

## Women in Community Development: The Contributions of Nnobi Women since 2009 -2022

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### Abstract

This study is a careful examination of the contributions of Nnobi women to community development. It tried to look at the various spheres of life that their contributions have been felt. By way of explanation, it delved into the political, economic and social dimensions of those contributions. The study employed historical methods predicated on qualitative and field research. The data used herein were generated from both primary and secondary sources. A cardinal primary source used was oral interviews, which were based on random selection of men and women of Nnobi community. The secondary sources utilized were mainly books and journal articles. A significant revelation of this inquiry reveals that Nnobi women actively engage in mentoring apprentices within their respective fields, thereby fortifying the traditional Igbo apprenticeship framework. Moreover, this study illuminates the distinct contributions of Nnobi women and underscores the necessity for governmental support and intervention. Furthermore, this research serves as a valuable addition to the existing literature on apprenticeship systems and gender studies.

**Keywords:** Nnobi, community development, gender, Igbo apprenticeship system

### Introduction

Presently, the world strives or aims to enhance social justice by building inclusive societies. Significant efforts have been made over the years [and unilaterally, bilaterally and multilaterally] to create a society where age, gender, ethnicity, race, etc. are respected. For example, it has been identified that the United Nation's (U.N) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UN Human Settlements

Programme (UN-HABITAT) and the World Bank are at the forefront of the inclusive society goal.<sup>1</sup>

In a bid to contribute to the world's drive towards inclusivity, scholars of gender studies have tried to showcase the efforts, or rather the contributions, of women to community and national development. In a welcome attempt to show how crucial women have become in national development, especially in Nigeria, Ogunjemilua and Familugba posit that women are "currency with which political and economic alliances are cemented". Their study went on to reveal that women "control most of the non-monetary economy (subsistence, agriculture, bearing children, domestic labour, etc.) and play an important role in the monetary (training, wage, labour, employment, etc.) of the nation."<sup>2</sup> Sharing similar thoughts, Ogbodo made it clear that the roles of women cannot be alienated from national development discourse in Nigeria. She claimed that some remarkable achievements in Nigerian history and in contemporary times were made by women and some of those women are Queen Bakwa Turuku (founder of the modern city of Zaria), Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin Kingdom, Nwanerum who led the Aba Women Riot of 1929 against unfair taxation of the colonial government, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iwala (Director General of World Trade Organisation (WTO), Prof. Dora Akunyili (former Managing Director of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili (convener of the #Bring Back Our Girls campaign), and a host of others.<sup>3</sup>

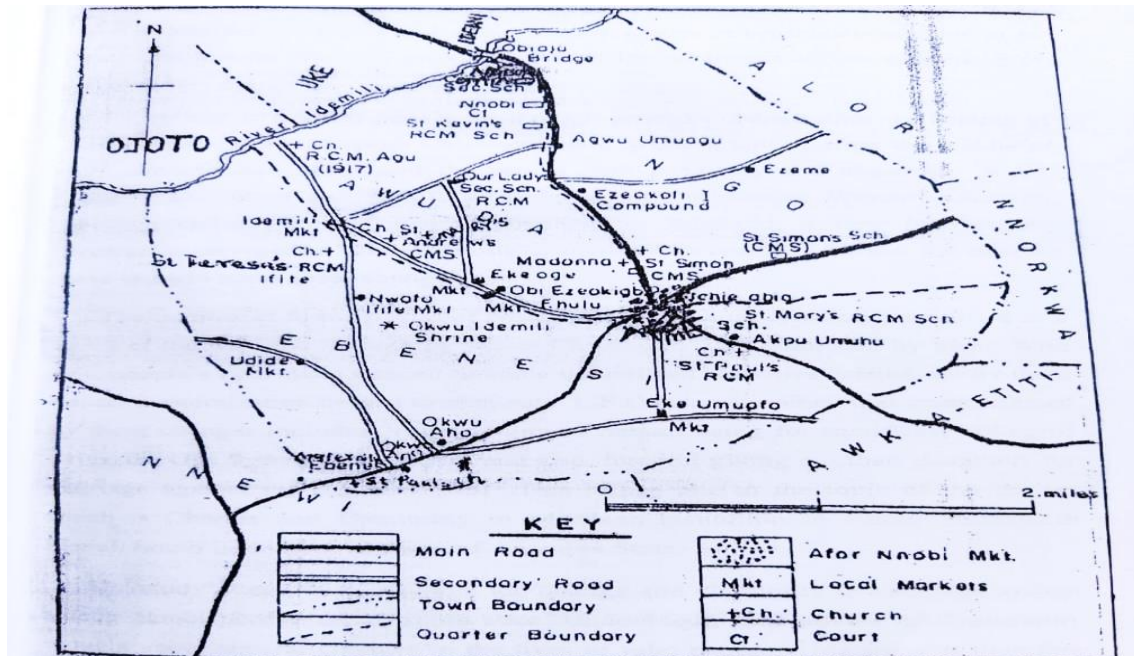
Having tried to establish the generic and growing importance of women in national development as exemplified in the few studies shown above, it becomes necessary for an academic searchlight to be turned at the contributions of Nnobi women in Anambra State to the development of their community. This is so to enable specificity and indigenization of the study area.

