

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: NIGERIA

**Transcript of Josephine Effah-
Chukwuma
Interviewer: Ronke Olawale**

**Location: Lagos, Nigeria
Date: November 9th, 2019**

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Josephine Effah-Chukwuma was born on September 29, 1966 and received her Bachelors in English and Literature. She worked briefly as a journalist with *The Diplomat* until 1992, when her desire for more education led her to the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, Netherlands, where she obtained an MA in development studies, with a focus on women issues.¹ She worked for a few years with the Constitutional Rights Project (CRP) and in 1999 founded Project Alert on Violence Against Women, a not-for-profit organization that provides legal services and emergency shelter/space for abused women and girls.² The organization supports gender equality and works to eradicate social norms and cultural practices that hamper the advancement of women. The NGO opened its first shelter, Sophia's Place, for abused/assaulted women and girls in Nigeria in 2001.³ Through counseling, advocacy, and temporary shelter, the organization helps to break the silence surrounding domestic and sexual abuse in Nigeria.

Ronke Olawale is a PhD Candidate in Social Work and Anthropology at the University of Michigan. She is interested in culture, care, and infectious disease; death and dying, and meaning-making; kinship and child welfare/wellbeing; and intergenerational care. Her dissertation explores the social and cultural context in which the 2013-2016 Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic occurred in Liberia.

¹ *The Diplomat* is a current-affairs magazine covering the Asia-Pacific region. (<https://thediplomat.com> 5/9)

² The Constitutional Rights Project (CRP) is a non governmental organization founded in 1990, dedicated to ensuring that Nigerian legislation and law enforcement (“Constitutional Rights Project Nigeria.” SourceWatch. Accessed May 09, 2020. https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Constitutional_Rights_Project_Nigeria)

Project Alert on Violence Against Women is a non-governmental organization founded in January, 1999 to support women’s rights by conducting research, educating the public on human rights and advocating for the protection of women, and providing support to female victims of violence. (“Project Alert in Brief.” Project Alert on Violence Against Women. Accessed May 09, 2020. <https://projectalertnig.org/breif-info/>)

³ An NGO, or non-governmental organization, is made up of independent citizens who advocate for policy change on a particular issue(s). Many NGOs are dedicated to human rights, women’s rights, environmental issues, and social programs. (“NGOs.” Global Policy Forum. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos.html>) Sophia’s Place was established by Project Alert on Violence Against Women in 2001 as a temporary and confidential shelter for women and their children who are victims of violence. (“Nigeria: Group Launches Shelter for Battered Women, Children.” allAfrica. Accessed May 09, 2020. <https://allafrica.com/stories/200105240385.html>)

Ronke Olawale: Good morning, Ma, it is my pleasure meeting and speaking with you today. This interview is part of the Global Feminisms Project, a multisite international project sponsored by the University of Michigan. Our goal in undertaking this oral history is to create and preserve conversations with women whose scholarship and/or activism has contributed to the advancement of women and a lot of focus on the issues that affect women and feminists globally. We would like to start out by asking you to introduce yourself, please tell me your full names and how you would like to be addressed. In telling me your full names, I would also like to have the spelling on record so that I do not misrepresent you.

Josephine Effah-Chukwuma: Thank you very much; it is my pleasure. My name is Josephine Effah-Chukwuma. Josephine, J-O-S-E-P-H-I-N-E. Effah-Chukwuma is a compound name, E-F - F - A - H, hyphen, C-H-U-K-W-U-M-A. So that's Josephine Effah-Chukwuma and I am the founder/executive director of Project Alert on Violence Against Women, an organization set up in January 1999 to promote and protect the rights of women and young girls in Nigeria, especially the rights of women and girls to live a life free of violence. So, in a nutshell that's who I am. I like to be addressed as Josephine.

RO: All right thank you, so let's just get started. What really in your background drove you to this work? How did you start?

JE: I'm a Nigerian. I was born in Nigeria in the '60s, mid '60s. I grew up in Nigeria, I grew up in Lagos specifically.⁴ I came from a very close-knit family, my family from Cross River state, Calabar, but my parents got married and had us all in Lagos.⁵ And like I said, a very close-knit family of six girls. I never, I wasn't conscious of the difference between the genders, girl and boy, in our home because it was never an issue. I had cousins coming to live with me, but by the time I was getting to 13, 14, 15 years of age a lot of things started hitting me. You're in school, you're socializing with people, you have neighbors around you, and the first thing that hit me as a thirteen-year-old was an auntie of mine who my dad was so fond of, actually she got married from their compound--my dad used to call her "Mommy" because according to him she was one sister of his that looked so much like their mom. So, he calls her "Mommy." He was so fond of her. Then she got married to a very abusive man and I remember almost every time, I can't count how many times, she would come running to the house with torn blouses and my dad would be so angry and my mom would be upset and everything, and I'm like, what's going on here? That was one.

