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BIOGRAPHY

Professor Dame Ijeoma Uchegbu: *An Igbo Woman Redefining Global Science*

By Chinemerem Okwuchukwu

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PROFESSOR DAME IJEOMA UCHEGBU

Professor Dame Ijeoma Uchegbu: An Igbo Woman Redefining Global Science

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In the quiet resilience of an Igbo woman lies a power that shapes worlds. Dr Ijeoma Uchegbu, a Nigerian-British professor and trailblazer in pharmaceutical nanoscience, embodies this truth. From her early days in southeastern Nigeria to becoming the President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and a celebrated global innovator, her story mirrors the Igbo proverb: “Nwaanyị bụ ife, ọ na-agbasa ọkụ dika anyanwụ” (A woman is a light, she shines like the sun).

Her journey reflects not just individual brilliance but the collective strength of a people whose culture values learning, resilience, and global contribution. Dr. Uchegbu’s life is a bridge between tradition and technology, rooted deeply in Igbo identity yet reaching fearlessly into the future of science.

01

Early Life and Igbo Roots

Born in the 1960s in the eastern part of Nigeria, Dr. Ijeoma Uchegbu grew up in a world still healing from the scars of the Nigerian Civil War. Her parents, like many Igbo families, believed in the power of education as the greatest inheritance. They taught her that wisdom is wealth, as echoed in the saying, “Ihe ọmụma ka ego” (Knowledge is greater than money).

She moved to the United Kingdom as a young girl, where she would

later attend University College London (UCL) and the University of Benin, among others, to pursue her passion for science. Despite the distance from her ancestral home, the Igbo values of hard work (*ịrụsi ọrụ ike*) and perseverance shaped her worldview.

While many saw barriers in her path, she saw opportunities. The cultural wisdom of her roots whispered that “Mmiri mara mma anaghị egbu anụ ọhịa” (Good water does not harm the forest animals). Her gifts would nourish others rather than compete with them.



Professor Dame Ijeoma Uchegbu. Credit: Wolfson.cam.ac.uk

02

Academic Journey and Rise to Prominence

Dr Uchegbu’s academic career began with her studies in pharmacy, which later evolved into groundbreaking research in nanotechnology and drug delivery systems. Her curiosity about how medicines move through the body led her to explore how tiny particles, nanoparticles,

could be used to deliver drugs more effectively, especially for complex diseases like cancer and neurological disorders.

Her research reshaped the field of pharmaceutical nanoscience, and she became one of the leading global experts in drug formulation using polymer nanoparticles. She has authored numerous peer-reviewed papers and holds several patents that have directly influenced how modern medicines are developed.

Currently serving as Professor of Pharmaceutical Nanoscience at University College London (UCL), she also co-founded Nanomerics, a company dedicated to transforming her laboratory discoveries into real-world therapies. Her vision merges science with compassion; she often says that innovation should exist to make lives better, not just to make headlines.

Her success is a living embodiment of the Igbo adage, “E jiri mara nwaanyị bụ ọrụ ya” (A woman is known by her deeds). Through her deeds, Dr Uchegbu has proven that excellence knows no borders.

03

Leadership and Global Recognition

Dr Uchegbu’s leadership extends far beyond the laboratory. In 2024, she was elected President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the first Black woman ever to hold that position in the organisation’s 180-year history. Her election marked not only a personal triumph but a cultural milestone, symbolising how the voices of African women now echo within the highest chambers of global science.

She has delivered keynote lectures around the world, from the London International Youth Science Forum to major academic institutions, inspiring young scientists, especially women and Africans, to break

boundaries. In her BBC interviews, she often emphasises kindness, integrity, and collaboration as the pillars of innovation.

When asked what drives her, she often returns to her heritage, explaining that the Igbo spirit is inherently innovative. Her story shows that “Ọ bụrụ na e mee onye Igbo mma, ọ ga-emekwa mmadụ ọzọ mma” (When you do good to an Igbo person, they will extend that good to others).

Her recognitions include multiple fellowships, honorary awards, and being appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) for services to pharmaceutical sciences. Yet, despite these global honours, she remains grounded in humility, a hallmark of true Igbo strength.

04

Science with a Human Heart

Beyond the technical brilliance, what sets Dr Uchegbu apart is her belief that science must serve humanity. She advocates for affordable healthcare solutions and equitable access to medicines, especially for underserved populations.

In her words, “Science must remember its humanity.” This echoes the Igbo proverb, “E jiri obi eze ebi ndụ” (One lives with a kingly heart), emphasising compassion and moral integrity. Her mentorship of young African scientists ensures that the next generation will carry forward both the scientific and cultural legacy she embodies.

Her work also challenges stereotypes about African women in science, showing that innovation and identity are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they enrich each other, just as she weaves her Igbo pride into her scientific purpose.

Legacy and Inspiration

Dr Ijeoma Uchegbu's story is a shining reminder that greatness begins with identity. Her life bridges continents, generations, and disciplines. She stands as a living metaphor for global innovation rooted in African wisdom.

Her Igbo upbringing taught her to seek solutions rather than excuses, to persevere where others faltered, and to uplift others as she climbed. Through her leadership, research, and humility, she reminds the world that African excellence is not emerging; it has always been here, waiting to be recognised.

Her legacy teaches us that “A na-amụta ihe ọhụrụ site n’aka ndị gara aga” (We learn new things from those who came before us). As young women look up to her, they see that science, culture, and compassion can coexist beautifully.

From her Igbo roots in Nigeria to the laboratories of London, Dr Ijeoma Uchegbu has built bridges of innovation and identity. She proves that an Igbo woman's brilliance can illuminate the world without losing its ancestral glow. Her life is both a song of progress and a prayer of gratitude, a reminder that “Ọkụ nke nna na-enwu n’ọmụmụ nwa” (A father's fire shines again in his child).

As science advances and the world evolves, Dr Uchegbu stands as a timeless symbol that the power of knowledge, when grounded in culture, can heal both people and nations. Her story is not just about innovation; it is about legacy, the enduring legacy of an Igbo woman who dared to dream beyond limits.

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