### The Geography of Nnobi

A study of this sort would appear incomplete without providing the readers with, at least, a glimpse of the geography of Nnobi community. With an estimated area of 25km<sup>2</sup>, Nnobi is one of the towns in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra state in Nigeria. It is located at 30km<sup>2</sup> Southeast of Onitsha and on the elevation of about 825m above the sea level. Nnobi, which has network of village pathways and the roads, is surrounded by Nwokwa in the East, Nnewi to the West, Ideani and Uke to the North, Alor to the North-East, Ojoto

to the North-West and Awka-Etiti to the South. Nnobi town lies at longitude 6<sup>0</sup>57<sup>1</sup>E and latitude 6<sup>0</sup>03<sup>1</sup>N. The climatic condition of the town is not undervalued. The town has two major seasons – the rainy and dry seasons. The annual mean temperature of 27<sup>0</sup>c shows that the temperature is fairly high. The annual rain falls from 15<sup>7</sup>0mm to 20mm. This entails a heavy amount of rainfall and it last from April to October while the dry season sets in November and ends in March. This marks the advent of the dry season with a very cold Northeast wind blowing through the Sahara Desert from the North and it is the period that is known as Harmattan.<sup>4</sup>

#### A Map of Nnobi



(Source: Idemili South Local Government Headquarters Library, Ojoto, February 26, 2024)

From available records, the estimated population of Nnobi as of 2015 is 521,000.<sup>5</sup> In the aspect of land distribution, EbenesiNnobi village has the lion share. She comprises of Umuona, Ifite, Amadunu, Umuhu, Ubaha, Umu-Ifeagu and Umuafor. The second village Ngo comprises of Ezi-Agbom, Ndam and Umuagu and it is in this village that the popular Ngbor Nnobi is situated. The third village Awuda comprises of Eziehur, Umuobi, Umudiokala, Umu-hai, Umu-ubah, Umu-ezeneke, Umu-gamuma, Umu-diya, Umu-ezike, Umu-ulaoma, Umu-ezeaba, Umu-ocha and Umannach. Again, to the North and North-West is the Idemili River which rose from Ezulake in Agulu to the North-East and flows into the West emptying into the River Niger, a kilometre south of the Niger Bridge at Onitsha.<sup>6</sup>

#### Contributions of Women to Nnobi Development

The contributions of women to Nnobi development will be looked at in this section from a tripartite perspective: political, economic and social.

- **Political Perspective**

Politics in Nnobi as run by the women is left solely in their hands until the matter becomes so cumbersome that the men folks have to be involved. The Women run their own politics or government which is mainly aimed at maintaining laws, order and discipline among the women in the town. At town level, it operates in the form of *Inyom-Nnobi*, the women wing of Nnobi Welfare Organisation (N.W.O). This body is also referred to as *Okwu-Inyom-Nnobi*. At clan and village levels, what is operational is *Inyom-di*, which is the lowest of level of women government in Nnobi. *InyomNnobi* is the highest body of government and the supreme assembly of women which is made up women elected from among Nnobi indigenes who are charged with the duty of overseeing the affairs of the womenfolk in Nnobi home and abroad. Members of *Inyom-Nnobi* are women of great virtues and integrity with amiable characters who have been chosen from the *Inyom-di* of the three villages that make up Nnobi: Ebenesi, Ngo and Awuda to represent their various villages at *Inyom-Nnobi*.<sup>7</sup> The reason why *Inyom-Nnobi* was formed is to create an avenue where Nnobi women from the three villages come together to dialogue on matters that concern the women, and also to share their opinion and proffer solutions to the challenges faced by the women in the town.