⁴ Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria, located on the southern coast. ("Lagos." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos>)

⁵ Cross River state is a state in the south of Nigeria bordering Cameroon, Calabar is its capital. ("Cross River State." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_River_State)

Then, I had a neighbor who died, a couple, an Igbo man, but I think his mom was Yoruba because he gave some of his children Yoruba names.⁶ When people have mixed marriages like that you see them oftentimes trying to reflect the ethnicity of both people. Efik and Igbo, or Yoruba and Hausa, the Hausa parent will give you Hausa name, the Igbo parent will give-- you know that kind of a thing.⁷ He was called Babadele, because they had a son called Dele. And they had four girls and a boy, and then he was the last. And then this man had an accident, was in hospital for a while and then he died. And then I saw the way his family swooped in like vampires and whatever, there was a lot of drama, you know? -- in relation to the wife, and the children and property and a lot of things. And of course I went to university. So, growing up as a young teenager up to young adulthood, I was becoming angry about a lot of things. I had a lot of questions, about the way and manner women and girls were being treated. I saw some of my friends in university having boyfriends who beat them. So, this was-- unconsciously, that was how it started. As a young girl wondering, questioning, a lot of things about the treatment of women and girls. So that was how it all started for me and somehow by the time I was leaving university there were some key decisions that I made to myself. I was like "Josephine you are going to draw boundaries in relationships, Josephine you are not going to be treated like shit, Josephine you are going to buy your first car by yourself, no one is going to buy it for you" because I happen to have a friend during youth service -- the man bought her a car and because he had a problem the man said, "Drop those keys there." And I'm like, "You know someone is playing god with you here.?"

You know so, all those things together and then by the time I finished my—I graduated from university and I did my youth service, a compulsory one year of youth service and I was working up north in Kaduna as a journalist.⁸ It was then I started, I have always loved reading and writing. I love writing, I love reading a lot. So, while I was a proofreader, I was engaged in a newspaper as a proofreader for a while. I would always write. And I wasn't

⁶ Igbo and Yoruba are two of six major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbo dominate the southeast and the Yoruba dominate the southwest. Most contemporary Yoruba speak Yoruba and practice either Islam or Christianity. Some contemporary Igbo speak Igbo dialects, and most practice Christianity. ("Culture of Nigeria." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Nigeria#Yoruba_Culture)

⁷ Efik and Hausa are two of six major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Efik are primarily in southern Nigeria in the Cross River state, and the Hausa are located in both northern and southern Nigeria. The Efik speak Efik and mainly practice Christianity. The Hausa are the largest ethnic group in Sub-Saharan Africa; most Hausa speak Hausa and practice Islam. ("Culture of Nigeria." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Nigeria#Yoruba_Culture)

⁸ Effah-Chukwuma is referencing the National Youth Service Corps, a program that requires university graduates to complete one year of service doing a variety of jobs to promote the development of Nigeria. Young adults are placed in regions different from where they grew up, where they work for a year after a short training period. ("National Youth Service Corps." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Youth_Service_Corps)

Kaduna is the capital of Kaduna state in the north-west of Nigeria. ("Kaduna." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaduna>)

trying... always writing about serious stuff, like things affecting women and all of that. I can remember some of my fellow corporers saying, “Josephine, you’re too serious. You take life too seriously. Enjoy youth service! Youth service is funny time, it is one year of fun. Do you want to win the Corper of the Year award” and all of those things.⁹ But I had fun! But I always had this in mind that being a girl, being a woman, I shouldn’t be judged by my looks or the lipstick I have on, or the clothes I have on, I should be judged by my brains. I’ve got brains, you know? There are a lot of much more serious stuff affecting women other than grooming, fashion, lipstick. So typically newspapers those days believe that if you are a woman writing, you should be writing about food, you should be writing about fashion, and they never saw any of that with me. So, it was like, “You this young girl, what is it? Life is not so serious, come on! Be your age, 21, 22,” and you know all of that. Yeah, so that was it, that was where I cut my teeth, and then from there, I got admission to the Netherlands to study at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague.¹⁰ And guess what the course was? Development studies, specializing in women and development, now called gender studies. And that was where I cut my tooth and that was where I got grounded in feminism and feminist theories.¹¹ That was when I said, okay now I understand a lot of the anger, now I understand a lot of the questioning I had as a young girl. The issue of socialization, the issue of gender discrimination, gender stereotyping, and all of that.¹² Feminism, patriarchy, yeah.¹³

RO: So, what does your career look like right now?

