

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

**SITE: NIGERIA**

**Transcript of Joy Ngozi Ezeilo  
Interviewer: Ronke Olawale**

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**Dr. Joy Ngozi Ezeilo** is professor of law and the dean of the Law School at the University of Nigeria (UNN). She has been the lead professor of the "Women, Children, and the Law" class at the UNN since 1997. A lawyer, activist, and feminist scholar, Dr. Ezeilo was appointed the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons between 2008 and 2014, during which time she travelled to several countries to determine the causes, mechanisms, and scope of human trafficking. She is an active member of the civil society movement in Nigeria, where she founded the Women's Aid Collective (WACOL), a not-for-profit that works to promote and protect the rights of women and young people. She is the founder and moderator of the West African Women's Rights Coalition (WAWORC). Dr. Ezeilo has served as a consultant and trainer in human rights, gender issues, and governance and conflict resolution to many international and national organizations including the Nigerian Judicial Institute (NJI), UNDP, UNIFEM, UNICEF, USAID, UNFPA, the Federal Ministry of Health, the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (MDG Fund), OSIWA, CODESRIA, Partners for Justice (formerly International Human Rights Law Group), the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, Abuja, Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), Center for Democracy and Development, West Africa (CDD), among others.

**Ronke Olawale** is a PhD Candidate in Social Work and Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Broadly speaking 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.

**Ronke Olawale: Good Afternoon, Professor Joy. My name is Ronke Olawale, from The University of Michigan, I am inviting you to participate in our global feminism project. This is a program that is meant to gather the oral histories of women, activists and feminists from all over the world. Indeed, we are interested in women who have focused a lot on important issues that impact or affect women and gender in our world. I would like to start out by asking you to introduce yourself. What is your name? Please do me the favor of spelling it and then how you would like to be addressed.**

Dr. Joy Ngozi Ezeilo: Thank you so much Ronke and welcome to Nigeria. I am glad that your institution is doing this very important work of recording women and their stories. My name is Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, Joy is my first name, Ngozi is my middle name as an Igbo woman,<sup>1</sup> and my last name is Ezeilo. J-o-y, N-g-o-z-i, E-z-i-l-o and that is my last name. I am a law professor, so you can call me Professor Joy Ezeilo, I am fine with that, you can call me Joy Ezeilo, I am also fine with that.

**RO: Thank you so much. I would like to start out by asking you to tell me a little about your life, specifically thinking about where you are today, how would you depict the journey that brought you to this point?**

JE: Simply put, I would say my journey is a journey from local to global. From being a local activist scholar to doing global work that I have done and continue to do around the world. I started very early in my life, my first experience that made me decide to go on the path of activism or to defend women, women's rights, and to defend the broader human rights issues was my experience as a teenager. My father died, my mother and I were living in the city and I was not exposed to much culture including cultural differences, gender discrimination, stereotypes, and the treatment they give to women as widows, which is different from how they treat the men as widowers. We traveled to the village, and that was when I started seeing all kinds of widowhood rites that they were expecting my mom to do.<sup>2</sup> Things like: waking her up, asking her to cry, to let it out. I was wondering why they had to do that, I was already in senior secondary school, and that is when I noticed the gender differences and the saddest part of the mourning practices. They made us stay in the village for two months plus and my mother ended up spending a year in the village and then you had to wear mourning cloth for

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<sup>1</sup> Igbo is one of six major ethnic groups in Nigeria, dominating the southeast. 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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Nigeria#Yoruba_Culture))

<sup>2</sup> Widowhood rites 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>)

one or two years. Those were the days that made me decide to be a lawyer, for me, that would give me the voice to become the mouthpiece, the advocate, the defender of human rights and that was it. That is how I went to read Law and then immediately after law school, I didn't waste any time, I did pro-bono work for different organizations. I formed and pioneered quite a number.

I have always seen the need to ensure access to justice-- it's one of the areas where we have the greatest gaps in terms of women's rights. We can all advocate for rights, but if women are not actualized in including those rights that are in written statutes, then it will be meaningless. Until they are able to enforce it, when they are in court, then they are able to say they have a remedy if their right is violated.

