



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# The engagement of women's movements with religion: legal reform in Anambra state, Nigeria

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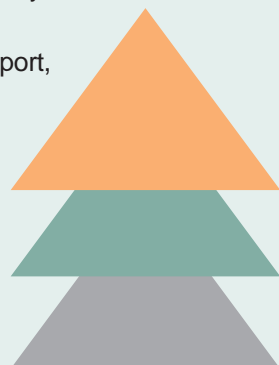
Campaigning by the women's movement in Anambra State was instrumental to the introduction of a new law in 2005 designed to prevent the maltreatment of widows. Religion is often implicated in gender inequality and discrimination against women, but religious leaders and organizations played key roles in this campaign. The case study enabled the researchers to address the questions of when, why and how religious actors facilitate rather than obstruct legal reform intended to realize women's rights.

Many of the rituals and practices with which widows in largely Igbo Anambra State have traditionally been expected to comply are both incompatible with Nigeria's 1999 Constitution and today regarded as inhumane and degrading. Widows are also discriminated against by Igbo inheritance rules, which prescribe that property is inherited through the male line. Women are not entitled to inherit land from their fathers and widows are not entitled to any share in the property of their deceased husband, even property acquired during the marriage. Many of the rituals and practices are associated with traditional religious beliefs. They and the inheritance rules are enforced by the male and female relatives of the deceased man, sometimes quite brutally. They are humiliating and can reduce widows and their children to destitution.

Protests against widowhood practices started in the late 1980s but were uncoordinated. In the 2000s, the campaign for legal reform was spearheaded and organized by CENGOS (Coalition of Eastern NGOs), an umbrella organization of over 100 NGOs in the nine states of the old Eastern Region, including Anambra. The assistance of professional associations of women

lawyers and journalists and religious organizations was vital. Growing concern over the maltreatment of widows, including their own members, by women's organizations associated with the dominant Catholic and Anglican denominations in this majority Christian state led to them becoming involved with the campaign. The initiative was taken by the Catholic Women's Organization, which brought in the Mothers' Union and the Women's Guild, both associated with the Anglican Communion.

- They initiated and led on the community level campaign, seeking from the outset to obtain support from their own members, religious leaders, and traditional organizations and leaders, especially men, justifying the campaign in terms of religious language and beliefs, for example, the incompatibility between traditional and Christian funeral rites. Community level support both increased the legitimacy of the State level campaign and led to local pressure for changes in practices.
- Although secular NGOs and professional associations led on the campaign to persuade the State House of Assembly to pass the bill that became the *Anambra State Malpractices against Widows and Widowers (Prohibition) Law No. 2005*, the FBOs' role in lobbying Assembly members and obtaining the support of religious leaders was vital. Churches provided a platform for campaigners to spread their message, including to people in the State House of Assembly. They and religious leaders provided credibility and legitimacy for the campaign, pastoral support, prayer and material resources. Tactical compromises, for example, including widowers as well as widows in the law, reduced opposition from men.



- The 2005 law prohibits and penalizes the maltreatment of widows and widowers. Pressure for effective implementation has been maintained, with an emphasis on educating women about their rights and providing support to women seeking redress through mediation or the courts. Informants reported increased awareness of the law and their rights, and a decline in (though not elimination of) harmful traditional practices.
- However, it has proved particularly difficult to implement the provisions on inheritance included in the 2005 law, because of the entrenched nature and complexity of issues related to land and property. In addition, the campaigning momentum on this issue has been lost, as organizations have moved on to other issues.
- The support of FBOs was forthcoming because widows in general and their members in particular are harmed by traditional practices and there is scriptural justification for the campaign.
- Tactics to avoid alienating key groups were vital to the success of the campaign, including obtaining the support of (male) religious and traditional leaders and compromises on the content of the law.
- A women's movement is a diverse fluid network of organizations and individuals. Within it, coalitions can form for a limited period to around a shared cause and goal. Successful coalitions contain actors who are both affected by the issues or practices of concern and are capable of changing them.

Some implications of the successful campaign for legal reform in Anambra State for the women's movement more widely are that

- Church involvement helped to bridge the elite-grassroots divide that has weakened the Nigerian women's movement – the faith-based women's organizations' ability to generate grassroots support strengthened the campaign, has increased ordinary women's knowledge of their rights and is resulting in changes in local practices.

Based on Fatima Adamu, Olufunmilayo J. Para-Mallam, Adebayo O. Ajala and Bolatito Lanre-Abass (forthcoming) *The Engagement of Women's Movements with Religion in the Promotion of Women's Rights through Legal Reform in Anambra State*. Birmingham: Religions and Development Working Paper 60.

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