⁹ The award referenced by Effah-Chukwuma is the State Honours Award given to “outstanding” Corps members at the passing-out ceremony concluding each cohort’s year of service. (“The National Youth Service Year: An Overview.” National Youth Service Corps. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.nysc.gov.ng/serviceyear.html>)

¹⁰ An idiom meaning to gain experience with something for the first time. (“cut (one’s) teeth.” The Free Dictionary. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cut+my+teeth>)

The Institute of Social Studies is an international graduate school of policy oriented social science. (“Institute of Social Studies.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Institute_of_Social_Studies)

¹¹ Feminism includes a range of movements and ideas that work to promote gender equality, focusing on the notion that societies are male-dominated and women are at a disadvantage in many aspects of life. Feminist theories place feminism in academic and philosophical discourse. (“Feminism.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>)

¹² Socialization is the process of learning and teaching that results in internalizing norms and ideologies of a society or culture. (“Socialization.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialization>)

Gender stereotyping is the practice of ascribing traits or roles to a man or woman based solely on the individual’s gender group membership. Gender stereotyping can be harmful when it results in discrimination based on an individual’s gender identity. (“Gender Stereotyping.” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Accessed May 10, 2020.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/GenderStereotypes.aspx>)

¹³ Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold the majority of political power and social and moral authority, and can determine the way in which a society’s government and economy are designed. (“Patriarchy.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarchy>)

JE: I'm at the peak of it, of my career. I mean this is twenty-five years of being an activist and twenty years of founding and running Project Alert on Violence Against Women. I would say, without knowing it, I've been a feminist all my life, but I didn't know it of course in my teenage years, but I was questioning things and that for me is feminism. When you are seeing injustices perpetrated against women and girls and you are asking why, why, why? You know, you don't just take it for granted or take it as given. "It's okay that's the way women should be treated," and I'm like why? The boys is not being treated this way, why is the girl being treated this way? The man has not been treated this way, why is the woman being treated this way? And all of that. The point I'm in now is a point where sitting back and looking back, one has come a long way and one is asking what next? And for the younger ones, it's getting the younger ones also to be active. You know, the whole issue of intergenerational dialogue, intergenerational feminists across generations talking and all of that. I have spent twenty-five, going on twenty-six years.

RO: And in all of these years, what would you say are some of your most significant lifetime achievements?

JE: For me, the most significant lifetime achievement, for me, has been founding Project Alert on Violence Against Women and building it up to the position it is in now. Because Project Alert on Violence Against Women is actually the first women's rights organization run from a feminist perspective using a feminist advocacy strategy which is all about not seeing issues of violence against women as an isolated case of one crazy man against a woman but more at structures and institutions.¹⁴ You know, there are systems that allow, that tolerate, that, you know, justifies the treatment of women. You know, you talk of patriarchy, you talk of the family as an institution and all of that. So, for me founding, breaking the silence, Project Alert was the first women's rights organization to deliberately and specifically focus on violence against women. Before then, you had some broad human rights organizations like Constitutional Rights Project, Civil Liberties Organization, you had Community Health and Ngozi Iwere's group.¹⁵ But they were working on broad human rights issues, community rights groups-- Ngozi Iwere's group was focusing on community,

¹⁴ Feminist advocacy strategy is based on an analysis of what needs to be changed to advance women's rights and why. This analysis is done through a feminist lens, based in feminist theory and focusing on an analysis of patriarchy and its effects on women. (Evans, Kristy. "A guide to feminist advocacy." Gender and Development. November 2015. Accessed May 10, 2020.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/20053159?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

¹⁵ Civil Liberties Organization, founded in 1987, is a non governmental organization dedicated to promoting human rights. Ngozi Iwere's group is called Community Life Project and is a non-governmental community-based organization founded in 1992, working to promote community empowerment and participation in government.

("Nigeria: Information on the Civil Liberties Organization." Refworld.

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab3a24.html>. "Community Life Project." MacArthur Foundation.

<https://www.macfound.org/grantees/1115/>. Accessed May 10, 2020.)

grassroots community advocacy and all of that.¹⁶ So, Project Alert came in at that time to occupy a glaring—a space where there was a vacancy, clearly.

And that was just after the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.¹⁷ During that conference, the outcome of that conference was twelve critical areas of concern, known as the Beijing Platform for Action. It identified twelve critical areas of concern, as areas that governments the world over should look at. One of such areas, one of the areas was violence against women. I was a young twenty-eight-year-old, at that time when I attended that conference. My takeaway from that, coming back was that I need to start something on violence against women. I need to deliberately-- we need a group that would deliberately focus on abuse of women. We need a group that would set up a shelter for abused women and protect them. And we need a group that will consciously carry out research and documentation, because I studied development studies focusing on women and development. And I remember when I was writing my thesis in the Netherlands then-- 93, 94, I basically ran into a dead end. I remember sitting there in the Netherlands sending messages back home to friends, family members, “please I need information, I need statistics on domestic violence, occurrence rate, prevalence rate, impact,” all of that; nothing, there was nothing.¹⁸ I almost threw up my hands, and I almost gave up on that thesis because this was primary research; it was supposed to be a primary research of course with some secondary research--what has been written, review of relevant literature.¹⁹ The little I saw was from Women in Nigeria (WIN) which happens to be the first consciously developed feminist group in Nigeria: (WIN) Women in Nigeria.²⁰ And my supervisor then in the Netherlands happens to be an American who was based in Nigeria before, and was one of the 3 or 4 women who started Women in Nigeria. Her name was

¹⁶ Grassroots community advocacy is a form of social/political movement whereby members of a community organize to advocate for change by contacting local and state governments about issues they need solved in their own community. (“Grassroots.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grassroots>)