**RO: You already began to talk about the connection between your work and your life, how would you expand on how your life experience impacted your work life?**

JE: Like I said, my first push to this work was the experience of my mom. Even in Law school I was already demonstrating leadership by taking positions in the student association and being very active, but I didn't lose sight of my passion. Immediately after law school, I realized I liked the corporate world and started to do corporate law, representing banks, but that was not my passion. I quickly realized my passion was still burning. I knew I couldn't do corporate practice and still want to be a human rights lawyer. I abandoned corporate law and went into academics, which was easy for me because when you are at the top of your class everyone wants to get you back on campus to teach. So, that was how I started teaching at the university and being a scholar also enabled me to blend those two worlds. Especially to engage in that type of scholarship that leads to social transformation. It complimented my work ,my activism, my scholarship. Through my scholarship, I could write from my experiences in activism.

Women in Nigeria,<sup>3</sup> was the first feminist organization in Nigeria, I became the Enugu state<sup>4</sup> coordinator and the national publicity secretary of WIN at some point, over twenty years ago. It gave me that opportunity, I was involved in International Federation of Women Lawyers,<sup>5</sup> and I was also the publicity secretary. I did a lot of work prior to Beijing and during Beijing,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 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 effect 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)))

<sup>4</sup> Enugu state is located in southeastern Nigeria. ("Enugu State." Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enugu\\_State](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enugu_State))

<sup>5</sup> The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) is a non-profit, non-political association of women lawyers in Nigeria working to protect women and children by providing free legal representation, education, counseling services, and advocacy. ("About Us." FIDA. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://fida.org.ng/about-us/>)

<sup>6</sup> 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

in terms of getting the message and mobilizing women for the pre-Beijing conference for Africa<sup>7</sup> that took place in Dakar<sup>8</sup> in 1994. I remember going to villages and talking to women that there was going to be this big Beijing conference. “What do you want us to say? What do you want us to take to African regional conference ahead of that?” From there, Women in Nigeria, to my work at FIDA, I felt like there was still a gap when it came to women’s rights. Women’s rights was still emerging in Nigeria. Not that we haven’t had women’s movement, champions, and mentors, like Professor Awe,<sup>9</sup> who have been women in history: the first African woman to attend Oxford from Nigeria who studied to get her Ph.D. We had Professor Jadesola Akande.<sup>10</sup> These were pioneers. I recall, when I was at the Gender Institute<sup>11</sup>-- we were the first set to be at the Gender Institute in Dakar. In 1994 or 1995, Professor Jadesola Akande came to talk to us. I told her what I was writing and she said, “that is good to do your scholarship around this area.” I said “Yes, I already found my scholarship.” My LLM<sup>12</sup> was on human rights and public international law at the University of London, my PHD work was on human rights and criminal rights justice system. In terms of legal scholarship and then scholarship around women’s rights and women’s movements. I am also practicing and doing that.

There have been women in Nigeria who have been a part of this women’s movement, but there were still gaps because I felt like there was not an organization addressing squarely the issue of women’s access to justice and the issue of women’s reproductive health rights. I recall

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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>)

<sup>7</sup> The Fifth African Regional Conference on Women was held in November 1994 in order to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the following year. The result of the conference was the African Platform for Action. (“African Platform for Action.” UN. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/cap\\_women\\_dakar\\_1994.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/cap_women_dakar_1994.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> Dakar is the capital of Senegal, a country in west Africa. (“Dakar”. Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakar>)

<sup>9</sup> Professor Bolanle Awe is a former Nigerian history professor who obtained her doctorate at Oxford University before becoming a lecturer at University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Her work focused on women’s oral histories. The Global Feminisms Project has an interview with Bolanle Awe on the Nigerian Interviews site (“Bolanle Awe.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolanle\\_Awe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolanle_Awe))

<sup>10</sup> Professor Jadesola Akande (1940-2008) was a Nigerian lawyer, author and academic. She is considered the first Nigerian woman to become a professor of Law. (“Jadesola Akande.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jadesola\\_Akande](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jadesola_Akande))

<sup>11</sup> The Gender Institute in Dakar, organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, promotes study of gender issues in Africa by bringing researchers together to teach in addition to conducting research. (“Gender Institute.” CODESRIA. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://www.codesria.org/spip.php?rubrique25>)

<sup>12</sup> An LLM is a Master of Laws degree, a type of law degree (JD) most often pursued in order to specialize and advance one’s career. (“What is an LLM Degree?” LawderEdu. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://www.lawyeredu.org/LLM-degree.html>)

