

Extending the Frontiers of the Age-long Powers of Women in  
Southeast Nigeria for Grassroot Development

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## **Abstract**

Women in Southeast Nigeria wield enormous power by virtue of their positions as daughters of the lineage (*umuada* or *umuokpu*). Their exercise of power often promoted traditional harmful practices to the detriment to grassroots development. This paper investigated the ways the *umuada* still wield power and has evolved innovative strategies that could extend the frontiers of their age-long power beyond traditional roles, into economic, political and health spheres. The population was made up married women who are active members of *umuada* in Southeast Nigeria. A sample of 275 women was studied. Questionnaire and focus group discussion were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The findings include various ways through which *umuada* still exercise their power in selected socio-cultural activities, namely in funerals, widowhood rites, traditional marriage ceremonies and conflict resolution. Other findings are the ways through which the women could extend the frontiers of their power into the economic, health and political spheres. These include, among others, the modification of widowhood rites mobilization for kindred – based enterprises, stopping harmful traditional practices. The problems that could militate against such extension of power and conditions/factors necessary for enhancing the extension of power were also identified.

## **Introduction**

Women in Africa play dominant role in the family. The family in turn affects the status of the women. The family dictates most of the norms that affect the women (Kuenyehia 2003). If the family accords the proper respect and dignity to women, society will do the same and women will be empowered to contribute their utmost to the development of the society at various levels. The prevalent family type in Southeast Nigeria (among the Igbos) is the extended family, which characterized by extensive kinship network of reciprocal social and economic obligation (Dow and Werner 1983). Among the Igbos, ties of kinship are strongly sustained as the dominant concern of every day life in the extended family structure and each member is his/her kin's keeper. Consequently, there emerges a system of vital mutual socially constituted, shared and transmitted cultural support system among members of the extended family group (Nett 1981). This is the extended family system (EFS).

The EFS exercises some controlling authority over its members, commands their loyalty and demands strict adherence to the norms and practices of mutual aid. Every member of the EFS has a status, rights and obligation, and enjoys the sense of security, which comes from these (Dow and Werner 1983). Masha and Hunge (1988) referred to the system as "Nigeria's own type of social insurance for old age and welfare of members of the extended family" (p.9). In Southeast of Nigeria, there are patrilineal and matrilineal communities, but the EFS remains a dominant feature in both (Anyakoha 1991).

Various forces and norms combine in the engineering and sustainability of the EFS in Southeast Nigeria. The two most dominant and potent of these forces are the kindred men (*umunna*) and daughters of the lineage (*umuada* or *umuokpu*). These are people whose genealogical relationship can be traced to a common ancestry. While the *umunna* (men)

constitute the strongest and most effective means of managing issues, including law and order in the kindred, *umuada* or *umuokpu* is the strongest women group vested with the age-long power of perpetuating the EFS norms including various forms of traditional practices.

By virtue of their position as daughters of the lineage, the *umuada* wield enormous power, recognition and respect from all members of a given kindred, including *umunna* and wives of the lineage (*inyomdi* or *ndi-nwunye-di*). In any Igbo community, “the powers of *umuada* are enormous and they are even very much feared by men of their kindred (*umunna*), especially in matters affecting deaths, burial rites, marriage and settling the conflicts existing among their men... they constitute essential instrument of an organised system of government in Igbo land” (Ogbukagu 1997, p. 61). The *umuada* are empowered to execute and perpetuate the traditional practices and norms which are sometimes harmful, hindering rather than enhancing development at the grassroot level. The exercise of their power is often manifested in their roles or activities during funerals, widowhood rites, traditional marriage ceremonies, conflict resolution and other kindred activities. In the process of wielding their age-long powers the *umuada* often harass, intimidate, punish and sanction people, including imposition of levies and making of threatening demands on members of the kindred. Their activities border mostly on traditional EFS practices, some of which are harmful, hindering rather than promoting development at grassroot level. Notable among their activities are the agonizing widowhood rites by which widows are often subjected to various obnoxious treatments (Okoye 1995; Azikiwe 1994; Nzei *et al.* 1990).

The problem however, is that the grassroot level at which the *umuada* have wielded, and are still wielding their age-long power, though rural, is fast changing and is being threatened by various challenges including, poverty, HIV/AIDS, economic and political crises, globalisation, etc (Ebisike 2004). As society becomes more complex and new problems

arise, the *umuada* as a powerful institution at the grassroots level must necessarily become involved in problem solving at this level. They need to extend their age-long powers beyond the traditional practices into the economic, health and political spheres for the purpose of promoting development. They need to modify their strategies, drop some old ones and where possible adopt new ones, so that they could remain relevant in grassroots communities which are presently being challenged in various ways.