¹⁷ The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was organized by the United Nations with more than 17,000 participants. It marked a turning point for global gender equality movements by putting forth a widely accepted 12-platform agenda, the Beijing Platform for Action, highlighting critical areas. This conference was followed by a series of five-year reviews to assess implementation of this agenda. (“World Conferences on Women.” UN Women. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>)

¹⁸ The occurrence rate is the number of new cases of domestic violence during a specified interval, and prevalence rate is the proportion of cases of domestic violence in a particular population at a particular time. (“Measures of Risk.” Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/csels/dsepd/ss1978/lesson3/section2.html>)

¹⁹ Primary research involves the generation of new data through field work, and secondary research involves gathering information to answer a research question from data published by others. (“Secondary research.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secondary_research)

²⁰ Women in Nigeria was founded in 1982 to advocate for the advancement of women’s rights in Nigeria. It has focused on research and documentation, issuing publications intended to affect change. (“Women in Nigeria (organization).” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Nigeria_\(organization\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Nigeria_(organization)))

Renee Pittin, Professor Bene Madunagu, Ayesha Imam and there was one other lady I can't remember her name; those were the ladies that started Women in Nigeria.²¹ Starting from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria.²² So, some of the conferences and papers presented at workshops were things I basically fell back on to a very large extent. So, when I decided to start Project Alert, I said to myself, the first program, and the program that would be dearest to my heart, will be research and documentation. In order to be part of the solution, and not part of the problem, we need to generate information, generate data to help academics, to help activists, anyone and everyone interested in this-- contribute to knowledge. For me, that's what I'll pride myself that I've done using Project Alert.

RO: So, in the course of all this work, what kind of issues do you see that really cause abuse, assault of women? And then I know that you have that shelter and I imagine that you've been having, like, cases even from the outset, how prevalent and what kind of things result into women and gender violence in Nigeria?

JE: What I always tell people, that if I'm to answer that question honestly, really there's no reason for abuse of women and girls, for gender-based violence, there's absolutely no reason. What people prefer as reasons are often justifications, basically people try to justify their actions, but like I said earlier, when you look at the issue of gender-based violence-- for you to get a proper understanding of it, you need to look at systems and structures in place; and at the foundation of this is patriarchy. The rule of men. Nigeria is a patriarchal society just like many other African societies and even countries in Europe and America. They are not totally exempt from patriarchy but the level, the occurrence rate, and prevalence rate, and the entrenchment rate could be different, relatively different. But patriarchy is a global issue. So, if you look at patriarchy, a system that favors men, a system that makes men feel entitled, actually gives them an edge over women, you'll understand why gender-based violence is going on. Because patriarchy says men are superior and above to women. A woman, when she gives birth to three female children, two even, and the third one is a female again, guess what, she starts crying for herself. She starts feeling sorry for herself. Why? Because the number of children, they don't start counting them until the first boy comes. The other ones, the other 3, 4, 5, they're not human, they are girls. You know? That's patriarchy, that's culture. Because patriarchy is now taken into culture, it's taken into religion, it's taken into even laws, where you see discriminatory laws for similar offences. I can give an example of that. In the criminal code in Nigeria, for example,

²¹ The First Annual Women in Nigeria Conference included presentations from feminist scholars Renee Pittin, Bene Madunagu, Ayesha Imam, Bilkisu Yusuf, Molar Ogunjipe-Leslie and Therese Nweke. ("Women in Nigeria (organization).") Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Nigeria_\(organization\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Nigeria_(organization))

²² Ahmadu Bello University is a federal government research university in Kaduna state in northern Nigeria. ("Ahmadu Bello University.") Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadu_Bello_University

rightly in law, similar offences should carry similar punishment. But in our criminal code, you will see indecent assault of a girl is considered to be a misdemeanor, meaning a lesser offence.²³ Indecent assault of a boy is considered to be a felony, a higher offence. The first question is, how do you define indecent assault? One. Two, between a male and a female, who is most likely to be indecently assaulted? Between a male and a female. Indecent is what is indecent. Who gets more assaulted? Most likely the female! And so, it tells you that, the girl is lesser, it is more severe for you to indecently assault a boy or a male. If it's a girl or a woman, it's okay to some extent.

