

Gender and Development: The Historical Leadership of Nde Ndom in Oforola Ancient Kingdom

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Abstract:

➤ Introduction

Established in 1980 under Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere, *Nde Ndom Oforola* became the formal women's association responsible for welfare, morality, and community development.

➤ Methods

The study applied a qualitative approach, drawing on oral histories, community records, and thematic analysis to examine their leadership roles.

➤ Results

Nde Ndom restored the dignity of women through laws against immorality, instituted pregnancy responsibility rules to protect the girl child, and spearheaded development projects such as building schools, women's halls, and securing electricity.

➤ Conclusion

The leadership of *Nde Ndom* reflects transformational and servant leadership styles, positioning women as central actors in governance and grassroots development in Oforola.

Keywords: *Nde Ndom, Women's Leadership, Oforola, Transformational Leadership, Community Development, Women's Associations.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of leadership, but they all usually agree that great leaders are able to make visionary, strategic decisions and persuade others to follow them (Obire & Eginwin, 2025). Leadership is the process by which leaders influence and motivate followers to strive to achieve common group goals through interpersonal behaviors (Kaiser et al.,

2012). Therefore, female leadership refers to the characteristics and styles that female leaders show in the process of organizational management, which can make organization members strive to achieve common goals (Chen, C et al., 2025). the subject of females in leadership roles is gaining increasing emphasis within various fields Zhiyu & Jngguo (2025) Zhiyu & Jngguo believes that It emphasises the importance of women's views, talents and contributions in formulating

policies, pursuing innovation and promoting positive social change.

According to Turock, the concept of female leadership has evolved in the context and theory of feminism (Turock, 2001). The research on female leadership began in the 1970s and was carried out from the perspective of gender differences. (Chen, C et al., 2025). In the 1990s, after the third wave of feminism, more and more scholars began to pay attention to female leadership. Eagly and Karau (1991) draw on gender role theory concluding that the male role focuses on agentic behaviors, while the female role focuses on communal behaviors. Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed the role congruity theory of prejudice to explain why women are difficult to recognize as effective leaders. Women face a glass ceiling that makes it difficult for them to break through in the workplace (Cotter et al., 2001), and it is more difficult for them to be promoted to leadership positions than men (Badura et al., 2018). Leaders should also be learning how to be nimble and flex their influence while effectively articulating the vision, expressing gratitude, and working with others (Leis & Wormington, 2024).

There are various leadership styles available to leaders, and their impact differs according to the group they are leading and the sector they work in (Obire & Eginwin, 2025). Among the most prominent theories of leadership are: Great Man Theory, Situational/Contingency Leadership, Transformational, Servant leadership, Transactional, Authentic, Path-Goal, Behavioural theory, Leader-Member Theory, Trait Theory, Emotional Intelligence (EI) Leadership and so on (Obire & Eginwin, 2025).

Transformational leadership is one of the most effective at bringing about lasting change (Baker, 2023).

Women mostly adopt transformational leadership techniques compared to men. Women may empower both themselves and others, opening doors for more representation in positions of leadership (Obire & Eginwin, 2025)

The concept of transformational leadership was first proposed by Burns (1978) and refers to the leader through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration. (Chen, C et al., 2025). By influencing followers to go beyond their immediate self-interest (Bass, 1985) and focus on higher-level values (Stempel et al., 2015), the morale, motivation, and morality of followers under transformational leadership are enhanced. Due to women's sensitive, emotional, and social behavior characteristics, researchers support female leaders who have the elements of transformational leadership (Sharif, 2019) and even refer to transformational leadership as a "female leadership style" (Chao, 2011).

In Nigeria, the perception that women belong to the kitchen and the other room as the then late president Muhammadu Buhari said caused a lot of argument among women. This has placed majority of Nigerian women in the

position of constantly requesting inclusion rather than taking the required actions to position themselves in key positions (Ogechi, 2023, p.58).

The statement of the last President seems to be untrue according to history and research. Within Nigeria, a rich body of work similarly highlights women's institutional leadership—most famously the collective action of women's associations that influenced local development agendas. According to Anah, after the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970) ravaged populations, homes and infrastructural facilities in the south-east region, town unions mobilized funds for community development. Schools and roads were rebuilt while communities were provided with portable water. In the 1980s when the town unions seemed to have run out of steam, the women of South East Nigeria organized themselves under the aegis of 'August meeting' to embark on development projects in the region (Anah, C. 2014).

However, irrespective of the patriarchal structure of the Nigerian society with men handling more positions of authority, in history of Oforola community, some group of women called Nde Ndom asserted themselves by taking leadership positions where they contributed their quota to the development of the community even within the patriarchal community.

These women's bodies historically regulated morality, protected market integrity, supported conflict resolution, and safeguarded vulnerable groups—functions intimately linked to community health and social reproduction.

Oral histories and community records describe how these women's groups mobilized labor and resources for schools, markets, electrification, and health-related mutual support, while also enforcing shared norms around care, widowhood rites, and intra-household responsibility (Eboh, 2019; Onwumere, 2020; Obichere, 2021; Florence, 2021). These accounts underscore women's dual role as development actors and custodians of culture, often operating through structured associations with recognized mandates.

Oforola community provides a salient case. Prior to the 1980s, women's affairs were overseen by Nde Mgboto—a council of women born, reared, and married within Oforola community—renowned for adjudicating disputes among women, investigating domestic care obligations (including toward ill spouses), and administering widowhood protocols viewed as protective of communal ethics (Chioma, 2019; Oparaeke, 2021; Florence, 2021). In 1980–1981, Nde Ndom Oforola was formally constituted under the leadership of Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere to coordinate women's collective action in welfare, youth protection (e.g., pregnancy responsibility laws), market organization, and community development, including contributions to school construction and public utilities (Obichere, 2021; Iwunwa, 2019; Mary, 2021). Together, these institutions illustrate complementary models of women's leadership: the Mgboto's custodial-judicial

authority and the Nde Ndom’s developmental–welfare mandate.

Despite this rich local history and a continental literature that affirms women’s consequential leadership, systematic, comparative evidence on community perceptions of these parallel women’s institutions in Oforola is limited.

Existing sources are largely qualitative narratives, oral histories, or single-case descriptions, leaving unanswered questions about how different demographic groups currently assess the legitimacy, fairness, and health-related impacts of Nde Ndom. This study addresses that gap by undertaking a research regarding The Historical Leadership Of Nde Ndom In Oforola Ancient Kingdom —especially as they relate to community health, protection of girls, restoration of women dignity, and local development. The study contributes to broader debates on gender, governance, and health in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, while offering actionable insights for community leaders and policymakers seeking to strengthen inclusive, culturally anchored leadership structures.

II. DATA AND MATERIALS

➤ Study Area

Oforola ancient kingdom has its geographical location currently in Owerri west local government area of Imo State but

formerly in Owerri L.G.A and is made up of two communities originated from the ancient kingdom, (Oforola and Olaukwu)

Oforola ancient kingdom is one of the fifteen communities in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo state. The community is among the five communities of Ara (Obinze, Avu, Okuku, Umuguma). Oforola ancient kingdom has boundary between Ara (Obinze and Avu in Owerri west L.G.A) and three communities (Obosima, Ohuba and Umuokanne) in Ohaji Egbema local Government Area.

In the earlier creation of Autonomous, Oforola ancient kingdom was with Okuku/Oforola ancient kingdom Autonomuos but in the year 1978, Oforola ancient kingdom became an autonomous community.

Oforola ancient kingdom is made up of nine villages: Umueke, Umuagubiam, Umuadu, Umuobide, Oboagwa, Amorji, Umuimeka, Amaku and Umuezeroke. These villages are known and called Oforola ancient kingdom Mbam-itolu (Nine villages of Oforola ancient kingdom) by the community.

Owerri West is one of the 27 local government areas in Imo State. It shares boundaries with Owerri Municipal, Owerri North, and neighboring LGAs. The administrative headquarters is located at Umuguma. Owerri West has a population of approximately 175,000 inhabitants, based on recent projections from the 2006 National Census.

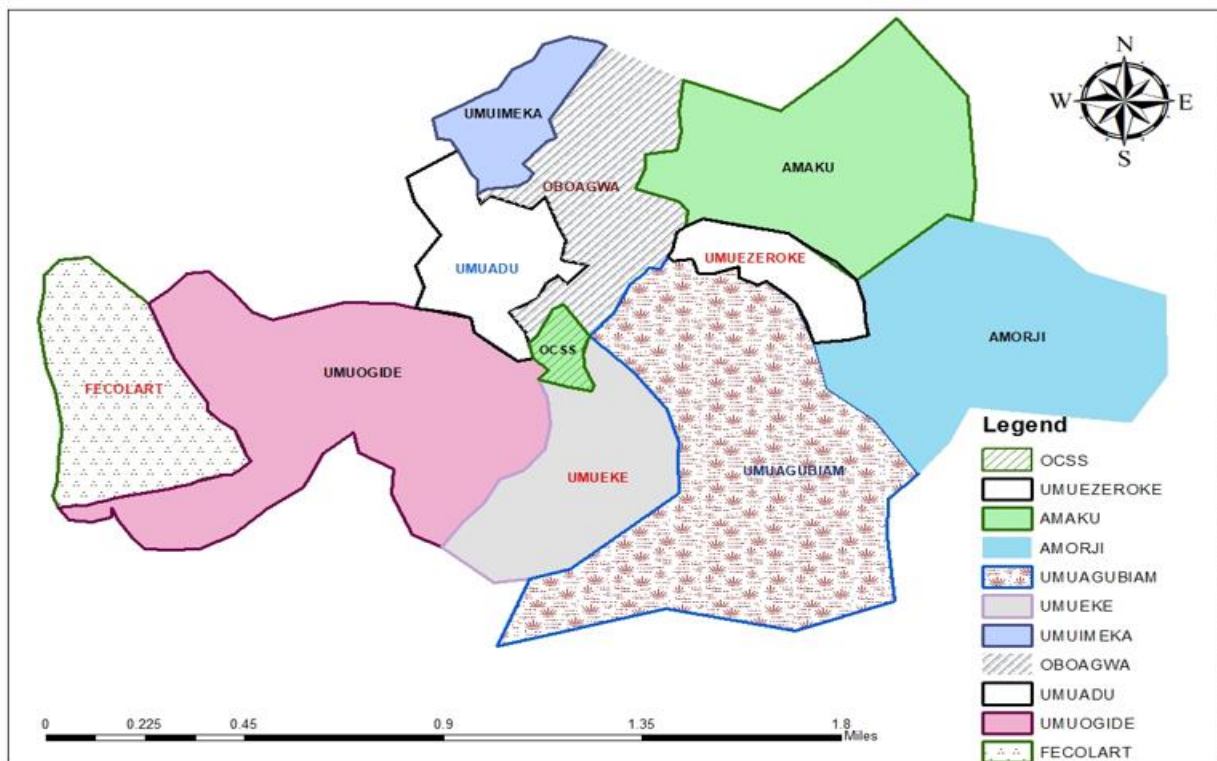


Fig 1 Oforola Ancient Kingdom Map Drawn with ArcGIS 10.8 and Field Coordinates for the Purpose of this Research in 2021 by the Corresponding Researcher.

III. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the roles and influence of *Nde Ndom*, women's institution in Oforola Ancient Kingdom. A qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of their judicial, moral, and cultural authority within the community.

➤ Sources of Data Collection

Primary data was collected through face-to-face individual interviews from elders (n=90) between the ages of 70-120, from 2019 to 2021. The secondary data were collected from both community facebook group and the researcher's facebook post feedback. Both primary and secondary data were utilized to collect qualitative data among the community for the research regarding the: (i) Historical Contributions of Oforola women, (ii) Organizational structure and leadership of Nde Ndom, (iii) Restoring the Dignity of Women, (iv) Protection of the girl child and (v) Socioeconomic and community development roles.

➤ Methods

The research employed a quantitative methods. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was used. The Thematic analysis outlines the key insights from the responses and

provides a structured approach to investigate the roles and influence of Nde Ndom, a traditional women's institution in Oforola Ancient Kingdom. A qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of their judicial, moral, and cultural authority within the community. The thematic analysis followed Baraun and Claurke 2006 outlined steps. The thematic analysis was done by familiarization which involved data transcription – noting down the initial codes, Generating initial codes which involved collating data relevant to each code, Searching for themes which involved gathering all data relevant to each theme, Reviewing of themes which involved checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extract and the entire data set, Defining and naming themes which involved generation of clear names for each theme, production of the report which involved discussion of analysis related to the research questions and use of direct quotes from the participants

➤ Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval of the study was obtained orally from the elders. The researcher protected the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals that participated in answering the questionnaires and assured that the information given were kept confidential. The ethical considerations informed the respondents about the purpose of the study to obtain an informed consent before the data was collected.

IV. RESULTS

The findings from the study highlight the multiple roles played by Oforola women in leadership, community development, and the protection of social norms. The results are presented under five thematic categories with supporting quotes from respondents.

Table 1 The Findings

Theme	Sub-Theme	Evidence from Data
1. Historical Contributions of Oforola Women	- Support in community wars - Traditional custodianship by <i>Nde Mgboto</i>	Women supported their husbands during the reign of HRM King Nwosu Ehirim, even going to war with them. Affairs of women were overseen by <i>Nde Mgboto</i> , who adjudicated disputes and safeguarded communal ethics.
2. Organizational Structure and Leadership of Nde Ndom	- Founding of Nde Ndom in 1980 by Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere - Appointment of pioneering leaders - Collective representation across villages	Formation of <i>Nde Ndom Oforola</i> in 1980 gave women authority over issues affecting women and children. Leaders included Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere, Madam Rachael Ekwueme, Mrs. Florence Ohakwe, and others from different villages.
3. Restoring the Dignity of Women	- Regulation of immoralities (adultery, theft, fighting, false witness) - Enforcement of penalties - Positive role modeling for young women	Nde Ndom created laws and sanctions to discipline married women, reducing immoralities and influencing younger women positively.
4. Protection of the Girl Child	- Pregnancy responsibility law - Enforcement of male accountability - Social protection and safeguarding of future	Any male responsible for impregnating a girl must care for her until delivery and pay ₦10,000 fine. This law discouraged exploitation and protected young girls' futures.
5. Socioeconomic and Community Development Roles	- Educational development - Fundraising innovations - Infrastructure projects - Rural electrification campaign	Women contributed one cup of garri every market day to fund community school construction. They built the Village Women's Hall and trekked to Umuguma to secure electricity for Oforola.

A. Qualitative Analysis

➤ Historical Contributions of Oforola Women before Nde Ndom

Respondents described the critical roles played by women in earlier times, especially during conflicts and traditional governance. Women were not passive observers but actively supported their husbands and defended the community.

One elderly respondent recalled:

“In the time of King Nwosu Ehirim, our mothers followed their husbands to war. They did not carry weapons but they constructed weapons with sticks, which gave the men more strength, and encouragement. Without the women, victory would have been hard.” (Male, elder, Umuezeroke)

Another respondent highlighted the custodial role of *Nde Mgboto*:

“Before Nde Ndom came, it was the Mgboto that guided women’s matters. They settled quarrels among wives, looked after widows, and made sure women behaved well.” (Female, elder, umuimeka)

➤ Organizational Structure and Leadership of Nde Ndom

The formalization of women’s leadership through *Nde Ndom Oforola* in 1980 was widely recognized as a turning point in women’s collective authority. Respondents emphasized the vision of Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere in establishing the association and appointing women leaders from across the villages.

As one respondent explained:

“When Ugoeze Phoebe started Nde Ndom, she brought women from every village. That was when we saw real unity of Oforola women.” (Female, elder Amorji)

Another respondent added:

“Those first leaders like Madam Rachael Ekwueme and Mrs. Florence Ohakwe showed us that women can lead just like men. They gave women a voice in the community.” (Female, 55 years)

➤ Restoring the Dignity of Women

A dominant theme was the role of *Nde Ndom* in restoring and safeguarding women’s dignity. Respondents noted that before the association, immoral behaviors among married women were unchecked, but *Nde Ndom* established laws to enforce discipline.

One respondent described:

“If a woman was caught stealing or committing adultery, Nde Ndom would summon her. There were punishments, and it made people afraid to misbehave.” (Male, elder Amaku)

Another stressed the positive role-modelling effect:

“The young girls learned from this. They saw that being a woman meant dignity, not shame. Nde Ndom helped us hold our heads high.” (Female, elder, Oboagwa)

➤ Protection of the Girl Child

Respondents consistently emphasized the significance of the pregnancy responsibility law introduced by *Nde Ndom*. This intervention was perceived as a breakthrough in protecting girls from abandonment and exploitation.

One middle-aged respondent explained:

“Before, when a girl got pregnant, her family would drive her away. But Nde Ndom said no, the boy must take care of her and pay fine. It reduced the way men were spoiling our daughters.” (Female, Middle-aged Umuagubiam)

Another respondent noted:

“That law saved many girls from suffering. It gave them small dignity because the man could not just deny them and go free.” (Male, elder, Umueke)

➤ Socioeconomic and Community Development Roles

Finally, respondents described the economic and infrastructural contributions of *Oforola* women through *Nde Ndom*. Women mobilized resources creatively and invested in projects that benefited the entire community.

One respondent highlighted the innovative fundraising:

“Every market day we contributed one cup of garri. Alice Chikwe carried it to Owerri to sell. From that, we built our secondary school.” (Female, elder, Umuezeroke)

Another emphasized the women’s determination in bringing electricity to *Oforola*:

“The women even walked to Umuguma many times to beg for light. They suffered for us, and today we are enjoying electricity because of them.” (Male, middle-aged Umuagubiam)

V. DISCUSSION

This study examined the historical and contemporary leadership roles of *Oforola* women, particularly through the institutions of *Nde Ndom*. The findings demonstrate that women have historically been central actors in communal defense, moral regulation, protection of vulnerable groups, and socioeconomic development. These findings challenge dominant patriarchal narratives that often portray women as passive followers rather than active leaders.

➤ Women’s Historical Contributions

The active participation of *Oforola* women in supporting their husbands during communal conflict and community defense resonates with feminist scholarship that emphasizes the agency of women in traditional African societies. This challenges the stereotypes reinforced in Nigeria, such as the statement by former President Buhari that women “belong in

the kitchen and the other room” (Ogechi, 2023). Oral testimonies from respondents underscore that women were not only present but essential to sustaining communal resilience during crises. In line with gender role theory (Eagly & Karau, 1991), while men engaged in agentic warfare, women performed communal roles that were equally vital to collective success.

➤ *Institutional Leadership: From Custodial to Developmental Mandates*

The emergence of *Nde Ndom Oforola* in 1980 reflects the evolution of women’s leadership structures from custodial authority (Nde Mgboto) to developmental and welfare mandates. Respondents described this transition as a turning point that gave women a collective voice across villages. This aligns with broader Nigerian literature documenting women’s associations, such as the *August Meeting*, which mobilized collective action for community development (Anah, 2014).

The Oforola case reinforces transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), which emphasizes vision, collective mobilization, and individualized consideration. Lady Ugoeze Phoebe Obichere’s leadership mirrors transformational elements by uniting diverse groups of women, creating a shared identity, and inspiring contributions toward community welfare.

➤ *Restoring Women’s Dignity and Regulating Morality*

A central finding is the role of *Nde Ndom* in restoring dignity among women through laws against adultery, theft, fighting, and false witness. These measures helped regulate behavior, preserve marital respect, and serve as positive role models for younger generations. This echoes the role congruity theory of prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which highlights that women leaders often gain legitimacy by embodying communal values and maintaining moral order.

The disciplinary functions of *Nde Ndom* also resonate with the concept of women as custodians of culture in African settings (Florence, 2021). By upholding moral standards, the association not only protected the integrity of married women but also shaped societal expectations of female behavior across generations.

➤ *Protection of the Girl Child*

The introduction of the pregnancy responsibility law demonstrates how women’s leadership can address systemic vulnerabilities of the girl child. By enforcing male accountability, *Nde Ndom* challenged patriarchal impunity and promoted social justice. This intervention aligns with transformational leadership principles of individualized consideration and moral upliftment (Sharif, 2019; Chao, 2011).

Respondents consistently emphasized how the law reduced stigma and safeguarded the future of young girls, thereby preventing early abandonment. This positions Oforola women as advocates of gender equity within a traditionally

patriarchal system, echoing feminist arguments that women’s leadership is integral to promoting social justice and inclusivity (Zhiyu & Jngguo, 2025).

➤ *Socioeconomic and Community Development Roles*

The developmental contributions of Oforola women—such as building schools, constructing the women’s hall, and campaigning for electrification—illustrate women’s roles as grassroots development actors. The innovative resource mobilization strategy of contributing one cup of garri every market day underscores the capacity of women to generate sustainable, community-based funding.

These findings align with the literature on women’s associations in post-war Igbo society, which mobilized collective action for rebuilding infrastructure and providing social amenities (Anah, 2014). They also reflect servant leadership principles, where leaders prioritize the needs of others and pursue community welfare above personal gain (Obire & Eginiwin, 2025).

VI. LIMITATIONS

Despite providing valuable insight into the leadership role of the *Nde Ndom* in the community, this study has limitations. First, the study relies primarily on oral histories and archival narratives, which may reflect selective memory or subjective interpretations. Secondly the study also focused primarily on selected elders with (n=90) although respondents provided rich insights, the relatively small sample may not fully capture the diversity of women’s leadership experiences in Oforola and may not capture the experiences of all the residents across the community.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that women in Oforola have played critical leadership roles historically and contemporarily through institution such as *Nde Ndom*. Their contributions extend beyond household responsibilities into moral regulation, protection of the girl child, and socioeconomic development. By restoring the dignity of women, safeguarding vulnerable groups, and driving grassroots development initiatives, Oforola women demonstrated transformational and servant leadership qualities. These findings challenge patriarchal assumptions about women’s passivity and underscore the importance of recognizing women as central actors in community governance and development. This study recommends that government and local authorities should formally recognize women’s associations like *Nde Ndom* as vital partners in governance and community development. Training and empowerment programs should be established to strengthen the organizational, financial, and leadership capacities of women’s groups. Also the pregnancy responsibility law developed by *Nde Ndom* should inspire formal legislation and policies aimed at protecting the rights and futures of girls in rural Nigeria.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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➤ Data Availability

The data (audio recordings) that support the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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