The question that necessarily arises is: what innovative strategies could be adopted to extend the frontiers of the age-long powers of *umuada* beyond their traditional roles into economic, health and political spheres for grassroots development? Various studies on *umuada* have focused on their traditional roles, notably on the widowhood rites wherein they are the sole perpetuators (Okoye 1995, Ahonsi 1997). No studies have however focused on ways of extending the frontier of the age-long power of *umuada* into the economic, health and political spheres for grassroots development.

### **Objectives of the study**

The general objective of the study was to investigate the ways the *umuada* in Southeast Nigeria still wield their power in socio-cultural spheres and evolve innovative strategies that could extend the frontiers of their age-long power beyond traditional roles into economic, political and health spheres for grassroots development.

Specifically, the study determined:

1. the specific ways through which the *umuada* in southeast still exercise their age-long power in selected socio-cultural issues/activities (funerals, widowhood rites, traditional marriage and conflict resolution).

2. the innovative ways through which the *umuada* could extend their age-long powers into economic, health and political spheres for the promotion of grassroots development.
3. the problems that could hinder the *umuada's* extension of their power into the economic, health and political spheres for grassroots development.
4. conditions/factors (support) that are necessary in order to promote the extension of the *umuada's* powers into the economic, health and political spheres for development at the grassroots level.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. In what ways do the *umuada* in Southeast Nigeria still exercise their age-long powers in selected socio-cultural issues/activities (funerals, widowhood rites, traditional marriage and conflict resolution)?
2. What are the innovative ways through which *umuada* could extend their age-long powers into economic, health and political spheres for the promotion of grassroots development?
3. What are the problems that could hinder the *umuada's* extension of their power into the economic, health and political spheres?
4. What conditions/factors (support) are necessary in order to promote the extension *umuada's* power into the economic, health and political spheres for development at the grassroots level?

## Scope of the study

1. The *umuada*'s exercise of power was measured by actions they carry out as their roles in each of the four selected socio-cultural activities (funerals widowhood rites, traditional marriage and conflict resolution).
2. The innovative ways through which the women could extend their age-long power into economic, political and health spheres were measured by what the women should do in order to:
  - i. increase income generation in their kindreds
  - ii. promote health in the kindred.
  - iii. enhance their participation and that of the kindred members in politics
3. The study focused only on the patrilineal areas of southeast Nigeria, that is, among the Igbos.

## Methodology

**Area of the study:** The area of the study was the patrilineal communities of southeast of Nigeria. This area is made of the Igbos. There are diversities of family patterns in the area but the basics of extended family system and the *umuada* institution remain fairly the same. The area is made up of Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia States of Nigeria. The patrilineal areas were the focus of the study.

**Population of the study:** The population was made up married women who are active members of the *umuada* institution in their kindreds. The age of the women ranged from 25 – 60 years.

**Sample of the study:** A purposive sample of 255 women who came to University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) for sandwich B.Ed holiday programme in 2003 was selected for the study.

The sample was a representative of the *umuada* in the area of the study. The five states in

Southeast Nigeria are part of the catchment areas of University of Nigeria Nsukka. Additional 20 women were also selected from two communities (Nsukka and Arondizuogu, in Enugu and Imo States respectively), for focus group discussion. The sample was thus made up of a total of 275 women.

**Data collection instrument:** Quantitative and qualitative data were utilized for the study.

Data collection instruments included structured questionnaire and focus group discussion (FGD) guide. These instruments were based on the objectives and research questions of the study. Draft instruments were developed, validated and pilot-tested before use for data collection.

**Data collection and analysis techniques:** A total of 255 copies of questionnaire were distributed by hand to the respondents. Only 240 copies were properly completed and retrieved, representing 94.12 percent return. Two FGD sessions, each of 10 discussants, were carried out in two locations, (Nsukka and Arondizuogu).

The frequencies and percentages of each for each of the questionnaire items were calculated. The data from the FGD were also summarized.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Based on the research questions the following findings were made:

A: **The specific ways through which *umuada* still exercise their age-long powers in selected socio-cultural issues/activities**

The findings on Research question #1, namely the ways the women still exercise their age-long powers are summarized in tables 1,2,3 and 4, representing their exercise of power in

- (i) funerals,
- (ii) widowhood rites,
- (iii) traditional marriage and

- (iv) conflict resolution, respectively.