So, you see a huge tolerance level for abuse of women and young girls. A little girl is raped, and you are trying to seek justice for her, and someone tells you: come on it's just sex. She's going to forget it, she's a young child, it's just sex, she wasn't killed, she wasn't butchered, her legs were not cut. You know? So, it's just sex. And I'm like, rape is not sex. Rape is abusive sex. Sex is what? 'Ordinary sex' -- I'll put it in quotes -- is one I consent to and I enjoy it with you. But rape is not consensual sex, it's abusive sex, it's violent sex. So, you can't just call rape sex! You know? And all of that, so, these are some of the issues, you know, like the people say. So, there are a lot of so-called cultural traditions, the religion, the manipulation and misinterpretation of religious books. You know, when people say, the Bible says the woman should be subservient, should be submissive to the husband. It's true, but what does the same bible say about the man? Love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave up his life for it, for the church. Where does submissiveness stop? They use submissiveness, they manipulate and misinterpret that to mean the woman must be an idiot. So even when your husband tells you, go kill somebody, or go rob a bank, because you have to be submissive, you have to go do it. So, if you don't do that, then you get punished for that by way of beating, so it's okay. What people call causes, like I said reasons, like I said, there are no reasons, they are mere justifications because really there is no reason for gender-based violence. Every human being - man, woman, and child - has the right to life, to dignity of the human person. To freedom from torture. And if you look at every form of gender-based violence, if you look at the entire gamut of gender-based violence, be it domestic, be it non-domestic, physical, be it sexual, be it harmful traditional practices, sexual harassment, rape, in every act of gender-based violence, several human rights abuses have taken place. Threats to life, women die as a result of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Their lives get threatened. Dignity of the human person gets taken away. You get raped. You get gang raped. Is that dignifying? Torture! What is rape if it is not torture? What is domestic violence if it is not torture? Physical and psychological. So, in every act of gender-based violence that occurs, one or more, if not

²³ Indecent assault is assault with sexual features, short of penetration or rape. The term has been largely replaced by "sexual assault" which includes the actions covered by indecent assault and rape. ("Indecent assault." Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indecent%20assault>)

several human rights abuses have taken place. That's what happens when we talk of gender-based violence.

RO: So, I imagine that in the course of this work there have been a lot of things including litigations and all of that. Are there some ways that your experiences doing this work have resulted in changes in the way that you engage with feminism and activism?

JE: Yeah, Project Alert has come a long way, like I said. We are twenty years this year. And like I said, right from the beginning, at the birth of Project Alert, I am the founder, but I founded Project Alert along with five other women and we are all women in our forties and fifties now, we are all women that were born in Nigeria. Because one thing with Nigerians, when we want to shy away from something, the first thing we say is, "oh, it's a foreign concept, because you were born in the US and the UK you come in with all this" - no. We were all born in Nigeria. I was born in Lagos; I grew up in Surulere.²⁴ I saw a lot of things happening as a child, as a young adult. All of us. So, right from the beginning we were very clear that we're all coincidentally feminists. In the sense that we interrogate, we question. You know, people shy away from that word "feminist" and I tell people, "it's okay, If you don't want, okay, I'm a gender activist." It's okay. But let me tell you just one thing, for as long as you are questioning the treatment of women, for as long as you are seeing and fighting for social injustices against women and girls; for as long as you are saying it's not okay for a girl to be raped, a woman to be raped, for as long as you are saying that your daughter should be safe in any environment, you are feminist. Because it's all about fighting social injustices. So, we were very clear that Project Alert was being set up to respond, to deal with the issues of violence against women, using feminist advocacy strategies. And like I said earlier, what do I mean by feminist advocacy strategies? Feminist advocacy strategies involve engaging systems. Moving beyond--You know the feminist struggle has come a long way. When it started it was all about... especially when you're talking about how the women's suffrage started with the issue of voting rights, being able to vote as women, and all of that. Equal pay, for equal work and all of that. And then the issue of domestic violence was initially seen as, it's a crazy man, a sane man would not do this. But for me advocacy strategies say no, it's not just a crazy man, it's the system that is allowing him to do that. A dysfunctional system. A patriarchal system which informs the criminal justice system. Because, who creates all this—who makes laws? Human beings. Who are the courts? Who are the judges and the policemen? Human beings. And they are men and women. With the men already being at an advantage because of patriarchy.

²⁴ Surulere is an area within Lagos on the southern coast of Nigeria. ("Surulere." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surulere>)

So, right from the beginning, we knew we knew we were challenging patriarchy. Right from the beginning we said we would employ feminist advocacy strategies which included carrying out research and documentation. And that is why for us at Project Alert, every intervention, every single intervention that has been carried out in the twenty years of this organization, starts with a research. Our very first research was the very first nationwide documentation of the prevalence, the forms, and the impact of violence against women in Nigeria. The title of that... it came out in a book report we titled, *Beyond Boundaries*.²⁵ And what is the meaning of *Beyond Boundaries*? We are saying violence against women was beyond boundaries. It cuts across ethnicity, it's not about how educated or how beautiful you are, it wasn't only affecting Muslims, or Christians, it wasn't only affecting northerners against southerners, or the poor against the rich, the key thing is: you are a woman. And just that fact that you are a woman or a girl, exposes you to the risk, the very high risk, of being abused. So, every single intervention, that documentation, that research, threw up to us the need for a shelter. Which is the reason why two years after, 2001, we opened the very first shelter for abused women in Nigeria. Imagine as recent as 2001. Meanwhile shelters came out from the feminist movement in the 70s, in the 70s, 80s, but in Nigeria, the very first shelter for abused women in Nigeria was set up by Project Alert; and is called Sophia's Place. Actually that is the building right there, that picture, that's it, that's the building. So, it's the first shelter for abused women known as Sophia's Place. Why Sophia? Sophia is a Greek name, a Catholic name, Sophia means "wisdom". And basically, what Project Alert is saying is, "women please be wise, you do not need to die, marriage is not a death sentence. You do not need to be silent." Project Alert came into existence at a time when there was a lot of silence; silence was a weapon, a severe weapon used against women because women did not talk. They were scared, they were frightened, they were ashamed, they were ridiculed, and so we came in to break the silence. So, every-- be it the shelter, be it our legal aid, that is yet another feminist advocacy strategy. We give as a part of our practical support services, the shelter is there, legal aid, we have lawyers to take up cases for women in court, and then we engage the system. In the twenty years of the existence of Project Alert, we have worked with other-- during this period other organizations have come up, there have been legal reforms, there are laws now. When Project Alert came into existence in 1999 there was no state that had a domestic violence law, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act of today, which redefines and broadens the definition of rape, was not in existence.²⁶ Female genital mutilation laws were not in