*Inyom-Nnobi* has contributed greatly to growth and development of Nnobi in numerous ways, including the maintenance of tranquillity, peace and unity among the women. They are able to achieve this by adhering strictly

to the provisions of their constitution. Even when Nnobi Welfare Organisation [Male wing] was in dispute, the women wing remained peaceful. More so, these women are in charge of giving out punishment to law breakers found guilty at the village level and in *Afor* market. The punishment given to law breakers by *Inyom-Nnobi*, or *Inyom-di* as the case may be, comes as it is stated in the constitution. When such offence committed is not found in the constitution, the *Inyom* executives will be responsible for deciding on the punishment appropriate for that particular default. Owing to this, women in Nnobi are meticulous in what they do in order not to attract punishment from *Inyom-Nnobi*, *Inyom-di* or *Umuada*.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the *Inyom-Nnobi* women have contributed greatly in the welfare of the community. This can be seen in the area of entertainment during important festivals in Nnobi. They are solely in charge of entertainment during festive periods in Nnobi especially during *Asha-Olu* and *Ofala-Igwe*. Though the committee is headed by the wife of the *Igwe* (traditional ruler), they are to ensure that everyone invited for the celebration is well fed and taken care of without any issue arising as it pertains to the feeding of both the invited dignities and the members of the community. Though complaint sometimes arises, they have equally been applauded severally for jobs well-done, which have proven them to be good mothers who always diligently take care of their children.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, *Inyom-Nnobi* stands firm in advocating for its members who may be experiencing any form of maltreatment, particularly from their spouses. The organization takes a strong stance against any form of abuse inflicted upon women. Such issues are promptly addressed, ensuring fairness by hearing from all parties involved. Cases of this nature are typically referred to the *Umunna* (Men kinship group) by *Inyom-Nnobi* for judgment, as women do not handle male kin-related matters. Subsequently, the accused individual is expected to make amends with his wife upon being found guilty by his *Umunna*. Failure to comply will result in *Inyom-Nnobi* intervening and persisting with the matter until justice is served accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the men of the town are fully aware of this women government and rarely interfered with it. In fact, they indirectly support it by keeping abreast of the operations and sometimes subtly influencing the appointment of the officials. But they do not generally and openly interfere with the operation of the system.<sup>11</sup> The system is a very effective form of the government and men respect it since this body, through its effectiveness, had contributed exceedingly to growth and development of Nnobi.

**Plate 1: Inyom-Nnobi Executives 2019-2022 headed by Mrs G.E Ugoigwe, President General**



(Source: Fieldwork by the Researcher, 6 July, 2022)

Another significant way that *Inyom-Nnobi* has contributed to the political development of Nnobi as a whole is through the introduction of an annual summit known as *Inyom-Nnobi* Summit. The legendary Igbo writer, Chinua Achebe once stressed the importance of meetings like this. He crafted his words on the importance of unity in this manner: “A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.”<sup>12</sup> The Summit was introduced in 2009 by Mrs. R.N. Ochiagha who hailed from Umuagu, Ngo village. In an interview with her on January 8, 2022, Mrs Ochiagha told the researcher that the summit came into existence as a result of the pressing need to raise substantial amount of money for capital projects in Nnobi. Another pillar upon which the summit was built or introduced was to unite Nnobi women both at home and in diaspora and to teach women the core values of the town. The summit stemmed from the annual summit held in the state capital, Awka, by Mrs. B.U. Obi, wife of the former governor of Anambra state, Mr. Peter Obi.<sup>13</sup>

At the start of each summit, a general prayer is said by Nnobi women for their land, the Igwe and for their husbands and families. Further into the summit, a consensus is reached on the projects the women are to embark upon the following year and then funds are raised for such projects. It is on record that the funds (about 7 million naira) used for the purchase of the nylon and tissue paper machines in Nnobi today was donated by High Chief Emeka Agbanari during this occasion and also the fund for the modern public toilet and bore-hole were also realised from the women summit. Hon. Barr. Chuka Ezenwune made it possible. Besides, records have it that funds for the maintenance of these infrastructural facilities in Nnobi such as the modern public toilet and bore-hole at Afor-Nnobi market were also raised at the summit. Equally important, the summit serves as an avenue for Nnobi women in diaspora to contribute to the development of their town. Those women first send their own monetary and cloth (wrappers) support to their respective wards. The wards in turn make a presentation of them at the summit, where it is sold to make money for the group.<sup>14</sup>

• **Economic Perspective**

In the economic sector in Nnobi, interviews from this study showed that women are active players in agriculture, manufacturing, fashion designing, arts and craft (e.g. bead making, broom making, and basketry), trade (local and long-distance trade) and photography. For purpose of this article, attention will be paid to a few of the areas listed above.