FGD findings are also presented.

(i) **The *umuada*'s exercise of power in funeral**

**Table 1**  
**Responses (%) on the ways *Umuada* still exercise power in funerals**

<b>Exercise of power in funeral</b>		<b>Responses</b>	
		<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
The <i>umuada</i>			
1.	must be informed formally of any death/bereavement in the kindred.	125	(89.58)
2.	must be consulted in fixing burial dates and other funeral plans in the kindred.	220	(91.67)
3.	must attend and participate in all funerals in the kindred.	225	(93.75)
4.	play key role in the funeral of their "brothers" ( <i>umunna</i> ).	231	(96.25)
5.	Sit around the corpse of a brother at night wake-keeping or prior to interment.	198	(82.50)
6.	demand and receive their entitlements/mandatory gifts from bereaved family (includes assorted food, money, drinks, etc).	236	(98.33)
7.	often reject any entitlements /gifts that are below their standard (norms).	236	(98.33)
8.	can abandon a funeral to the rot of the bereaved family when entitlements/standards are not met.	227	(94.58)
9.	sanction kindred members who do not comply to the funeral norms of <i>umuada</i> 's demands.	234	(97.50)
10.	deliberate on conflicts arising from any given funeral in the kindred.	219	(91.25)
11.	spend extra days in the house of the bereaved after burial.	181	(75.42)

*N* = 240

Table 1 shows 11 ways through which the *umuada* still exercise their power in funeral activities in their kindreds. Each of the 11 ways obtained scores ranging from 98.33 – 75.42 percent. The findings are consistent with those from the FGD. Other findings from the FGD however include:

- Burial of a son of the lineage (a member of *umunna*) will not take place unless the *umuada* is properly represented.
- During the final rites, prior to closing the casket of a "brother", the head of *umuada* and/or a blood sister of deceased man is expected to make some pronouncements.

A discussant insisted that the *umuada* often “maintain a domineering presence in the funeral of a member of the *umunna*, and their absence signifies discord”. These findings are consistent with literature (Ogbukagu 1998).

(ii): ***Umuada’s exercise of power in widowhood rites***

**Table 2**  
**Responses (%) on the ways *Umuada* still exercise power in widowhood rites**

<b>Ways <i>umuada</i>/exercise of power in widowhood rites</b>		<b>Responses</b>	
<i>The umuada</i>		<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
1.	may suspect and/or accuse widow of death of husband.	235	(97.92)
2.	deface widow through shaving of hair, eyebrow, pubic hair, etc.	221	(92.08)
3.	keep widow in seclusion for specified periods.	229	(95.42)
4.	force widow to sit on the floor (dethronement).	187	(77.92)
5.	take widow through purification rites	230	(95.83)
6.	take widow through routine crying rites	227	(94.58)
7.	make various demands on the widow, e.g. money, food, drinks, kola nuts, etc.	234	(97.50)
8.	could punish widow for any suspicion of maltreatment she might have meted to bereaved husband.	228	(95.00)
9.	enforce wearing of mourning clothes by widow.	233	(97.08)
10.	bar widow from public gatherings for specified periods.	218	(90.83)

*N* = 240

Table 2 reveals a total of 10 activities which the *umuada* still perform in the process of widowhood rites. These findings are consistent with those from the PGD. The findings are also consistent with those of previous studies (Azikwe, 1994, Okoye 1995, Ahonsi 1997).

The FGD results further revealed:

- Restrictions on the feeding, bathing, resting and sleeping patterns of the widow.
- In cases of extreme suspicion that a widow was reasonable for the death of her husband, she may be forced to drink the water used for washing the corpse of the dead husband as a proof of her innocence.
- It was and still is an abomination for a widow to die during the morning period.
- The period of restriction for the widow has reduced in many places from one year to six months, as a result of pressure from religious groups.

The discussants in the two FGDs were of the conscious opinion that the *umuada's* activities during widowhood rites often result in humiliation for the widow.