²⁵ *Beyond Boundaries* is a book published by Effah-Chukwuma presenting empirical research on violence against women in Nigeria.

²⁶ The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, passed in May 2015, outlaws violence against women, including rape, domestic abuse, stalking, abandonment, etc., and includes explicit explanations of each form of violence, most notably rape. ("Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015." International Labour Organization. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/104156/126946/F-1224509384/NGA104156.pdf>)

existence.²⁷ Widowhood practice laws were not in existence.²⁸ But now we have all of that. So this is what feminist advocacy strategies does. You engage the system, you engage in legal reforms, you engage in policy advocacy, social advocacy, engaging the media. This is what we have done over the years.

RO: Okay, great, wonderful. I'm just wondering, I know you began to touch on some of these issues already, for you, what do you perceive to be the relationship between feminist scholarship and activism? What is the relationship?

JE: The relationship ideally should be a symbiotic one, a marriage; because both--activism fits into academics, academics fits into advocacy.²⁹ I will use the example of Project Alert. At the point Project Alert started in 1999, there was little or nothing being done in terms of academics, feminist academics. And like I said, it started with the first organized feminist movement in Nigeria was Women in Nigeria. And the women involved in this were women in the academics. Renee Pittin was a lecturer in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Professor Bene Madunagu was a lecturer in University of Calabar. Ayesha Imam was also an academic. So, they saw a lot of those things. So, it started off, and they started engaging, and they got other people involved in it. Beyond that, as it went on, it moved more into activism. The next generation after that, it was more of activism. With little or nothing been done academically, in terms of theories, localizing and all of that. When Project Alert started, that was why we had to-- our starting point was research and documentation. Project Alert did a lot of heavy lifting at that point in time, because if there were academics actually documenting and researching and coming out with publications on issues such as this from a feminist perspective, as an NGO probably we wouldn't have had to have research and documentation, we would have relied upon what was coming from this, but there was little or nothing going on. So we had to do a lot of heavy lifting at that point in time. Because all of our research, all of our documentation, are from a feminist perspective. Talking about using reviewed literatures, using various feminist theories – be it radical feminists, liberal feminists, Marxist-social feminism, of course we have African

²⁷ Female genital mutilation is defined by the WHO as total or partial removal of external female genitalia or other injury to female genitals for non-medical purposes, and is mostly carried out on young girls from infancy to age 15. ("Female genital mutilation." World Health Organization. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>)

²⁸ Widowhood practices are rituals and practices expected of widows that are degrading and dehumanizing, with the primary motivation of proving their innocence in the death of their husband. They include specific mourning practices, purification rites, and limits on inheritance of money and property. (Nwogu, Mary-Imelda Obianuju. "The legal anatomy of cultural widowhood practices in southeastern Nigeria: The need for a panacea." March 2015. Accessed May 10, 2020. <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Legal-Anatomy-of-Cultural-Widowhood-Practices-in-South-Eastern-Nigeria-The-Need-for-a-Panacea.pdf>)

²⁹ A symbiotic relationship is characterized as a close and mutually beneficial relationship. ("symbiotic." Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbiotic>)

feminism coming on– there are different strands of feminism.³⁰ So, the relationship between feminist academics and feminist activists, is and rightfully should be, a marriage. We need each other. The academics, looking at it from the theory, need to hear from us what is on the field, in order for them to theorize. And we need their theories to also test it out here and see what is going on. So, that kind of -- I'll call it “pracademics”, that’s “practice” and “academics,” in the area of feminism, it’s what is needed. It’s the right way to go.

RO: So, for you, what is feminism? If you were asked to define it.

JE: Simply put, I’ve said it, feminism is an ideology.³¹ It is that ideology that talks about social justice for women, it’s all about the humanity of women. That women are first and foremost human beings, before they are women. Some people will say, okay you’re talking about humanism against feminism. I say, well, if you want to, but feminism narrows in on women; humanism is every human being; feminism is a woman is first and foremost a human being. So, feminism for me is about social justice; it’s about equality, equity for women and young girls.

RO: And in terms of global feminism, you said it’s an ideology, how does that differ from African feminism? If you also want to tell me what African feminism means?

