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## BIOGRAPHY

## Dr Stella Okoli - Life and Legacy

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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Pharmaceuticals.**

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**DR STELLA OKOLI - LIFE AND LEGACY**

# Dr Stella Okoli - Life and Legacy

*By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe · Biography · Ozikoro.com*

**D**r. Stella Chinyelu Okoli is one of Nigeria's most influential pharmacists, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists. Widely known as the founder of Emzor Pharmaceutical Industries Limited, she transformed a small retail pharmacy into one of the largest indigenous pharmaceutical manufacturing companies in Nigeria. Over several decades, Dr. Okoli has contributed significantly to the development of Nigeria's healthcare sector by promoting local drug manufacturing, improving access to affordable medicines, and encouraging entrepreneurship. Her life story represents determination, innovation, and the power of indigenous enterprise in Africa's pharmaceutical industry. Through her work in business, philanthropy, and national economic development, Dr. Okoli has become a symbol of female leadership and industrial success in Nigeria.



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## Early Life and Background

Dr. Stella Okoli was born on 30 July 1944 in Kano, Northern Nigeria, although her family originates from Nnewi in Anambra State, a town historically known for entrepreneurship and commerce among the Igbo people. She was born to Felix Ebelechukwu and Margaret Modebelu, who placed strong emphasis on education and discipline. Growing up in a culturally diverse environment in northern Nigeria exposed her to different social and economic realities, which later influenced her dedication to improving healthcare accessibility across the country.

- Her early education began at All Saints Primary School in Onitsha, where she demonstrated strong academic ability. She later attended Ogidi Girls' Secondary School in Anambra State, completing her

secondary education in 1964. Her passion for science and healthcare motivated her to pursue a career in pharmacy, a decision that would later shaped the trajectory of her life and career.

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## Academic Training and Professional Development

After completing her secondary education, Stella Okoli travelled to the United Kingdom to pursue higher education. She studied pharmacy at the University of Bradford, where she obtained a Bachelor of Pharmacy (B.Pharm) degree in 1969. She later continued her studies at Chelsea College, University of London, earning a Master's degree in Biopharmaceutics in 1971.

Her academic training equipped her with advanced knowledge in pharmaceutical sciences, drug formulation, and medical research. While studying and working abroad, she gained practical experience in clinical pharmacy and pharmaceutical distribution. She worked as a pharmacist at Middlesex Hospital in London and later at Boots Chemists, one of the largest pharmacy chains in the United Kingdom. These experiences provided her with exposure to modern pharmaceutical systems and drug manufacturing practices. In addition to her formal education, Dr. Okoli pursued executive management training at prestigious institutions, including Harvard Business School, Lagos Business School, and IESE Business School in Barcelona, where she studied leadership and strategic management.

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# Early Career in the Pharmaceutical Industry

Upon returning to Nigeria, Stella Okoli began her professional career in the healthcare sector. She worked as a pharmacist at Massey Street Children's Hospital in Lagos, where she gained valuable experience in clinical pharmaceutical services. She later joined Parke-Davis Nigeria Limited (now Pharma-Deko Plc), where she worked as a medical representative and eventually rose to the position of sales manager.

During this period, she gained deep insight into the pharmaceutical supply chain, including drug distribution, marketing, and regulatory challenges. These experiences inspired her to pursue entrepreneurship in order to contribute to Nigeria's healthcare sector by producing affordable medicines locally.



Photo credits; Nairametrics

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## Founding of Emzor Pharmaceutical Industries

In January 1977, Stella Okoli established a small retail pharmacy called Emzor Chemists Limited in Somolu, Lagos. The company was initially focused on selling pharmaceutical products and importing medicines to meet local demand. The name “Emzor” was derived from the names of her children: Emeka, Uzoma, and Chike.

By 1984, the business expanded into full pharmaceutical manufacturing and became Emzor Pharmaceutical Industries Limited. Over time, the company developed into one of Nigeria’s leading indigenous pharmaceutical manufacturers, producing a wide range of medicines including analgesics, antibiotics, anti-malarial drugs, vitamins, and cardiovascular medications. Today, Emzor manufactures over 140 pharmaceutical products and distributes medicines across Nigeria and several African countries. Its flagship product, Emzor Paracetamol, has become one of the most widely recognized pharmaceutical brands in Nigeria.

The growth of Emzor represents one of the most successful examples of indigenous pharmaceutical manufacturing in Africa.

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## Leadership and Contributions to Nigeria’s Pharmaceutical Industry

Dr. Stella Okoli’s leadership extends beyond her company. She has played an important role in shaping Nigeria’s pharmaceutical policy

and manufacturing sector. Over the years, she has served in several professional and advisory positions, including:

- Chairman of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Group of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (PMG-MAN)
- Vice President of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN)
- Member of the Nigerian Economic Summit Group
- Member of the Health Matters Advisory Board of Nigeria.

Through these roles, she has advocated for stronger regulation of pharmaceuticals, improved drug quality, and greater investment in local pharmaceutical manufacturing. Her advocacy has helped strengthen Nigeria's capacity to produce medicines locally and reduce reliance on imported drugs.

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## Challenges while starting her business

According to Stella, one of the major challenges she faced while starting her outfit was the unfavourable government policies at that time which favoured foreign multi-national companies to the detriment of local companies.

“There have been policies over the years that have favoured trading multi-nationals, to the detriment and disadvantage of those of us who have invested in the development of the manufacturing aspect of the industry. They are foreigners and could divest, pull out their funds or go back home to their countries. I couldn't go anywhere, hence, I was forced to do the best I could to ensure the quality and the growth of the industry was maintained. We just had to do our best the only way we knew how.”