Professor Awe was in Ibadan<sup>13</sup> and then the MacArthur Foundation<sup>14</sup> coordinator. There was a leadership award --the MacArthur fund for leadership, I remember writing a proposal; one: to research sexual and reproductive health rights and two: to provide free legal aid to women whose rights have been violated, especially sexual and reproductive rights. I did a study around rights to health care, safe motherhood, rape, abortion, and women's bodies. After I got that award, I got 75,000 dollars, it was 1998, so that was a lot of money. Normally, people who have won this do research and find other things to do and of course you are supposed to be a leader. They give you the opportunity to take 25,000 dollars every year for three years, you would then do the research and do the intervention, so I took the opportunity. In 1998 when I got this, it enabled me to put concept notes of women's organizations on paper, I pioneered that women's aid collective that I founded. This helped me ensure that this organization, in terms of its mandates and objectives, took off.

With that, we started immediately to provide free legal aid. I found there was a need for shelter, women did not have shelter in Nigeria. In 2001, I built the first shelter,<sup>15</sup> built not rented. By 1998, we were already in a rented shelter, by 2001 we mobilized enough resources to build the first ultra-modern shelter for women who were at the peak of crisis and needed a safe place, it was a safe house to stay. Women's Aid Collective, WACOL,<sup>16</sup> was the organization I founded in 1997, we started running the shelter in 1998, providing free legal aid. With the funding I got from the MacArthur Foundation, it became a seed grant that enabled the organization to take the formative research I'd done in the area of sexual and reproductive health rights of women and girls and also to use that to begin to address some of the findings and provide succor,<sup>17</sup> and avenues for redress<sup>18</sup> and empowerment of women who are victims or survivors. Meanwhile my academic work continued and so did my writings, I addressed different subjects around women and children.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibadan is the capital of Oyo state in the south west of Nigeria. Elizo is referring here to the University of Idaban, one of the most highly regarded academic institutions in Africa. ("Idaban." Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibadan#Education>)

<sup>14</sup> The MacArthur Foundation is a private organization based in Chicago that provides grants and investments to non-profit organizations around the world tackling pressing issues today. ("MacArthur Foundation." Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacArthur\\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacArthur_Foundation))

<sup>15</sup> 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>)

<sup>16</sup> Women's Aid Collective is a non-profit organization focused on the protection of women and children in Nigeria, primarily by providing legal support and education. ("About WACOL." WACOL Nigeria. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://wacolnigeria.org>)

<sup>17</sup> Succor is another word for relief or aid. ("succor." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 8, 2020.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/succor>)

<sup>18</sup> Redress means to set right or make up for. ("redress". Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 8, 2020.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/redress>)

What I consider a landmark in my work, of which my activism influenced, was starting and teaching a course on women, children, and the law. It was supposed to be solely a women's course: women's rights, women and the law, but then given the patriarchy and patriarchal system that we have to navigate or bargain with, they told me I could not teach that. So, I had to take women and children, in fact they asked me to add illiterates and I said, "Sure, if that would give me approval." Their argument was that I was supposed to take all of the vulnerable groups: "If you say that women are vulnerable and you want to study them, then why not also take children and illiterates?" Illiteracy is something we study under evidence in Law-- that is, how do you do illiterate protection? Because being illiterate and then having all of the legal issues was a major thing in law because it was already covered in evidence law. They told me to take the illiterate as well, so I will cover the protection of women, children, and illiterate. It was not a hard choice to make, we needed to break new grounds, we needed to pay particular attention to our curriculum on the subject and if it was going to be a way of starting to pay particular attention in teaching that affected particular group of people, why not? I took it up, then we changed the course title, it is still Women, Children and the Law, that was also adopted by the National University Commission.<sup>19</sup> In 1997, I pioneered my faculty, the faculty of law at The University of Nigeria. The University of Nigeria is the indigenous university, and the Faculty of Law is the first and the oldest faculty of law in Nigeria which was in 1960. We started teaching it, I pioneered it in 1997, and we are still teaching it till now. It has not gone off of the curriculum, it is a very popular subject among students. It is not like it would be in the West where only women take women's classes, but here there are more men and then everyone signs up for it as an elective class. Quite a number of people sign up for it, which is good. That is one area that is an important achievement.