(iii): ***Umuada* exercise of power in traditional marriage**

**Table 3**  
**Responses on the ways *Umuada* still exercise Power in Traditional Marriage**

<b>Exercise of power in Traditional Marriage</b>		<b>Responses</b>	
		<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
The <i>umuada</i>			
1.	welcome would-be in-laws on arrival.	233	(97.08)
2.	present <i>umuada's</i> special kola-nuts to in-laws.	230	(95.83)
3.	demand and receive special <i>umuada's</i> entitlements/gifts from would be in-laws.	235	(97.92)
4.	reject entitlement/gifts that are below their acceptable norms.	237	(98.75)
5.	withhold bride/halt ceremony when entitlement gifts are not acceptable to them.	210	(87.5)
6.	present bride with gifts.	238	(99.17)
7.	advise and bless new couple.	236	(98.33)

*N* = 240

Table 3 reveals seven activities through *umuada* exercise power during traditional marriage ceremonies. The findings are also consistent with those from the FGD. The FGD however further revealed that in the past, in some kindreds, the *umuada* or a special delegation of *umuada* escorted the bride to the husband's house.

Finding #3 in Table 3: namely, “*umuada* demand and receive special entitlements/gifts...”, is consistent with related findings in Tables 1 (#6) and 2 (#7). These findings indicate that in the process of wielding their age-long power, the *umuada* make demands on the members of the kindred in various ways.

The discussants in the FGDs contended the bride, in any traditional marriage ceremony, is a daughter of the lineage (*nwa-ada* or *nwa-opu*), thus the *umuada* as the daughters of the lineage (the bride's sisters) must:

- be visibly present at any traditional marriage ceremony.
- play dominant role in the ceremony.
- demand their entitlements/gifts from the would-be bridegroom.

The discussants were also of the view that insistence on demanding and receiving entitlements/gifts at traditional marriage ceremonies by *umuada* is a way of demonstrating the importance of the *umuada* institution in the lineage. These findings are consistent with available reports (Ogbukagu 1997; Amadiume, 1989).

(iv): ***Umuada's exercise of power in conflict resolution***

**Table 4**  
**Responses on the Ways *Umuada* Still Exercise Power in Conflict Resolution**

Exercise of power in Conflict Resolution	Responses	
	F	%
The <i>umuada</i>		
1. promote dialogue among <i>umunna</i> (men of the kindred).	236	(98.33)
2. judge and settle disputes		
(i) between couples.	211	(87.92)
(ii) among co-wives.	173	(72.08)
(iii) among <i>umunna</i> .	221	(92.08)
3. judge and settle land disputes in the kindred.	207	(86.25)
4. discipline offending kindred members through fines and sanctions.	231	(96.25)
5. reprimand a brother (a member of <i>umunna</i> ) who is hostile to his wife without cause.	154	(64.17)
6. effect the separation of misbehaving wife from husband (their brother).	148	(61.67)
<i>N</i> = 240		

Table 4 shows a total of six ways through which *umuada* exercise their power in conflict resolution in their kindred. The findings in Table 4 are consistent with those from the FGD. The FGD however, further revealed that:

- i. the *umuada* can wield into very serious conflicts in a kindred because the *umunna* hold them at very high esteem.
- ii. *umuada* promote kindred solidarity and peace.

A discussant stressed that, “the *umunna* actually fear the *umuada* because they are no respecter of persons.” This finding is consistent with the reports by Ogbukagu (1997).

**B. Innovative ways of extending the frontiers of the age-long power of *umuada* into the economic, health and political spheres for grassroot development**

Findings on Research question #2 are presented in Tables 5,6 and 7, representing possible innovative ways of extending the frontiers of the age-long powers of *umuada* into the economic, health and political spheres, respectively.

**(i) Economic Spheres**

**Table 5  
Responses on Innovative Ways Through Which *Umuada* can Extend Their Power to Economic Spheres**

Possible ways of extending power to economic spheres	Responses	
	F	%
<i>Umuada</i> should		
1. modify widowhood rites.	230	(95.83)
2. engage in income generating enterprises as a group.	228	(95.00)
3. encouraging widows to engage in income generating enterprises.	210	(87.50)
4. mobilize <i>umunna</i> for kindred based enterprises.	215	(89.58)
5. engage in thrift savings.	233	(97.08)
6. promote human capital development through promotion of education of the youth in the kindred.	221	(92.08)
7. invest the money they collect during kindred based ceremonies on viable ventures.	229	(95.42)

*N* = 240

Table 5 shows a total of seven possible ways through which the women can extend their age-long powers into economic spheres. These findings are also consistent with those of the FGD. However, an additional notable finding from FGD is:

- *umuada* should train their girl children so as to break the vicious circle of ignorance and poverty among women in the grassroot communities.

Discussants agreed that, it is only an educated group of *umuada* who can operate in the economic spheres and refine the *umuada* institution for grassroot development.