She also identified double taxation, drug faking and unlawful importation of drugs into the country as major challenges faced over

the years.

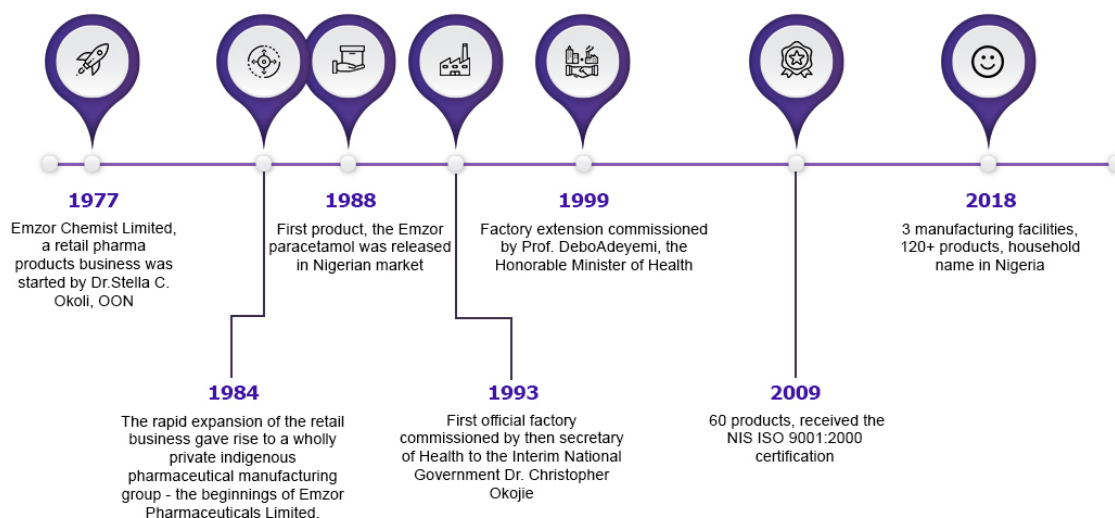


Photo credits; Emzor Pharmaceuticals.

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## Her quest for knowledge

In her quest for growth and self-development, Stella attended several courses across the world, to broaden her knowledge and sharpen her leadership skills. Some of these include The Executive Management Programs for business owners at Harvard Business School, Boston (1997- 1999); implementing Strategic and Organisational Change at I.E.S.E. Business School, Barcelona Spain (1996); Chief Executive Program of the Lagos Business School.

She has also held several professional leadership positions which include Chairman of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Group of Manufacturers Association of Nigeria, member of Economic Summit of Nigeria and member of Health Matters Advisory Board of Nigeria. She served as a Non-Executive Director of Guaranty Trust Bank Plc from April 22, 2010, to July 24, 2014.

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## Philanthropy and Social Impact

Dr. Stella Okoli is also widely respected for her philanthropic activities. In 2006, she established the Chike Okoli Foundation in memory of her son Chike Okoli, who died in 2005. The foundation focuses on health awareness, poverty reduction, and entrepreneurship development.

One of the foundation's major initiatives is the Chike Okoli Centre for Entrepreneurial Studies at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, which trains students in entrepreneurship and innovation. The program has helped thousands of Nigerian students develop business skills and entrepreneurial mindsets. Through this initiative and other outreach programs, Dr. Okoli has contributed significantly to youth empowerment and economic development in Nigeria.

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## Awards and Recognition

Dr. Stella Okoli's achievements have been widely recognized both nationally and internationally. Some of the awards and honors she has received include:

- Member of the Order of the Niger (MON)
- Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON)
- Ernst & Young Lifetime Achievement Award (2016)
- International Women's Entrepreneurial Challenge Award
- ECOWAS International Gold Award
- Silverbird Lifetime Achievement Award (IWEF Foundation, 2018).

She has also received an Honorary Doctor of Business Administration from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in recognition of her

contributions to Nigeria's pharmaceutical and business sectors. Dr. Stella Okoli was married to Barrister Christopher Nnaemeka Okoli, with whom she had three children: Emeka, Uzoma, and Chike. Her husband passed away in 2014 after battling lung cancer. Despite personal challenges, Dr. Okoli has continued to lead her company and philanthropic initiatives with resilience and dedication.

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## Legacy

Dr. Stella Okoli's legacy lies in her pioneering role in building a strong indigenous pharmaceutical industry in Nigeria. At a time when most medicines were imported, she championed local drug production and demonstrated that Nigerian companies could compete globally. Her work has not only improved access to affordable medicines but also created employment opportunities and strengthened Nigeria's industrial capacity. As a female entrepreneur in a traditionally male-dominated industry, she has also served as an inspiration to women across Africa. Today, Dr. Okoli is widely regarded as one of Nigeria's most successful business leaders and one of the architects of the country's modern pharmaceutical manufacturing sector.

The life and legacy of Dr. Stella Okoli illustrate the impact that visionary leadership and entrepreneurship can have on national development. From a small pharmacy shop in Lagos to a multinational pharmaceutical enterprise, her journey reflects resilience, innovation, and commitment to public health. Through Emzor Pharmaceuticals, philanthropic initiatives, and leadership in industry organizations, she has played a crucial role in shaping Nigeria's healthcare and business landscape. Her story remains an inspiration to entrepreneurs, healthcare professionals, and young Africans seeking to make meaningful contributions to society.

## SOURCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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