I also worked on curriculum development for the teaching of health law and reproductive rights, there also universities that teach it today even with the women's law. Now UNILAG<sup>20</sup> teaches Gender and the Law, even Osun University.<sup>21</sup> I get people every day telling me that they started all of these things, I am now trying to bring them together, so we can look at curriculum for all of those teaching gender and the law to see how to begin to develop. We already have developed local jurisprudence<sup>22</sup> in this area, including health law and reproductive rights. That is also in the academic arena. I worked to introduce the teaching of human rights, even in my university, human rights law. Now, we are not only teaching it at the

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<sup>19</sup> The National Universities Commission is a government arm dedicated to promoting quality higher education in Nigeria. ("National Universities Commission." Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Universities\\_Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Universities_Commission))

<sup>20</sup> UNILAG is the popular name for the University of Lagos, a public research university in the southwest of Nigeria. ("University of Lagos". Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University\\_of\\_Lagos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Lagos))

<sup>21</sup> Osun University is a large university in Osun state in the southwest of Nigeria. ("Osun State University". Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osun\\_State\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osun_State_University))

<sup>22</sup> Jurisprudence is the theoretical study of law. ("Jurisprudence". Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurisprudence>)

post-graduate level for many years, but at the graduate level which did not start until I became the dean. I am currently the dean of law at The University of Nigeria, so I was able to change the curriculum. The curriculum we are now teaching, not just at The University of Nigeria, but other universities that are our partners, are dealing with the issue of health law as well. This is an area where scholarship activism helps, the fact that I am an activist I am able to see this firsthand in the field. I know areas where women need to be studied and where you need to equip future lawyers with the skills to be able to engage in law reforms. Engaging in the system, including the system that will provide justice for women because if a lawyer is not equipped and does not know anything about human or women's rights you cannot expect them to represent the interest of their client in court. Today, I look back and see my students, from 1997 to today, that have passed through these classes, I see them in international organizations, I see them working in other places where they contribute a lot to society and are quite fulfilled. And that is what I think the power of education is. If I had just been an activist and didn't have the opportunity and possibility of using that to transform the world, my society, my environment... This leaves something that is long lasting. I am really fortunate to be in that special privileged position of blending two worlds with the work I do.

That is just one aspect of my work, like I said I have so many things to share. It is very typical of women to try to do too much and then we take on too much and we juggle and multitask all of the time. Other work that I have done is forming the foundation of WACOL I formed it to advance human rights of women and children and paying particular attention to their status under the law and in practice, and to end gender discrimination including gender-based violence. At WACOL, we have done tremendous work, I am very proud about the work providing free legal aid and assistance to women and girls. On the legal aid, we have given 55,000 women free legal aid. Modestly speaking, I do not think any organization in Nigeria can boast of that work, and is being consistent, it takes a lot and you don't always find funding for legal aid, but we keep trudging. I said even if it is my last Kobo<sup>23</sup> I have to take personally to ensure that we are bringing justice and providing assistance to women, we will continue because that is very crucial. We have tried to have a one-stop center, in 2005 we had an initiative that was supported by the British High Commission,<sup>24</sup> which we called a triangular response system, a tripartite system. We had the legal, medical, and the police. Working with the police, hospital, and then us providing legal aid. This was a tripartite response to women who are victims and survivors of sexual and gender based violence. We did this between 2005 and 2006 and we were able to carry on after the project ended for a few years, but then we

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<sup>23</sup> The currency of Nigeria is the naira, which is subdivided into 100 kobo ("Nigerian naira." Wikipedia. Accessed June 10, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian\\_naira](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_naira))

<sup>24</sup> The British High Commission is a diplomatic mission similar to an embassy, with the purpose of providing diplomatic relations and some assistance to citizens and travelers in the nations where the embassies are. ("British High Commission". Wikipedia. Accessed June 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_High\\_Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_High_Commission))

were not able to continue the medical, but we continued to provide legal aid and doing referrals, but the problem was that the hospitals were not taking them without any money, but when we had money we were able to pay for that. Fortunately, in 2014, we started--with DFID<sup>25</sup>--specializing in the one-stop center. Justice for All,<sup>26</sup> DFID partnered with WACOL, Women's Aid Collective, which I founded in 1997. We specialized in sexual assault reference center, we called it TAMASAC. We were trying to find a code, something that wouldn't stigmatize women and people wouldn't know when they said they were going to TAMA or TAMASAC, it wouldn't sound like a place to report rape; they could be targeted. I recall that we are religious people and down in the Eastern part of Nigeria where I come from, we believe in religion a lot, people read the bible, and Tamar was the first woman to be written in the bible. I put all of this together, then had a few consultations, and then named it TAMASAC. That initiative is when we partnered with Enugu state government. They provided us with space, they donated a space we refurbished with the funding we received. We received generous funding from DFID U.K. and British Aid, and then ran by the Justice for All program. We were able to innovate a space specifically. We got the government to send in some staff on secondment from the Ministry of Health, Minister of gender and Minister of justice, we partnered with the police, and then WACOL measured the stuff. We ran this project for nearly 3 years and it was a huge success, but the whole idea was that at some point the government would take over TAMASAC (registered as a subsidiary of WACOL) and continue to provide for that in the budget, I am very happy and excited this happened because usually when you get started you cannot replace the government. Government must always have the obligations to take responsibility to protect rights, respect rights, and to remedy any violation and that includes gender budgeting and budgeting for addressing issues affecting women and other vulnerable groups in society.