The finding on modification of widowhood rites, could be a confirmation that *umuada* are the sole perpetrators of the widowhood rites. It is also only the group that could possibly

modify the practices. This finding is consistent with available reports (Okoye 1995 and Ahonsi 1999). The modification of the rites would not only improve the health of the widows but their period of confirmed could be shortened to enable the widows engage in income generating activities.

Four out of seven the findings in Table 5 (#2,3,4,5 & 7) deal directly with possible ways of increasing income generation in the kindred. Finding #6 focuses on education of the youths which is vital for equipping the youth for employment and self-reliance.

**(ii) Health Spheres**

**Table 6**  
**Responses on Innovative Ways Through Which *Umuada* Can Extend Their Power to Health Spheres**

Possible ways of extending power of <i>Umuada</i> to Health Spheres	Responses	
	F	%
<i>Umuada</i> should		
1. modify the widowhood practices.	235	(97.92)
2. promote welfare and health of the widows.	233	(97.08)
3. stop harmful traditional practices.	228	(95.00)
4. sensitize kindred members on issues relating to HIV/AIDS.	230	(95.83)
5. discourage the involvement by <i>umunna</i> in heterosexual relationships outside matrimony.	209	(87.08)

*N* = 240

Table 6 shows a total of five possible innovative ways through which *umuada* can extend their age-long power to the health spheres. The findings are consistent with those from the FGD. Most of the findings focus on what the *umuada* should do to traditional practices in order to promote health. Two findings focus on the widows. A discussant in one of the FGD sessions pointed out that, “It is an abomination for a widow to die in the process of the widowhood rites, yet, the rites are enforced in spite of the health condition of a widow”. FGD also revealed that in the course of widowhood, “the widow is restricted with regard to feeding, rest/sleep, exercises, and these often affect health”. This finding is consistent with available

reports (Anyakoha 2003). Thus, it follows that the modification of the widowhood practices would improve the health and welfare of the widows. The finding on widowhood rites is consistent with finding #1 in Table 5 on ways of extending the *umuada*'s powers to the economic spheres.

The finding could be indicative of the fact that the promotion of the health of the widows could enhance their income generation capability. This can only be made possible through positive modification of widowhood rites. The finding on harmful traditional practices is important, since they are often injurious to health. These practices include, among others, various forms of discrimination against the girl-child female genital mutilation (Nzei *et al* 1998). Since *umuada* are influential, they can move for modification of the traditional practices which hinder rather than promote health. FGD results also confirmed that, "Some traditions are permissive with regard to extra-marital relationship by men (*umunna*), with the backing of *umuada*". A discussant even reported of a case where a man contracted HIV/AIDS from his concubine and infected his wife, leaving behind five children. This type of situation probably explains the finding #4 in Table 6 on sensitizing kindred members on issues relating to HIV/AIDS. It could also mean that HIV/AIDS awareness level is improving among the respondents.

**(iii) Political Spheres**

**Table 7**  
**Responses on Innovative Ways Through Which *Umuada* can Extend Their Power to Political Spheres**

<b>Possible ways of extending power to political spheres</b>		<b>Responses</b>	
		<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
The <i>umuada</i> should			
1.	register for voting.	218	(90.83)
2.	encourage members of <i>umunna</i> to register for and participate voting.	200	(83.33)
3.	encourage wives of the lineage register for and participate in voting.	201	(83.75)
4.	reject money from politicians.	223	(92.92)

*N* = 240

Table 7 reveals four possible ways the *umuada* can extend their age-long power to political spheres. The number of findings, (only four ways), could be explained by the low political awareness of the respondents since available reports indicate low political awareness and participation of women in politics in Nigeria (Oguonu, 2004).

The FGD analysis however indicates that *umuada* are “generally politicians”. By this however, discussants were referring to kindred intrigues by which the *umuada* enhance and perpetual their position of authority in the kindred. FGD participants were of the consensus opinion that it is possible for the *umuada* to extend their power to political sphere, if they are properly informed/enlighten.

**C. Problems that could hinder the umuada’s extension of their powers in the economics health and political spheres for grassroot development**

The findings on Research question #3, namely the problems which could hinder the umuada’s extension of their powers to economic, health and political spheres are summarized in Table 8.