**Agriculture:** It plays a significant role in the economy of Nnobi people. The town’s agricultural practices are primarily based on small-scale farmers cultivating crops and rearing of livestock for their own consumption and local trade. Farmers in Nnobi engage in the cultivation of various crops such as yam, cassava, maize, cocoyam, plantain; vegetables such as okra, *utazi*, *uziza*, garden egg leaf, pumpkin and bitter leaf; and fruits such as oranges, pineapple, garden egg and watermelon in their various farms which is called *Mbubo* in their native language. These *Mbubos* are usually located very close to their homes apart from it there exist a place far from home known as Agu where crops are cultivated by the farmer who are opportune to have one. For example, Umuagu people have one, where indigenes from this village usually go to cultivate any crop of their choice. It is imperative to note that method of land acquisition for farming is based on inheritance; but for those who do not have land or enough land for farming, they can purchase if they have the money. Most times, those living outside the village [abroad] give out their lands to people who need them for cultivation; some lease them out for some time to these farmers. Interestingly, Nnobi farmers have invested in the cultivation of plantain and watermelon which appears to be lucrative and also yielding funds for the populace. These crops are grown both for food and income generation.<sup>15</sup>

Another important aspect of agriculture in Nnobi is Livestock rearing. This is very common in Nnobi as almost every home has animals like goats and sheep for rearing in their compound especially those residing in the town. Farmers here raise animals such as goats, sheep, pigs and poultry [chickens and turkeys] for meat and eggs. Livestock provides a source of protein and additional income for farmers. Fishing farming is also an interesting aspect of agriculture in Nnobi. The table below shows some female agriculturists in Nnobi, the field of agriculture they have interest in and their output.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1: Some notable Nnobi Women, their Agricultural Activities and their Output**

Individual	Activity	Location/Place of activity	Output
Mrs. I. Ojukwu	Cultivates yam, cassava and cocoyam	UmubaAwuda, Nnobi	Large-scale farming/production
Mrs. N. Ezebube	Cultivates cassava, yam and cocoyam	Umunebo, Ngo Nnobi	Large-scale farming/production
Mrs. UjunwaOgbuoji	Goat rearing	Her compound near High Tabernacle at Awuda, Nnobi	Large-scale pastoral farming
Mrs. Chika Okpala	Chicken farming	Her compound in Umuagu, Ngo Nnobi	300 birds (estimate)
Mrs. Ebele Ogida	Chicken farming	Her compound in Umuba, AwudaNnobi	200 birds (estimate)
Mrs. Eucharía Ezeonwa	Fish farming	Pond located near Awuda Town Hall in Awuda, Nnobi	Large-scale farming/production

Source: Researcher’s Compilation (Fieldwork, April 2023.)

Again, it is worthy to note that Nnobi is known for its palm oil production which is one of the major features of agriculture in this community. Palm trees are cultivated in large quantity in Nnobi, and it is found in almost every farmland (*mbubo*). These palm trees are allowed to grow and mature, when this process has taken place, they produce fruits which are processed to extract palm oil, a valuable commodity used for cooking and by various

industries. Before now in Nnobi, Palm-oil production/processing was usually carried out in small-scale processors using traditional built structure called *ikwe-akwu*. But today in Nnobi the presence of milling machines has made work easy as people can now produce oil in large-scale. It is a well known fact that women dominate in this oil selling business and are making large amount of money from it as people are known to come from both near and far to buy this product from Nnobi. The table below contains information about various palm-oil producing mills in Nnobi and the amount of oil they produce periodically.

**Table 2: Palm-oil Producing Mills Owned by Nnobi Indigenes**

Milling Plant/Centre	Owner	Output
Philloc International Mill at Musa Junction, Umuagu, Ngo Nnobi	Ogbuefi Philip Chidubem Okeakpu	During palm season (November-April), production goes thus: 8-10 gallons daily 60-70 gallons weekly 240-300 gallons monthly
Ezeani Palm-Oil Mill, Ndam Nnobi	Mr. Chukwuma Ezeani	15 gallons weekly 50-60 gallons monthly
In her compound, off Our Lady's Girls School Awuda, Nnobi	Mrs. Chinelo Ezeoku	10 gallons weekly 40-50 gallons monthly

*Source: Researcher's compilation (fieldwork, April 2023.)*

**Manufacturing:** As a body, Nnobi women under the *Inyom-Nnobi* have been able to establish a cottage industry where toilet papers and Nylon bags are manufactured for sale in the local markets and nearby towns. Through this industry, employments are created for the people and this has also led to increase in the *Inyom's* finance, which is used to enhance the economy of the community.