When you are talking about inclusivity, that inclusion leaving no one behind means that you plan for those who are not in the privileged position or those who are more at risk in a community. The TAMASAC was able to give to hundreds, in terms of general legal aid, our cases are mainly on inheritance, denial of inheritance to women and girls. Issues around rights, land; in certain communities or cultures in Nigeria, if a man dies, the wife and children may not be able to benefit, especially from estates subject to customary laws or Islamic law.<sup>27</sup> What

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<sup>25</sup> The DFID is the Department for International Development, which is an organization in the United Kingdom that provides aid (commonly in the form of funding) to developing countries to promote livelihood globally. ("About Us." Department for International Development. Accessed June 8, 2020.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-development/about>)

<sup>26</sup> The Justice for All program works with the Nigerian justice system to promote safety and justice for all Nigerians. ("Justice for All Programme." British Council. Accessed June 8, 2020.

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/partner/track-record/justice-for-all-programme>)

<sup>27</sup> Customary laws refer to law based on traditional culture and practices. Islamic law, or Sharia law, is a form of religious law. With respect to estate inheritance, these forms of law generally limit the amount of property a widow can inherit from her deceased husband, or children can inherit from their father. ("Law of Nigeria". Wikipedia. Accessed June 10, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law\\_of\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Nigeria))

happens is that in these cases, even if the man has made a will, it can be jettisoned or challenged. We have a lot of cases of disputes regarding the possibility of a woman getting the right to land or property or inheritance. Women and girls in Igbo land don't inherit customary land. This is important because land is an important means of production and access to capital. If you deny women access to an important means of capital that means, economically speaking, they will continue to be powerless and if women are economically powerless they will not have access to political means. It means they will be marginalized in power and if women are not where power is, then it will continue to be a recurring decimal of ineffectiveness, of disempowerment, of inequalities that continue to exist. That is why it is important that women have access to inheritance.

We have cases handling assault, cases on rape, physical wife battery. A lot of cases around custody of children, a lot of cases on maintenance; people abandon families a lot, especially children. There is no law, and this is another line of advocacy for me because what I have participated in pushing social advocacy that has led to a number of laws across Nigeria nationally and at state levels, but we also have to focus on laws around custody. A man always seems to take custody without regard for the woman and they don't give the women maintenance and even the children are not being properly maintained for, and we have to think of the best interest of the child. We do a lot of cases around that. For example, in a year we have about 2000 cases sometimes even over 3000 drop-ins and then we don't provide for those who can afford it. We use the means test, if you can afford or we feel that you are economically in power, then we will not be able to handle that case. In TAMASAC, we focus on victims of sexual violence. Within three years in a small community we were able to assist 647 cases within two years. These are people who would not have been able to break the silence on their own, they would not have been able to report their victimization because of stigma or blaming the victim. We were able to break the culture of silence. We started intensive community advocacy; we used the media to tell people: "You're not to be blamed if you were raped," and people started reporting.

Today we see people... we are not there yet, but the confidence is there because they know there is a support system. if you don't have a support system then when you ask them to report they don't know where to report and then what happens? Who provides redress? At TAMASAC, what we are doing is international best practice, comprehensively providing free legal aid, medical first, and then immediately report; if it is within three days or 72 hours, you do prophylactics, counseling, psychosocial support, continued visitation. We integrated best practice, confidential and quality service that includes medical, legal, psychosocial, counseling and continuing support. All this work is going on, we have lawyers, big pro-bono schemes, and it is going on a daily basis and people are doing amazing work.

Listening to these cases on a daily basis can be traumatizing, I know when I used to be in the clinic more, but now my work is more Global and I am not in the clinic every day. There are people who are working in my organization every day; it is traumatizing. There are times I think of how to protect the human rights defenders; how do we also provide the psychological healing as well because those doing the listening are also traumatized. Less than two weeks ago I had an emergency call, it was about a 14-month-old baby that was defiled by a man and I had to run around, take her to medical-- because it was a weekend and the office wasn't open, but we do have hotlines. I was just coming from a travel but I knew this was a dire situation and I had to get the baby to the hospital, call the doctor, and the doctor had to travel from the village to look after the baby and then also get the police involved immediately. Luckily the police were able to effect arrests the following day. He is still awaiting trial. Sometimes my time is not my time, I have to combine all of this with administrative work at the University, blending that with the scholarship work I'm doing and then, activism is quite demanding.

When I describe myself, I say I'm a feminist activist scholar but importantly I say that it is really a journey from local to global because I told you how I started with what transpired in my village with my mother as a widow. That made me want to dream big dreams by defending people's rights and then especially women's and then from there to what I'm doing now with the global world. In 2008, I was appointed United Nation's special rapporteur on human trafficking by the human rights Council which is also within U.N. system, how human rights are promoted through the system of U.N. especially ensuring accountability. As part of the accountability mechanism, we have something called special procedures in order to have independent experts be in charge of certain subjects, certain thematic focus, and they can report directly to United Nations and undertake country missions on behalf of United Nations, do communications, and work to protect the victims of right violations. I was appointed to this very competitive position, at the end of the day, I was nominated, was a finalist, and then I was finally appointed. That was a big task. Doing that, I traveled globally, I have traveled to over 130 countries. During my mandate, I traveled to over a hundred countries for six years. I had the first three years in 2008, it was renewed. Normally, you don't do more than two tenures. I had two tenures of 6 years fully working on this subject around the world. Human trafficking is a thematic focus and part of my work was to report, write reports, expert reports on the subject. I dealt with every aspect of human trafficking, about recourses and the consequences, the root courses, the push and pull factors, to the demand that drives it, issues of prevention: what action do we do to prevent, what are the forms of trafficking we need to focus on, the labour aspect, or the sexual, trafficking in the sex industry, or the slavery part of it, the servitude under manifestation and exploitation. How do you show that even organ trafficking? I did all kinds of thematic expert reports in those fields. Within that I saw that the world is an ugly phenomenon and trafficking affects every country in the world, whether as a transit, as a source country that is sending, or as a transit country or as a destination country. You find that even though it affects countries in different ways, it knows no border, it

is modern day slavery, and it is still going on. Before I knew about human trafficking, WACOL had been working on the subject and even documented research because WACOL did focus on domestic trafficking. We have worked on it, we have researched it, and we have researched the issue of torture because at WACOL we do a lot of publications to inform the people about their legal rights, legal education. I did not know the quantum of external dimensions of international trafficking. There's international trafficking and internal trafficking and the external trafficking, the international one, is also huge and has no border. Even Nigeria is affected as a sending or source country. It is also a major transit country, and a destination country all in one. If you look at Africa, Nigeria is one of the top countries affected. If you were looking at the world, South East Asia followed by Africa. Apart from the official U.N. mission that I conducted in almost every region of the world, I did U.N. official mission, and that gave me the opportunity to meet with thousands of victims and to advocate for rights to effective remedies and come up with a draft of basic principles on rights to effective remedies for victims of trafficking.

My main concern was getting human rights every intervention to combat human trafficking. I developed around 11 pillars, for fighting human trafficking. 11 pillars around five P's, three R's and three C's. The five P's was dealing with protection, prevention, prosecution, promotion (partnership that is important), and of course punishment because lack of accountability is a major problem, which is why trafficking continues to happen unabated. If it is not a high-risk business and people know they can traffic people, sell them into slavery, trading in human beings and, there is no accountability? Then they get away with it and then they continue to do that. We need to make it a high-risk business, a low-profit one in order to stamp out the phenomenon. The five P's we target on this comprehensively, deal with prevention, and then deal with the issue of three R's, re-dress, rehabilitation or recovery, and reintegration particularly focusing on victims. This is where I did a lot of advocacy for effective remedies which include compensation, restitution, satisfaction, and guarantee of non-repetition for victims because victims don't get opportunities. In foreign countries, what happens when people are trafficked, even if they are not identified as a trafficked person, they are identified as "irregular or illegal migrants." They are arrested and deported, putting migrants in detention camps and they are sent back to their country with no possibility of getting remedy or compensation and then the traffickers will get away with it. Those who have exploited them, using their labour and services, who have trafficked or enslaved them will get away with the exploitation. Countries must put in place measures to do early identification and detection. Once a person is identified as a trafficked person, there should not be a non-punishment approach. The approach you take must be victim-centered, human rights-centered in order to provide real succor to the victims. One of the markers of globalization is migration, and trafficking is migration gone wrong, but sometimes people, out of poverty or gender discrimination, inequalities, conflict, livelihood challenges, want to move to find greener pastures, they are escaping violence and gender inequalities, they are also being pushed by