JE: The whole thing about ideologies is that the world generally, we are all at different levels of growth and experiences, and that has to be recognized. At some point in history, while women in the Global North were struggling for the ability to vote, equal pay for equal work; for us in Africa, we were struggling with colonialism and even survival as a people.³²

³⁰ Radical feminism calls for a radical reordering of society, and argues that the root of women’s oppression is patriarchal social systems. (“Radical feminism.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical_feminism#Theory_and_ideology)

Liberal feminism values individual action towards the liberation of women and equality between men and women; it advocates for political and legal reform rather than the restructuring of oppressive social structures called for by radical feminism. (“Liberal feminism.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_feminism)

Marxist-socialist feminism focuses on private property and capitalism and their interconnectedness with patriarchy as causes of women’s oppression because they lead to economic inequality and dependence. (“Socialist feminism.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_feminism)

African feminism focuses on the needs of specifically African women, and takes into account African history and culture that sets oppression of African women apart from white Western feminism. (“African feminism.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_feminism)

³¹ An ideology is a systemic body of assertions, theories, and aims that characterize an aspect of culture. (“ideology.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>)

³² The Global North generally includes the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Russia, Israel, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. (“North-South divide.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North-South_divide)

So we were not at the same level with other women in the Global North. Are you with me? So, now when you're talking about feminism in the Global North and feminism in Africa, it's all about women's rights. But we have to recognize that we are at different levels. So, while the experience for us as African feminists, some of the key issues facing us include, when you come down to Africa, you also look at rural and urban women. The woman in the rural area, when she's talking about feminism - I mean she doesn't know that word - But if she's talking about her needs as a woman, she's talking about water, access to road, hospitals to have her child, maternal safety, survival of pregnant women and their newborn babies, clean water, food, health facilities and all of that. So, you talk about what is affecting her as a woman, and then of course, domestic violence; but on a scale of what is affecting her, first is food, health, and then "okay I want to be safe as a woman, I don't want to be beaten." So, if you're talking about feminism of women in a rural area, and women in an urban area, then there could be some differences. In terms of the urban, okay "I am an educated woman who has gotten empowered and got some money," her own is "I don't want to be discriminated against in terms of wanting to build my house, wanting to rent a place without a landlord wanting me to bring a man as a surety," or whatever, yes, which is what happens. I don't want someone telling me I can't work because I am a woman. So, the level at which we are in is not exactly at par with feminists in the Global North. In the Global South we have quite a lot of issues we are still trying to grapple with.³³ Yes, we have democracy now, but what's the nature of the democracy we have? How many women are in senate?³⁴ Governance issues, participation of women, representation of women, women's voices. We are still grappling with that. Across various arms of governments, in the judiciary, how many women are there? A lot of other countries are talking about 50%, we haven't even been able to get to 30%. In fact, right now, if you look at the various state houses of assembly, and the federal house of assembly, I don't think women, in any one of them, constitutes 10%. We are jubilating a bit with the Kwara state government, that recently-- in sending names to the state house of assembly, I think got about 50%.³⁵ That's about the only one we've gotten. So, for African feminists, we have key issues, stemming even from survival. Stemming even from survival, discrimination, exclusion, there are even intersectional issues. Women with disability, whose own experience of violence and discrimination is at three levels - their gender, their disability, and their social status.

³³ The Global South generally includes Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia, including the Middle East. ("North-South divide." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North-South_divide)

³⁴ In the 2019 election, 7 of 108 seats in the Nigerian Senate were won by women. ("Federal Republic of Nigeria." Election Guide. Accessed May 10, 2020. <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3099/>)

³⁵ Kwara is a state in western Nigeria. ("Kwara." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwara_State)

RO: I know it challenges a lot, but in terms of your work, where do you see that intersection between the women’s movement in this country and globally?

JE: The women’s movement in Nigeria--we are suffering a rollback. It was very active in the 80s, early 90s. It came to a peak during the Fourth World Conference of Women, Beijing; that was the peak of it. That was when we had a strong voice, as women in Nigeria, women in the continent, we actively participated in a lot of campaigns and advocacies, leading to the Maputo Protocol and several other regional and international instruments, and all of that.³⁶ Over the last decade to a decade and a half, we seem to be suffering a rollback. I don’t know if it’s just me or if you’re getting that sense in other people saying in terms of, we don’t really, the women’s movement is not really, we need to be actually now trying to get it reactivated, get it back together. Some arguments from some people, some people will say the Beijing meeting, the Fourth World Conference of Women, and the twelve critical areas of concern, sort of led to fragment, fragmentization. Because each and every one of us picked something and ran with it. On the one hand, it led to specialization of functions because we had to specialize, you can’t be a jack of all trade. There were issues affecting women in environment, there were issues affecting women in politics, there were issues affecting women in health, violence against women. So, I picked violence against women and moved with it. Someone else picked women in politics. Another group picked environment. But in so doing, I think we didn’t really tie it all up again, in terms of still not losing sight of the women’s movement.

RO: This actually leads me to the next question. What is the relationship between your work and your relationship with other women, feminists, activists or scholars in Nigeria?

