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## Empowering Igbo Women: *The Legacy of the Slessor Memorial Home, Arochukwu*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

**Mrs Arnott &#038; Girls at Slessor Memorial Home, Arochuku”, a sewing lesson at a centre in Arochukwu established in memory of Scottish missionary Mary Slessor after her death in 1915.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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EMPOWERING IGBO WOMEN

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The early 20th century was an era of great transformation for women across many parts of Africa, and Nigeria was no exception. One such initiative was the Slessor Memorial Home in Arochukwu, established to commemorate Scottish missionary Mary Slessor following her death in 1915. The centre was a source of education and strength for Igbo women, giving them opportunities to learn, create new ideas, and improve their societal position.

Mary Slessor was a social reformer and a missionary. She dedicated her life to the cause of women's and children's welfare in Nigeria. Her mission led to the establishment of the Slessor Memorial Home, which was established to continue her work by providing young women with Western education and vocational training. The intention was not only to train them in vocational skills but also to help them be Christian wives. This indicates the extent to which missions impacted gender roles during that era.

## *Education and Skill Development*

Slessor Memorial Home was made into an institution for training home skills, sewing, and needlework. A 1967 photograph by Dr. G.W. Grootenhuis shows a young Igbo woman in a sewing class intently working at a machine. This is part of a broader movement of empowering women through education and skills acquisition.



Igbo lady decorating house walls with uli, Igboland. Photo by Margaret Courtney-Clarke, late 1980s.

These classes were more than vocational training. The women at the centre combined Igbo traditional designs, such as Uli or Uri patterns, into their embroidery. This fusion of local and foreign methods produced artistic and culturally valuable pieces, many of which are now housed in museums around the world. These pieces showed how women could blend tradition with modernity and establish themselves in a changing world.

### *Uli Art and Cultural Transformation in Igboland: The Influence of Missionary Intervention and the Resilience of Igbo Artistic Traditions*

#### *Women's Empowerment in the Past*

During this time, more people realised how important it was for women to be educated and empowered. In Igbo culture, women had important roles in business, farming, and community leadership. But, the arrival of colonisation and Christian missionaries brought new expectations and chances for women. Programs like the one at the Slessor Memorial Homie helped women balance their traditional roles

and new opportunities by teaching them useful skills.

Education in schools like Slessor Memorial allowed women to have higher incomes and self-esteem. Being able to earn money or create art allowed the women to challenge conventional male roles and express views within their communities and families.

Empowering women through Slessor Memorial Home had a ripple effect throughout the region. The majority of the program's graduates became role models, inspiring other women to seek education and develop themselves. The skills they gained enabled them to play a significant role within their homes and the overall economy, thereby shattering the dependency chain.

Their art and culture were enjoyed all over the globe. Their embroidery work is now being revered in museums around the world. This adoration brought prestige to the women of Igbo and exposed the richness of Igbo cultural heritage to the world.

The Slessor Memorial Home represents more than just a historical initiative; it stands as a testament to the resilience and potential of women when given opportunities to learn and grow. Educating Igbo women and training them in skills created a platform upon which future generations could continue to shatter barriers and assume their place in society.

In an era when women's work went largely unseen, institutions like the Slessor Memorial Home demonstrated how much the world needs women to be nurtured. The legacy of young women who learned, produced, and flourished in such institutions reminds us that education and empowerment can transform lives and communities.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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