**Table 8**

**Responses on Problems that Could Hinder the *Umuada’s* Extension of their Power to Economic, Health and Political Spheres**

<b>Problems that could hinder the extension of umuada’s extension of their power</b>		<b>Responses</b>	
		<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
1.	Gender issues/traditional and cultural factors	205	(85.42)
2.	Illiteracy	240	(100.0)
3.	Poverty	240	(100.0)
4.	Inadequate political orientation	231	96.25)
5.	<i>Umuada’s</i> contentment with status quo/their “powerful” privileged position.	224	(93.33)
6.	Power of <i>umuada</i> not recognised beyond the traditional practices.	230	(95.83)
7.	Activities (violence) of political party leaders/politicians	222	(92.50)

*N* = 240

Table 8 shows a total of seven problems which could hinder the *umuada* from extending their age-long power into economic, health and political spheres. The findings from the FGD are consistent with those seven in the Table. The FGD findings however, further include:

- *umuada*'s unawareness of opportunities open to them to wield power in economic, health and political spheres.
- *umuada*'s contentment with their present socio-cultural roles/power.
- lack of interest in state politics by *umuada*.
- *umuada*'s lack of awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the democratic process.
- perception of state politics as men's business by *umuada*.
- no right to inherit property from father for *umuada*.

A discussant remarked, "*umuada* are expected to wield power but cannot inherit property from their fathers or own land in their community".

The findings in Table 8 are consistent with reports on factors militating against women's involvement in development in Nigeria (Okeke 1995, National Planning Commission (NPC)/UNICEF 2001). Finding #1 in Table 8 deals with gender issues/traditional and cultural factors. These include, various forms of gender discrimination, violence against women, gender biased inheritance laws and practices, low status of women. These issues obtain, in spite of the position of *umuada*. All these hinder rather than promote women's involvement in development (NPC/UNICEF 2001).

**D. Conditions/Factors (support) necessary to promote the *umuada*'s extension of their powers into the economic, health and political spheres from grassroot development.**

The findings on Research question #4, namely the conditions/factors (support) necessary to promote the extension of frontiers of powers age-long of *umuada* into the economic, health and political spheres are summarized in Table 9.

**Table 9**  
**Responses on Strategies that Could Promote the Extension of the Powers of *Umuada* into Economic, Health and Political Spheres**

Conditions/factors that could promote extension of power	Responses	
	F	%
1. education of <i>umuada</i>	237	(98.75)
2. enhancing the status of women.	230	(95.83)
3. political re-orientation/voter education for <i>umuada</i> .	229	(95.42)
4. alleviation/eradication of poverty.	240	(100.0)
5. women/girls should have right to inherit property from husbands/fathers.	238	(99.17)
6. promoting education of the girl-child.	235	(97.92)
7. improving/providing social amenities in the rural areas.	240	(100.0)

*N* = 240

Table 9 shows a total of seven strategies that could promote the extension of the power of *umuada* into the economic, health and political spheres. The findings are consistent with those from the FGD. The discussants in FGD sessions also agreed that the *umuada* would need the support of the following in order to succeed:

- their husbands
- the *umunna* (the men of the lineage who are also their brothers)
- wives of the lineage (*ndi nwunye di*)
- the government.

The findings on the strategies are also consistent with different views on ways of empowering women for development (Uzumah 2001, Oguonu 2004). Female education has been recognized as the key to development (Nzei *et. al.* 1998). Education could empower the *umuada*, by enhancing their literacy, equipping them with saleable skills. These could in turn enhance their status and help them extend their power to economic, health and political

spheres. The findings are also consistent with the stipulations of the *National Policy on Women in Nigeria* (Federal Republic of Nigerian 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The study has revealed that *umuada* still wield their age-long power during funerals, in widowhood rites, traditional marriage ceremonies and conflict resolution in their kindred. It has also shown that the women's age-long power can be extended beyond the socio-cultural traditional practices into the economic, health and political spheres for development at the grassroots level. However, the study has further indicated that there are possible factors which could hinder the women's extension of their into the new spheres. It was also found that there are conditions/factors which could be applied to remove the obstacles and facilitate (providing support for) the extension of the frontiers of the women's age-long power into the economic, health and political spheres.

Since *umuada* is a vital and powerful institution in perpetuating the traditional norms and practices of the EFS, and could possibly extended their powers to the economic, health and political spheres, the institution should be empower for such extension of power for development at grassroots. This crucial as the grassroots faces emerging societal challenges. The possible obstacles to the extension of powers as identified by this study need to be removed. The conditions/factors (support) necessary to promote *umuada's* extension of their powers, as identified by this study, would be useful in empowering the women. The findings of this study have implications for, scholars, researchers, policy makers, NHOs and other bodies interested in women' participation in development, welfare of the family and grassroots development.

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