The Awuda women wing of *Inyom-Nnobi* also has a milling centre which is handled and maintained by them. It is situated at Awuda town-hall. According to I.M. Nnekwelugo, the *Inyom-di* Awuda Milling Centre was established to empower women, as the individuals in town who cannot afford to buy machines for mixing and kneading their flour can easily come to the centre to have it done for them in exchange for little token which equally serves as source of income for the body. This had enabled those of them in confectionery businesses to handle large orders from their customers and make more money which is used to take care of their needs.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that before now Nnobi women in the baking business went as far as Nnewi to mill their flour and according to them, doing that was never easy but with establishment of the milling centre in Awuda-Nnobi, learning, mixing, kneading and production cost have been reduced drastically.

**Plate 2: Inyom di Awuda Milling Centre Empowering their Women**



*(Source: Fieldwork by the Researcher, 11 October, 2022)*

**Fashion Designing:** Nnobi women are known for their remarkable talents in turning beautiful fabrics into great designs. The fashion industry has long been a space where women can express their creativity and talent. Women fashion designers in Nnobi showcase their skills, contribute to the local economy and empower other women by creating employment opportunities. By running their own businesses or leading design team, they become role models for aspiring designers. Herritta Chigbo, a modern-day top-notch tailor and a widow in Nnobi, revealed that she had made money from her occupation which has enabled her take care of her family's needs especially in the area of completion of her family house, training her children at the university level since she is the breadwinner and more so expressed her delight in her work since it has given opportunity to groom and impact the lives of women and girls in the community. Presently, she has fifteen apprentices whom she is grooming to become professional tailors.<sup>18</sup>

**Plate 3: Herritta Chigbo and her apprentices at her fashion home in Nnobi**



(Source: Fieldwork by the Researcher, 11 October, 2022)

It is now prevalent for the emerging fashion designers in Nnobi to integrate various facets of fashion into their creations. This implies that the fashion designers currently present in this community are adept at not only designing clothing but also providing professional make-up services for women during special events. Some even craft stylish hand-fans, turbans, fascinators, auto-gele, and offer accessories such as traditional beads and bouquets for rent to celebrants at events, contributing to their additional income. Beyond financial gains, they have also mentored individuals to excel in this field. Scholastica Okpanku, a skilled make-up artist from Nnobi, expressed her profound satisfaction in empowering numerous unemployed young women by offering them opportunities to work alongside her and earn a substantial income from their efforts. Currently, she is mentoring a group of seven apprentices, guiding them towards a promising future in the industry.<sup>19</sup>

- **Social Development**

Nnobi women have made great effort in the improvement of the well-being and quality of life of their people, especially women. They have played significant role in various spheres of social development in their community. Here are some potential areas where Nnobi women had made contributions:

**Education:** Nnobi women have actively contributed to the educational development of their community. They have been teachers, mentors and advocates for education of both boys and girls. They have also been involved in initiatives to establish and support schools, provided scholarships and encouraged the pursuit of knowledge. Women in Nnobi have taken part in efforts to promote education particularly for girls. They advocate for equal access to education and encourage female students to pursue higher education, since education will enlighten the girl child and enable them to become better mothers and leaders of tomorrow who will help to build a better nation for Nnobi people and the world at large. It is worthy to note that some Nnobi women have taken it upon themselves to make sure that children who have no opportunity to continue their education are granted scholarships. Speaking on this, R.N. Ochiagha mentioned of Prof. K.A. Omenugha (an indigene of Nnobi) and her contributions towards this noble course in ensuring that Nnobi children who merited it are given the opportunity to study any course of their choice at the university level as expenses from beginning to the end of such individual's study are taken care of by her.<sup>20</sup>

Ambassador S.C. Nwosu, an educator and advocate of "Save the Girl Child" and an indigene of Nnobi, is known for her work in promoting education and had also through her various capabilities contributed to the intellectual and social development of Nnobi and Nigeria as a whole. She stressed the importance of education for the girl when she asserted that: "It is imperative to give ears to a girl child as this will enable one to know what they are going through both physically and emotionally in order to save them from subjection and from eternal wound which if not discovered on time may lead to destruction of their lives". She argued further that if a girl child is not properly oriented through education, especially from secondary school; the said child may become voiceless and might even end up not speaking her mind as a result of threat and fear that have been input in her by her abusers, leaving her in a mentally derailed state.<sup>21</sup>

Through education this have been made possible in Nnobi as schools are visited by her and other women especially those of them from Nnobi, who are advocates of "Save the Girl Child" and education to build a better girl child for Nnobi community, who are not only educated but well informed on how to fight for their rights when it is being violated, as these girls are the mothers of tomorrow.

