerment and Ethics in Community Development*.
[30] Border Communities Development Agency. Annual Report on Capacity Building and Asset Distribution in Frontier Communities. BCDA Publications, 2022.

Education was another major area of impact. The women of Ngor Okpala used the August Meeting to help pay school tuition and distribute essential educational equipment. They also took the initiative to build mentorship programs that support youngsters and young adults in their neighbourhoods.[31] Several interviewees cited initiatives in which low-income students received discounted tuition, textbooks, uniforms, and academic and career support. These educational initiatives focused on problem-solving. Women identify gaps in educational access within their communities and mobilise resources to fill them, suggesting that development can be achieved through community-level initiatives rather than top-down approaches. [32] According to the Women Empowerment and Agency Framework, participation in health initiatives increases women's agency by establishing them as major decision-makers and facilitators of health interventions, leading efforts to organise outreach drives and foster campaigns that recognise women's capacity to affect societal well-being, alongside social and political empowerment within their local groups.[33]

According to the World Bank, everyone votes on which children or schools receive the donations. It is a mutual decision. Women's committees manage funds, set priorities, and monitor progress. They ensure these educational projects stay on track and meet their objectives.[34] This approach helps ensure that instructional assistants remain fair and respond to the community's requests. These mechanisms show that the August Meeting is more than a social gathering or ritual; it is a real, organised engine of growth driven by women in Ngor Okpala over time. Primary school pupils benefit greatly from the School Feeding Program, which helps keep them in class rather than skipping. Students at all levels, from primary to university, receive scholarships, books, and bursaries to help them succeed. Teachers also benefit from additional training and improved teaching resources. Researchers and older students stand to benefit the most. Programs like the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)

[31] Lovina Onu (Ms); 28 years, Student (undergraduate), Olakwo. Interviewed on 26 April 2025
[32] K.A.Ogbonnaya, and Okechukwu Ann E. "Enhancing Women's Participation in Community Development Through Community Education for Sustainable Development in South-East Nigeria." *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Policy*, 2023, p. 2293
[33] Naila Kabeer. *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on Measuring Women's Empowerment.* Development and Change, 1999, p. 441

[34] World Bank. Community-Driven Development: Investment in Local Capacity and Economic Empowerment.

and the Academic Manuscript to Book Intervention appear to bridge the final gap between study and professional work.

Health and Social Welfare

The August gathering marked a significant shift in how the community manages its infrastructure and environment. Women led road repairs, cleanliness, and facility maintenance. They combined donations and effort, collaborating with local leaders and youth organisations. Locals identify flaws in their own systems and mobilise to solve them from the ground up. Road rehabilitation and water systems do more than merely move people; they also reduce health concerns. Suddenly, markets and schools are available. This move improves socioeconomic well-being across the board. However, it is more than just infrastructure. The Women Empowerment and Agency Framework encourages active engagement in these projects. Why? Because involvement increases decision-making capacity. It establishes leadership positions in planning. When women lead environmental projects, their prominence increases. In traditionally male-dominated industries, the impact is apparent. They are not only present; they are pushing change. This is not symbolic. It is structural power. Women identify major health challenges in their communities and design practical methods to address them, improving community well-being.

The Women Empowerment and Agency Framework contends that health programs increase women's agency. By taking on key decision-making roles, their leadership in organising outreach initiatives encourages the community to recognise their potential. These movements in power are both social and political. The World Bank's Community-Driven Development Model extends this by treating health development as truly community-driven. Women are not only consulted; they also make consensus decisions on service prioritisation, resource allocation, and results tracking. It is about transparency and community ownership, not top-down demands. This participatory strategy ensures health solutions are responsive, egalitarian, and sustainable.[35]

Community Infrastructure and Environment

Another area where the August Meeting had a significant impact was on community infrastructure and environmental development. Women work on road repairs, sanitation

[35] World Bank. Community-Driven Development: Investment in Local Capacity and Economic Empowerment

programs, water projects, and building or maintaining community amenities. These programs usually include shared financial contributions, volunteer labour, and partnerships with local leaders and youth organisations. Using Grassroots Development analysis, these initiatives indicate local actors' ability to identify infrastructure deficiencies and mobilise collective action to address them, displaying a bottom-up approach to community improvement. Road restoration and water supply systems boost mobility, reduce health risks, and improve access to markets, schools, and healthcare facilities, all of which contribute to the community's socioeconomic well-being. According to the Women Empowerment and Agency Framework, participation in infrastructure projects empowers women by strengthening their decision-making capacity and leadership in community planning. Women's participation in environmental projects boosts visibility and influence in typically male-dominated sectors of community development.[36]

Women's committees develop, implement, and monitor infrastructure projects jointly, using the Community-Driven Development Model. They make resource allocation, labour mobilisation, and project oversight decisions inclusively to ensure accountability, sustainability, and alignment with community interests. This shows that women-led development is not only participative but can also deliver substantial, long-term improvements in communal infrastructure and environmental conditions. Overall, these findings show that the August Meeting serves as a multifaceted development platform, meeting both the immediate and long-term requirements of Ngor Okpala villages while strengthening women's roles as key actors in grassroots development.

Social and cultural cohesion

The August Meeting in Ngor Okpala plays a significant role in promoting social and cultural integration. Women use this meeting to resolve local conflicts, build solidarity networks, and safeguard culture through rituals, assemblies, and other ceremonies. By allowing diverse families, age groups, and communities to communicate and cooperate, they reduce social tensions and strengthen communal harmony. These actions show that grassroots efforts can maintain social stability and cultural continuity while also promoting growth. Women recognise problems in social and cultural life and use their resources and networks to address

[36] N. Kabeer. *Resources, Agency, Achievements: ...*p.197

them, showing that development encompasses not only the economic sphere but also the social and cultural spheres. The Women Empowerment and Agency Framework shows that women's roles in conflict resolution and cultural preservation promote their empowerment and leadership. By shaping social norms, resolving disputes, and sustaining cultural continuity, women gain additional power within the family and community. The Community-Driven Development Model allows women to decide how to organise mediation, cultural events, and solidarity actions.

Political and Civic Participation

Other sources of influence include political and civic participation, with women using the August Meeting to address community issues, take up leadership roles, and become activists. At the gathering, women share ideas on local governance, lobby for projects, and influence decisions on education, health, and social welfare. Participation in leadership committees, project monitoring and management, and local councils enhances women's civic engagement. Using Grassroots Development Theory, the meetings demonstrate how local development projects can improve civic involvement. Women transform community issues into tangible projects, bridging the gap between community needs and local governance structures. According to the Women's Empowerment and Agency Model, this participation promotes autonomy, political voice, and leadership skills. According to the community-driven development method, women collaborate to develop lobbying strategies, assess local government responsiveness, and manage the civic involvement process. This ensures accountability and ownership of the development and political processes, resulting in a highly participative August meeting. The findings show that the August Meeting serves as a forum to discuss economic, educational, health, and infrastructure challenges in the Ngor Okpala Local Government Area.

Challenges of the August Meeting for Community-Based Developments

Despite being very productive and participatory, the Ngor Okpala LGA women's group faces many challenges that threaten their capacity for women-led community development. These include Sustainability and dependence on funding: Donations for projects, often voluntary and inconsistent, make up the bulk of fundraising, especially as many members

reside in the diaspora. The organisation struggles to cover recurring one-time expenses, such as instructor wages or maintenance of the community health centre. [37]

Disagreements over project locations, financial irregularities, or leadership disputes can bring the organisation to a standstill, leading to factions and project delays. Gender, age and class differences between older and younger women can also fuel intra-group conflict.[38]

The issue of patriarchy. Women's groups have been able to organise themselves and raise significant funds, but they still face pushback from the male-dominated community hierarchy, such as traditional rulers and town unions, who may want to control finances or development projects. [39] Irregular meeting attendance and participation undermine the women's group. The August meeting is annual, and many group members live abroad. Keeping tabs on projects and ensuring they are followed through within the year is often challenging.

Another common problem is a lack of funding or insufficient funding. According to Monica Adele Orisadare, "The irregularities of getting grants… and sometimes the absence or shortage of funds have been a major problem in carrying out programs contributing to the advancement of women's causes in Nigeria.[40] Contributing to the advancement of women's causes in Nigeria." -Monica Adele Orisadare. According to UN Women's findings, women-centred organisations are often the most financially strained, even when they serve a large population.[41] Consequently, within Ngor Okpala, projects initiated by women tend to be small-scale, unsustainable, or halted by financial shortfalls, as the community struggles to retain funds because of these issues. [42]

Politicians increasingly exploit the August Meeting in Ngor Okpala to rally women's support for votes, with project awards sometimes functioning as a means of vote-buying. This manipulative political strategy is often divisive.[43] Also, in the Politics of Women's Groups, whether from within women's leadership or from politicians and men in power, women's groups face influences that may steer them toward serving a few members' interests (patronage

[37] C. Okere (Ms); 34 years, (Single Mother), secretary emeritus.
[38] U. Igwe (Mrs); 43years, businesswoman, active member.
[39] Joseph (Nze); 65 years, Retired Civil Servant.
[40] M. A. Orisadare. *An Assessment of the Role of Women Groups in Women Political Participation and Economic Development in Nigeria.* Frontiers in Sociology, 2019, p. 66.
[41] UN Women. Funding for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Programming: Case Study – Nigeria. UN Women, 2020.
[42] Alozie Chinyere (widow); 50 years, farmer and businesswoman.
[43] Eberechukwu, Oluchi (Mrs); 40 years, Businesswoman, partially active member.

politics) or forming an elite women's class.[44] Studies have found that "women's organisations [in Nigeria] exist as ad hoc bodies" with little or no coordination, continuity, or sustainability. Politics can cause mistrust among members, limit who can join the organisation, and make it harder for women to push agendas that would benefit the village.[45] Politicisation can breed suspicion, reduce inclusivity, and make it difficult for women to articulate a grassroots message. In Ngor Okpala, leadership rotation, funding allocation, and project prioritisation may favour particular individuals, limiting collective ownership.

Lack of Documentation and Accurate Data Preservation: Poor documentation hampers monitoring, evaluation, and knowledge exchange. According to Evelyn Iheukwumere's research on rural women's groups in Abia State, the absence of documentation and statistics on prior programs has made it impossible to assess the performance of empowerment initiatives. Proper documentation, including meeting minutes, financial records, and project reports, is crucial to scale up Ngor Okpala's success beyond August meetings.

Women's Grassroots Associations operate primarily independently of government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to a study on Nigerian women's groups in decision-making, there is a lack of engagement and collaboration between women's organisations and the government, resulting in women's inability to participate in the governance process. Using Ngor Okpala, the implication is a lack of support (technical, financial, and policy). As a result, it inhibits program expansion, training opportunities, and the institutionalisation of women-led development in local government planning.

Migration: Migration leaves gaps in active women's organisation membership. Women moving from rural areas to cities or abroad often thin out the active membership of women's groups. While studies on women's organisations rarely discuss women's migration, rural development studies in Nigeria examine how demographic changes affect project continuity and leadership.[46] In Ngor Okpala, the migration of key female leaders and the lack of younger women members due to education or employment elsewhere make it difficult to rotate leadership, transfer institutional memory across generations, and sustain projects during the August Meeting.

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[45] B. Madunagu. "The Nigerian Feminist Movement: Lessons from Women in Nigeria, WIN." *Review of African Political Economy*, 2008, p.201

[46] O. Afolabi, "Rural-Urban Migration and Its Socio-Economic Impact on Community Development Projects in Nigeria." *International Institute of Academic Research and Development (IIARD) Journals,* 2019, p. 90.

Lack of institutionalised platforms: Although women's development organisations connected to local government will aid development, no regulation or platform institutionalises these women's development groups within the local government structure. Joseph Ikechukwu Uduji and Elda Nduka Okolo-Obasi mention that women's collaborative groups formed under the Nigeria for Women Project (NFWP) should be the "bedrock of public policy" for governmental incorporation to support social cohesion in women's entrepreneurship development.[47] However, they typically lack formal recognition or institutional connections. Thus, without formal incorporation into governmental or non-governmental structures, women's groups in Ngor Okpala risk fragmentation, project interruptions, and exclusion from formal development.

Together, these issues show that women's development meetings, such as the August meeting, can improve their communities but are hindered by political, financial, and institutional limitations. To overcome these limitations, it is important to increase women-specific grants to strengthen financial channels, establish partnerships with governmental and non-governmental platforms, improve documentation and monitoring, and support member retention by countering migration. This will make women's groups more sustainable and institutionalised as development agents.

Conclusion

This paper encourages policy awareness and advocacy for intervention through structured support. It introduces the idea that the August meeting (the August Women's Committee) should be regarded as a novel intervention going forward when discussing grassroots women-led development initiatives in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area. Between 2019 and 2024, the August meeting spearheaded various women-led, multidimensional development projects, including women's empowerment/livelihood support, village roads and common infrastructure, education scholarships, health initiatives, environmental sanitation practices, community support, cohesion, and bringing women out to support elective positions. August meetings have allowed women to support themselves, each other, and their community while increasing their agency through political means.

[47] J. I. Uduji and Eunice N. Okolo-Obasi. *Nigeria for Women Project (NFWP) and Social Cohesion in Rural Livelihoods.* Working Papers of The Association for Promoting Women in Research and Development in Africa (ASPROWORDA), no. 24/018, 2024. p 240

The women of Ngor Okpala proved that when women are allowed to mobilise, they can be instrumental in sustainably developing their community through August Meetings. Beyond adding to the discussion on women's contributions to sustainable grassroots development, this study can help organisations and policymakers target women as change agents. Organisations can support women as leaders and decision-makers in their communities instead of passing them over for male candidates and giving funds directly to households. People who understand communities' needs are often involved at the grassroots level, and organic development happens every day, even if it is not well documented. The August Meeting: Local solutions like those implemented by Ngor Okpala community women showed how organisations can build on existing bottom-up initiatives. Women who came together monthly to contribute to a communal fund provided sustainable development projects that lifted their community's standard of living. Through their organisation, they paved roads, donated scholarships, supported locals in need, and improved sanitation and environmental practices. They have also begun bringing women out to run for political office and lead their communities.

Despite the communities' success in organising, mobilising local resources and building these organisations from the ground up, many projects faced sustainability issues. Project continuity, maintenance of established projects, and replication were inconsistent for several reasons. This is because most committee organisations rely on single-day fundraising or collection efforts. Some committees were also politicised, had too little collaboration with formal organisations, did not track or document activities, or lacked structures that could have supported continuity if the lead organisers were no longer available. Committee-based donations and volunteerism are unsustainable models for rural community development. However, with training, partnerships, and support from NGOs, development organisations, and for-profit organisations, these groups could achieve widespread impact and drastically improve community livelihoods.

Projects can be improved to allow these women-led groups to continue their work by providing consistent, year-round funding. Organisations can do this by creating structures to allow for continuity even when leadership changes. Here are some ways organisations can help support year-round local women's groups. Community August Meetings should consider: The August Meeting is a women-organised tradition that helps determine the social development and empowerment projects identified and implemented in communities across Ngor Okpala LGA. The August Meeting exists in almost every village, and during my research, women came

together to raise and contribute millions of Naira to provide villages with social amenities and empower the less privileged in their respective communities. While the initiative has seen success, if these August Meeting institutions hope to continue developing projects that can stand for years after they start, they will have to improve how they manage committees and handle funds.

This study contributes to academia and practice in several ways: First, it expands the literature on women's grassroots organisations. In particular, it highlights women's informal self-help groups in Southeast Nigeria, which academics have largely overlooked. Secondly, it bridges three schools of thought: grassroots development, women's empowerment and agency, and community-driven development (CDD) by discussing women-led grassroots development from these three perspectives. Finally, this study expands existing knowledge on how socio-cultural norms and practices can affect community development. NGOs, policymakers, and local governments can use this study to better support women-led groups and community committees as vehicles for grassroots development. By providing a case study of the successes and shortfalls of a societally implemented women-led initiative, local governments can use this information as proof of concept to help them better achieve SDGs at a community level.

Specifically, these findings can help to improve education, health, and community-led infrastructure and increase community participation. With these recommendations, August Meeting groups can improve their current systems and, hopefully, see more positive long-term development in their communities. Governments and LCDAs should recognise women's self-help groups. Creating matching or grant funds for these groups can help organisations maintain projects they have started. Also, provide training to the selected women's group to manage funds. Do not rely solely on democracy; let women decide who can best manage funds through your basic required organisations. Hold workshops to teach groups how to manage funds, be accountable, and organise effective projects.

Partnerships with NGOs will help provide funding, while advocacy will help open more channels for NGOs to provide training workshops. Exposure can also help women lead and help other women leaders. Resources should be directed toward helping women create co-ops that meet every month, not just in August. Creating a system for taking organisational minutes, tracking budget contributions, and circulating general meeting documents can improve transparency, let others learn from your group, and build organisational capacity.

Women's Migration is a big word in many villages, so there should be ways to allow members who may leave for their place of work to contribute either by sharing knowledge when they return to visit or by allowing them to participate and contribute funds during these workshops. Committee members should keep full, transparent records of August Meeting funds. Please consider keeping books on an accrual basis and provide your group with an audited statement at the end of every year when you meet. August Meeting groups should partner with or be recognised by the Ngor Okpala LGA. The local government can set up a liaison office to collaborate with women on August projects. The LGA can provide technical assistance, help budget for women's projects, and celebrate them with certifications and maybe grants.

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