

An Ebonyi State  
Case Study

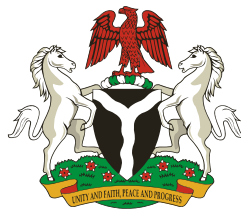


Photographed by Edoziem Chisom Valentine,  
Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria

# Ebonyi's Traditional and Religious Leaders Speak Out to Improve Maternal and Child Health



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Nigeria's Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health and Nutrition (MNCH+N) indicators have improved recently. However, further efforts are needed to address persisting challenges and disparities in MNCH+N outcomes. Ebonyi State has low maternal health indicators, with a high maternal mortality rate of 602 per 100,000 population (NDHS, 2018), contributed to by several complex factors. The Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria project led a Human Centered Design assessment in 2022, which reflected insights that ingrained traditions and practices shape behaviors of individuals and communities. These deeply rooted traditions influence beliefs and attitudes in communities, influencing how people live their day-to-day lives. This includes how gender expectations and roles are carried out; who makes decisions and how decisions are made about a woman's health, family size and responsibility for caring for children. All of these ultimately impacts MNCH+N practices and outcomes.

For example, many residents in Ezzainyimagu, a remote and rural community in Ebonyi state, do not use health services provided by health facilities. Instead, because of long-established norms in the community, they rely on traditional healers and traditional birth attendants. This choice and practice limits access to skilled health care services during childbirth and antenatal care (ANC), raising the risk for maternal and child mortality rates.



**“I delivered six of my seven children at home, some with Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) and some without TBA. My challenge was the distance to the health facility, availability of someone to support, and our belief that strong women should deliver at home”**

**Juliana Mbam** in Ndioshia village of Ezzainyimagu, Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state.

**Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria sought to understand better how and why community members in Ebonyi State practice different behaviors related to MNCH+N.**

This process provided insights into the influence of gender and cultural norms on MNCH+N practices, which includes norms on

who has financial control, family roles and power dynamics and the different cultural expectations placed on community members based on their gender. These influence decisions and practices related to a woman's and child's health care. In addition, community members make decisions using health facilities based on their experiences, perception of quality of care, confidence level in the providers, modern treatment effectiveness, and whether an influential person trusts health information.



Insights also showed that religious and traditional leaders serve as influential people who shape the norms that impact maternal and child health practices. For example, expectations for modesty and the need for privacy, especially for women, are influenced by strong religious and cultural beliefs and can be reinforced by religious and traditional leaders. This inhibits a woman's ability to communicate about her maternal and child health needs, to learn about maternal and child health, and to seek the health services she or her child may need. Through religious and traditional leaders speaking out openly and publicly about positive social and gender norms and MNCH+N practices, community members would likely shift to norms that promote healthier behaviors.

**“Most men in our community, including my husband, do not support women delivering at the health facility because they feel it wastes time. They often feel they have more important things to do”**

Juliana Mbam in Ndioshia village of Ezzaiyimagu, Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state.

With a deepened understanding of the influential role of religious and traditional leaders, Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria adopted an existing approach already used by the project in Northern Nigeria. The project developed an approach for religious and traditional leaders in Ebonyi that would leverage their high level of importance and influence as trusted messengers to share messages made through declarations, encouraging shifts in social and gender norms. These declarations encourage community members to shift norms that inhibit healthy behaviors and to adopt healthy MNCH+N practices.

Influential religious and traditional leaders from surrounding communities are organized into Social and Behaviour Change- Advocacy Core Groups (SBC-ACGs). Within this structure, together, they collaborate to reflect on the harmful practices within their community that a shift in norms can address. They then use their platforms, status and influence to pass on positive messages during religious and traditional gatherings that promote changes in harmful social norms, beliefs and practices related to MNCH+N behaviors.

His Royal Highness (HRH) Eze Linus Nwizu, the traditional leader of the Ezzaiyimagu community, has been an SBC-ACG member since July 2021, using his influence through religious teachings and traditional declarations. He regularly shares messages encouraging community members to reduce harmful practices and to promote positive MNCH+N behaviors. He has used his platforms to dispel myths, misconceptions and the cultural practice of not using colostrum at birth. Colostrum is well-nourished breast milk that comes from a woman immediately after delivery and is beneficial for the newborn. A cultural practice in the area discourages women from doing this and instead promotes washing the colostrum. He emphasizes the importance of early breastfeeding initiation within one hour after delivery, exclusive breastfeeding and completing all antenatal visits. He also openly discusses topics not traditionally discussed, including the importance of male engagement and spousal communication and support for MNCH+N care.

“My participation in Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria programs opened my eyes to some cultural practices that encourage community members to rely on traditional birth attendance for ANC visits/delivery. Through the new knowledge I got, I realized that the death of pregnant women in most cases in my community is because husbands refuse to support their wives and are ignorant of the women's belief in traditional herbs.”

HRH Eze Linus Nwizu, the traditional leader of Ezzajimagu, Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state



HRH Eze Linus Nwizu, the traditional leader of Ezzajimagu, Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state during the public declaration directly addressing social and gender norms hindering the adoption of MNCH+N

As a result of the training and coaching received from Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria, HRH Eze Linus Nwizu, in consultation with the representatives of the 28 villages in the Ezzainyimagu community, made a public declaration directly addressing social and gender norms hindering the adoption of MNCH+N after on addressing:

- Henceforth, the traditional council will support emergency transport service for ANC visits and facility delivery.
- Orient the community routinely on the dangers of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriage and the importance of spousal communication.

To sustain this decree, a task force was set up to ensure implementation and accountability throughout the community, leading to improvement in ANC visits and facility deliveries.

**“After the declaration, my husband transported me to deliver at the health facility for the first time, and I can boldly say there is a clear difference between the baby I delivered at the health facility as the baby is healthier, rarely sick and has rapid growth than others I delivered at home.”**

Since October 2021, 175 religious and traditional leaders in Ebonyi state have made 885 Speak Outs reaching 159,593 people with messages supporting positive social and gender norms and behaviors. Declarations such as these, other types of Speak Outs and social and behavior change interventions implemented in Ebonyi have contributed to 34,135 people accessing health services.

**“I am pregnant, and my husband cares for me just like he decreed. I have registered for ANC through his support, and he has supported ensuring I eat right. He follows me to ANC visits whenever he has a chance and also follows me when any of my children are sick. And also support other pregnant women in the community”**

Ugueze Ifeoma Nwizi, wife of HRH Eze Linus Nwizi.

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