JE: We are all doing different things, but we try to come together. But I am not sure we are succeeding very well because if we still had—if the women’s movement was very strong, we would not be suffering the rollback we are currently experiencing, whereby we take three steps forward, and we go back five steps. It is playing out in front of us in terms of the participation of women, active participation of women in governance, in politics, in public life, in various sectors – be it in the health sector, the judiciary, the law enforcement – and all of that. We actually need to make a deliberate, a conscious effort, take deliberate steps to rebuild and to strengthen the women’s movement across all sectors in Nigeria.

³⁶ The Maputo Protocol, or the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, was established in 2005 by the African Union as an international human rights instrument granting women a variety of rights towards social and political equality with men and more freedoms in terms of reproductive health, including an end to female genital mutilation. (“Maputo Protocol.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maputo_Protocol)

RO: Wonderful, this will be a final question from me. For you, how does this global climate change impact the feminist movement generally in Nigeria and internationally?

JE: Hmmm. The issue of climate and the global climate change is actually an issue that is, in Nigeria, the government, Nigeria, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and a lot of Nigerians are still even in denial, even about that. But we are seeing it in the sense of the way things are changing. I am not sure we are even--if that discussion has actually even come up in the feminist movement in Nigeria, in the women's movement; I'm not sure. That the issue of global climate change, I'm not even sure at this point that we have actually started articulating and talking about that. Because even as a people, even as government, there is still a lot of denial about it. Or even understanding what climate change is, its impacting on the environment, on women, on practically everything. Because women--when things happen even in organizations, when organizations are financially challenged and have to shut down programs, the first program they always shut down is women's program. Anything that happens in this life, the first casualties are always women. So, it is actually important that we actually, I mean, this coming up now in this interview I appreciate it so much because we actually as women and as feminists we need to start talking about how is this whole issue of climate change affecting us as women – biologically, socially, even in families and in our communities – women are known to be the... You go to rural communities there is famine and all of that, how is this affecting them? How does it translate? Because if climate change is affecting women biologically, affecting their income and source of livelihood, it's going to translate to several other issues such as violence, health issues – so we actually need to take this discussion up. Which like I said earlier, I'm not sure at this point we are really-- there are so many things to deal with. So many. At this stage, after sixty years, or fifty-nine years of independence, sixty years I guess, Nigerian women are still talking about maternal mortality, they're still talking about cultural discrimination against women, we are still talking about religious manipulation and misinterpretation as it affects women. There is so much we are dealing with. We always try to play catch up (laughs), because we are dealing with so many things – social welfare issues, child sexual abuse – there's so much to deal with.

RO: Finally, maybe if there is anything else that I haven't asked that you want to talk about, but I would like if you would do your own analysis, evaluation, as well as expectations of development of feminism in Nigeria.

JE: Well my expectation is totally in line with that of Chimamanda Adichie, that honestly, we all should be feminists.³⁷ I'm looking forward to a time where right from primary schools, right from kindergarten, we are able to teach and discuss feminism with our children. Feminism is not just about women, there are male feminists, my husband is a feminist. The closest to feminism is like I said, humanism. The reason we say that is look, a woman is a human being, she is entitled to her body, she is entitled to be treated the same way a man is treated. So that's about humanism, that's about being human, and not dehumanizing a woman. For me in Africa and in Nigeria is starting from the socialization process, how we bring up our children. How are we bringing up our sons, how are we bringing up our daughters? On the day any child is born, that child is born blank – there's nothing up there. If you don't look at the genitalia you would not even know the sex of the child because almost all children are born bald – no plaited hair, no long wig, no earrings- - it is the lower part of the body that lets you know, oh, this is a boy or this is a girl. It is in the process of socialization and bringing up of children that we start feeding into them what a boy should be, what a girl should be or should not be. And then we are bringing up young men who cannot grow up and cannot accept the fact that a woman should be successful because the socialization says a woman should be dependent on a man, a successful woman will not find a husband to marry. In fact, why should a woman be successful? She is going to intimidate and frighten the young man. These are some of the issue's feminism is setting out. I shouldn't be a threat. Feminism is not about women sitting on the head of men. Neither is it about women being under the sole of the feet, it's about we being side by side. You respecting me; I respecting you. So, I am looking forward to that time when we can sit down as men, as women, old and young, and have constructive discussions on this issue. And also, from an early age, socialize our children to deal with each other with mutual self-respect. Recognizing that the school fees you are paying for your son are not any more expensive than the school fees you are paying for your daughter. If anything, the school fees for the girl may even be more expensive. And all of that. So, why this gender discrimination? Why this treatment of women as lesser, as second-class citizens?

RO: All right, thank you very much. This interview held today November 9th, with Mrs. Josephine Effah-Chukwuma. Thank you so much for accepting to participate and we look forward to working with you in the future.

³⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an award-winning Nigerian female author. Her works range from short story collections to novels to nonfiction. In 2012 she gave a TEDx talk in London titled “We Should All Be Feminists.” (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.” Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie)