

Book: *The Power of Women's Collective Action*
Comrade Mma Odi
Rural Women Empowerment and Development Network (RUWEN), Ikeja,
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Reviewer: Jumoke Verissimo

Mma Odi's agenda in the book, *The Power of Women's Collective Action* in her own words, is 'the passion of RUWEN's team to make change possible, feel the pains of rural women, understand their situation, win their confidence, as well as encourage them to their projects and turn them into concrete success stories" (p. xiv). The book presents the author and opportunity to showcase how RUWEN focuses on women in Ebonyi and Imo States in the South-East of Nigeria. In it, Odi celebrates the strengthening of advocacy among rural women, through her organisation's commitments to promoting a consciousness that is achievable only through the power of women's collective action.

From the early pages of the book, it is obvious that the author intends to expose readers to RUWEN's part in the facilitation and encouragement of women towards fighting their predominantly patriarchal social realities; by employing the indigenous mechanisms of female mobilisation and cooperation. The organisation also teaches them to become responsive and viable members of their democratic society. The approach the book uses is to present the direct testimonies of various women group leaders and traditional rulers that are influenced by RUWEN's capacity building and empowerment in the context communities.

In the sections, 'Foreword' and 'Introduction', there is a valid relevance and this is preparatory to the testimonies of the women and men which come after it. The writer, in 'Introduction' explores the society upon which the women's narrations are set. It grants a novice to the cultural system of the Igbos an understanding of the system, and how the way it affects the women. This is followed by a summary of RUWEN's projects and activities and a recount of the challenges faced.

Odi writes that 'In contemporary Igbo society, male dominated in various degrees, the belief is that culture and tradition objectively permit or promote the denial of women's rights.' We are prepared to understand that, the Igbo society is one where women are still denied a place in governance, violated, discriminated against under the device of traditional practices, and perceived as economic liabilities even when they are depended on. It is here that we also come to an understanding of RUWEN's extensive intervention, towards political participation, economic emancipation, freedom of speech in the community and a challenge of every form of inhuman treatment.

In the section titled "Situation Analysis of Women's Rights in The South East of Nigeria", we are introduced to a concise, yet expansive understanding of the social limitations the Igbo woman faces in her community. The writer, Lordship (Mrs). Oby Nwankwo does a summary of the background of who those in the South East region of Nigeria are, the social structure and organisation among the Igbos, Socio-cultural Pattern of Conduct, Women and decision Making; she even journeys into the tradition of mobilization and early attempts at women activism: the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 – 1930, down to women's participation in governance and democracy in recent times.

An understanding of the family life in the South East, which Nwankwo presents to us, makes many of the women's narrations better understood. She writes that: 'Traditional values give men proprietary rights over women. These values regard women as inferior to men.' Now, it is unfortunate that many of these practices are still relevant in contemporary times. In this sense, the reader comes to an understanding of some of the women's stories. Issues like being denied rights of inheritance; widows forced to go through humiliating rites, and other matters that can be traced through the genesis of the rural women's economic limitations in their society. It proves that this book can become a suitable resource for educating many Nigerians and participants in women-related policies about the challenges faced by rural women.

The style, though reportorial, retains the voice of the personnel interviewed; such that the reader can feel the joys, relief, pain and even anticipation of the narrators. The intimacy between the reader and the book is comparable only, to one achieved in a docudrama. The presentations are unpretentious and in the over 80 narratives of

different women and traditional leaders (most of them accompanied by photographs), there is an objective approach towards an aspiration, to accomplish that which identify those politico-cultural and socio-economic practices, that present an intervention platform for RUWEN.

A rather interesting perspective of the book is that RUWEN does not create an outlook where men are seen as the enemy, but rather as partners or instrument towards achieving a better community. In essence, the knowledge that women have been wronged, though a fact, becomes simply the platform to create individual awareness and build sustainable socio-economic environments where none had existed.

The appreciative tone of the individuals in their narrations, present RUWEN as a saviour, who saw them out of hardship. The organisation is recognised for the assistance rendered to the women, their men, and by extension the community, through its empowerment programmes. While we may not be able to evaluate the reports of each individual in the book, a re-examination of Lady Onya Caroline's analysis captures that of the other women. She says: '...before RUWEN came, have been under serious subjugation. No woman could express herself for fear of the men and the community. But after RUWEN's training, we were able to at least express ourselves. RUWEN has helped me to travel outside this place.'

In cases like this, the questions of continuity for an organisation like RUWEN comes to fore. Typically, the sheer proliferation of women's associations – mostly propagating diverging objectives and structures – would make a collective action challenging. However the narration of the persons in the book shows that RUWEN appears to have created a platform where the promotion of democracy and development, resistance to subjugation and underdevelopment is advanced. The impact is felt; such that the Traditional Rulers who narrate their position in the project, shows they are pleased with the impact of RUWEN in their communities. The presence of women in the traditional council which would not have been in the past, the reduction of domestic violence, the trainings on financial management and other traditional issues that have debased women for a long time.

In essence, a radically distinct project like this must continue, because the dynamic reflection of the women's transformation can be continuous only if RUWEN is empowered by funding organisations, to empower its focus groups—the women in the rural areas.

This book validates itself as one that not just showcases the success of RUWEN, but also that of the women groups represented and their communities. And by extension, the reader who employs empathy for the women issues raised in the book, also shares in the joy and expectations of the women as they overcome many of their challenges. What question we may be asking Mma Odi is what next? How does the author involve a reader who at once wishes to become a participant in this sort of advocacy?

Again, the success of the collective brings the question of government's place in the scheme of things to mind, and the women's perception of RUWEN as 'the' interventionist. Oriaku Agatha Umunnakwe expresses, "we need RUWEN to tell the Government to construct a good road network for our community and surrounding communities." As this is an ongoing project, the author could consider writing an aggregate of the women's expectations from government, as part of a book chapter.

Grammatical omissions are evident in a number of places. It is important to consider that small slips can be a distraction to a reader. There is need for clear chapterization and tighter editing, even if the intention is to retain the voice of the speakers and preserve the emotions behind their narrations.

All the experiences shared are a viable resource from which activists, scholars of Women's studies, African studies or Developmental Studies can explore the contemporary state and needs of the rural women in Nigeria. Even more, it can become for you and I, a reliable source of understanding issues that affect women in their country. It can also become for the government, firsthand information for assessing the platform to reach rural women in the background of Nigeria's democracy.

There is no doubt that the purpose for which the book is set has been achieved. Many of the women have a sense of self, and they are willing to achieve more and help others

around them to do the same. This is indeed a success point for RUWEN to flaunt, as it meets its set objective of 'enhancing capacities and empowering individuals'.

Bio

Jumoke Verissimo is an award-winning poet/writer. She has worked as an editor, freelance journalist/book reviewer, and copywriter. Her poems and short stories have appeared in journals, newspapers and magazines. Her poems are in translation in about five other languages.