

## Heading off harmful practices

A Voice to the People case study | December 2015

### Widowhood practices abolished in Urum



**With support from V2P and members of her community Oluchukwu Ikwune was spared further dehumanising treatment to which many widows are subjected.** Credit: Christian Aid/Tom Saater

When Oluchukwu Ikwune, 31, lost her husband in June 2015, she feared she would be subjected to the age-old inhuman practices meted out to widows in Urum community.

As in many parts of Anambra, widows in Urum were traditionally forced to remain indoors for seven days after the death of their husbands as a sign of mourning. They were instructed to speak to no one except a person designated to feed them every day. They were stopped from taking baths, washing their hands and eating with clean plates and were forbidden to go to the market to buy or to sell.

Though the V2P project, community members made a strong case for the abolition of the old traditions in Urum, but many others still resisted the change. As a result, for some days after the death of her

husband, Oluchukwu was forced to comply with the rules prohibiting her from speaking, taking a bath, going out of the house and eating with clean plates.

However, V2P community-based monitor Albert Chinwuko and other members of the community, with support from V2P partner JDPC Awka, redoubled their efforts and eventually prevailed on the resistant group and Oluchukwu was spared further dehumanising treatment.

The community has built on this landmark decision by establishing an executive committee of women to oversee women's affairs in Urum and ensure their rights are not denied.

For the first time in Urum's history, a woman stood for office in the 2014 general elections in Nigeria. Although she wasn't elected, this is still considered a victory for women in the community.

'Anyi n'achaputazi ka kpakpando,' says Theresa Nnatoanya, women's leader in Urum. 'We now shine bright like stars.'

### Women stand up for change



**The GEADOR group in Umueri, which has both women and men as members, is tackling harmful traditional practices head-on.** Credit: Christian Aid/Tom Saater

The Gender Empowerment and Development Organising Resource (GEADOR) group in Umueri community is also tackling harmful practices against women in their community head-on.

The group, established as part of V2P, has advocated strongly against a tradition that dictates that women in Umueri, in addressing elders and men in public, must sit on the ground.

Aloefula Felix, 75, a member of Umueri GEADOR group says the

tradition has been in place since before he was born. 'In my father's time, women had to sit on the ground to address men in a gathering while the men stood.'

Young people in the community feel the injustice of the tradition very keenly. Eluno Emmanuel Emeka, an undergraduate and a GEADOR facilitator, says women were afraid to speak in public even when they had pressing issues to raise.

'Any woman who had disagreements with a man had to sit on the floor to address elders, while the man stood to present his case,' he says. 'As a result, most women were afraid to speak out for their rights, as they considered it doubly humiliating to sit on the floor to advocate for their rights.'

But through the activities of Umueri GEADOR group, the end of this humiliating practice could be in sight. The GEADOR group has written to community elders and Umueri Town Union asking for the tradition to be abolished. The group also performed a drama pointing out the harm in this discriminatory practice against women.

Chike Odili, the President General of the Town Union, has approached community elders to ask for the tradition to be abolished. He says they have agreed to abolish the tradition but are yet to decide whether women will sit on stools or stand to speak in public places. There will be a formal ceremony to end the old tradition and usher in the new, he adds.

For Victoria Mbakwe, a member of the GEADOR group, the tradition cannot end quickly enough. 'It would be unimaginable for notable Nigerian women like Professor Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (former World Bank managing director) to sit on the ground to address public gatherings. Why then would this be expected of women in Umueri community?' she asks.



For Victoria Mbakwe, the practice of women sitting on the floor to address elders cannot end soon enough. Credit: Christian Aid/Tom Saater

### Fight to end child marriage

In Umuoba-Anam community the GEADOR group consistently fights to reduce incidences of child marriage. Not without opposition.

Female members of the GEADOR group have been challenged in their advocacy by parents who accuse them of ending prospective marriages of their daughters. They have also been labeled 'old maids' for remaining single beyond their teenage years.

Despite these obstacles, GEADOR members remain undaunted in their stance against child marriages.

GEADOR facilitator Nnaeke Rita explained how their campaign reached a secondary school for girls in the community. According to Rita, their first meeting at the school was attended by a hundred students. But a second visit saw many more girls in attendance – some coming from outside the area. The school principal now frequently invites Nnaeke and her colleagues to speak to new entrants.

'Now the stories have changed. The girls, who previously wanted to get married as a result of poverty, peer and parental pressure and ignorance, now want to be notable people in society,' Nnaeke explains.

***Voice to the People (V2P) is a programme supporting vulnerable communities in Nigeria to hold state and local governments and their leaders to account, take part in making the decisions that affect their lives and raise their voices to demand the rights and services to which they are entitled.***

***The programme will reach 2.4 million people in the south eastern state of Anambra and directly build the capacity and confidence of citizens to hold duty bearers to account.***

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