**Healthcare:** As a town, Nnobi has a General Hospital that is located in Ifite-Nnobi, off Nnobi-Nnewi Road. There are a lot of Nnobi women who are employed in health sector of Nnobi and in the world. Nnobi women have often played important role in healthcare including as community health workers, nurses and midwives. These women have been known to contribute to improving healthcare access and awareness, particularly focusing on maternal and child health. According to World Health Organisation (W.H.O) “health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>22</sup> The women have taken part in organising health campaigns, promoting immunization and providing supports to community health centres. Again, they have been noted as advocates of health maintenance in terms of sanitation. Nnobi women seek to address health and sanitation issues within their communities. In most of their church and local meetings, professionals from among them in the area of health are chosen to lecture others on how to take care of their health and wellness of their body. They have also admonished the women on how to always keep their environment clean and have gone as far as constantly organising health personnel to speak and teach women on health and its importance. Awareness campaigns and workshops on topics such as hygiene, reproductive health and disease preventions have been organised to achieve this purpose. They have also worked towards keeping the market clean as this is one of the duties of *Inyom-Nnobi* group. The *Inyom-Nnobi* with the help of their son, Hon. Barr. Chuka Ezenwune built a befitting toilet with ultra-modern facilities in *Afor-Nnobi* in other to stake their claim on hygiene.<sup>23</sup>

Another individual worthy of note in the area of provision of good health in Nnobi is Dr. Thelma Ezeonu who though lives in America but have often found time to come home to administer treatment to Nnobi women with her crew. Dr. Thelma has deemed it fit to give free eye treatment to Nnobi women by bringing in specialists in the area of optometry, who checked the eyes of the women and gave medicated glasses and drugs to those of them that had eye problems. Surgical operations were also carried out on those that had severe eye problem for free; she did not stop here, Nnobi women were also given room to go for Mammogram screening in order to check for sign of breast cancer so that immediate attention will be given to them if dictated.<sup>24</sup>

**Plate 4: General Hospital Nnobi**



(Source: Fieldwork conducted by the Researcher on 24th November 2022.)

**Religious Bodies:** Through their various churches, Nnobi women have frequently engaged in welfare, humanitarian and charitable activities such as providing food, healthcare, shelter and education to those in need. They are also known to have established charitable organisation, outreach programs and initiatives that help to address social challenges and promote the welfare of their community. This is made possible through proper collection of levies allocated to various members of the women groups in the church and some individual and voluntary organisations that assist the women to take care of the needs of the members of the church and the community. The Catholic Women Organization (C.W.O) and Nnobi Anglican Women Association (N.A.W.A) groups in their different parishes in Nnobi have always been in charge of the feeding and maintaining the priests and their homes. They equally provide for the less-privileged. Also, medical and educational assistance are made available to the members of their churches according to their capabilities. Nnobi women religious bodies have been a strong pillar to the church. The church groups help to promote societal values. During their meetings, the C.W.O and N.A.W.A teach their members how to dress modestly and how to raise godly children at home. They also teach cooking skills and enlighten their members on the need for submissiveness and the ills of promiscuity in marriage and in the society.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, the religious bodies help to foster the spiritual well-being of Nnobi women. They provide a framework for individuals to develop their spiritual lives, find meaning and purpose to life and also deepen their connection with God. Through religious teachings, practices and prayers women often experience personal growth, moral development and a sense of belonging within their religious community. This is usually achieved by organising different spiritual exercises like spiritual talks and prayer sessions where women come together to pray for their home and community. This promotes social cohesion and contributes to the overall wellbeing of the community.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

The highlights of this study show that women are giant partners in community development. Nnobi community may not have gotten to its present heights without the assiduous and diligent efforts of women, at both individual and group levels. As demonstrated already in the study, women are not just wives and mothers [as traditional thinkers would argue] but also educators, purveyors of societal values, employers of labour, infrastructure developers, entrepreneurs, leaders, advocates, policymakers and health enthusiasts. To encourage them and/or to witness increased participation in community and national development, it becomes highly consequential for government and the community to provide assistance in form of loans and an enabling environment for the Nnobi women to increase their contribution to the growth of the Nnobi town.

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