families who exploit them especially in cases for women and girls they are exploited in order to provide for the rest of the family. If people are desperate like that, they are in a very vulnerable position as somebody makes an offer and then they end up taking the offer. Some of them do not know it is a trap. For example, I have seen a girl from Columbia who got an E-ticket and just landed in Dubai and was enslaved for the next three years. If it was not for police intervention of something else where she was found accidentally, nobody would've known where she was and some people have died or disappeared ever because of this type of thing. I have seen people trafficked to fisheries, boats, survivors have witnessed people thrown overboard if they are sick or if they protest too much, otherwise they will just make you work for a couple years and bring you back to shore.

A lot of things happen in the world and it is heartbreaking to have witnessed this firsthand. I am glad that at the global level we can make an impact we have made especially with the human trafficking. In 2010, I was honoured by Newsweek, Daily Beast<sup>28</sup> as one of the women of impact in the world. Within the 125 women, in 2013, I was one of those who went to New York and I recall sharing the podium with a woman who had lost her daughter to traffickers and hasn't found closure. As of now she doesn't know what happened to her daughter and she was from Argentina. I have been on missions to some of these countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Bahamas, Belize, Morocco, Egypt, Thailand, Australia, Japan. I have gone around the world looking at these issues and then the intersection of it and the issue of human rights and the gender inequalities that fuel some of these practices and violations of human rights of women. That is why I always conclude that it is important, sometimes you don't get the feedback that we need from this field work and then to classrooms, and then from classroom to scholarship to put it in a thread. So, this is part of how I have been in this unique position.

**RO: Actually, I was going to ask that question. What do you see as the relationship between feminist scholarship and activism.**

JE: I am doing feminism already, I'm doing feminism and then the scholarship. I see that feminism and feminist work is also closer to scholarship because what they are doing translates to that. With my work, it was because I am already doing scholarship and I'm already an activist, but since I'm an activist I would have actually let go of teaching for example, or being in the classroom to focus exclusively on my activist work. But what I found out was that the interesting intersection, and it is important that I continue to do this, not just teaching, but writing and then using my field experiences and then giving account for the contributions I have made. People think that it is a different kind of paper, that it is refreshingly different because it shows that you are really on ground or in the field and bringing other

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<sup>28</sup> Newsweek, Daily Beast is an American news media company that reports on world news. ("The Newsweek Daily Beast Company". Wikipedia. Accessed June 10, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Newsweek\\_Daily\\_Beast\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Newsweek_Daily_Beast_Company))

perspectives that mere scholars do not have the opportunity for. People would never have known. That is what I call making an impact through one's writing.

**RO: That is very interesting and important work too. As you reflect on your work, I know you were talking broadly about all of the issues, what is it that you understand about feminism? What is feminism?**

JE: For me feminism is equal worth between men and women. Equal worth and that means dignity and rights. Equal worth, you have to have human beings have equal worth. That a woman has equal worth as men, equal in terms of rights, dignity, personhood as her male counterpart, period.

**RO: What has that meant for your work?**

JE: For me what it means is that there is no personal barrier, I've set all my goals and achieved all that I want to achieve. Nobody could've told me as a woman I couldn't be a professor of law. I am a professor of law and a premier university, I am a dean of law in my law school. I have served in various capacities, as heads of departments, and I continue to serve, I have reached a global level. I've worked for and reported to both the UN and General Assembly<sup>29</sup> and human rights counseling in Geneva<sup>30</sup> and General assembly in New York.<sup>31</sup> I've talked to all the countries of the world and gone around the world, meeting heads of states. It means that I have the ability to have agency. Nobody set that glass ceiling for me. Yes, that's me, I'm strong, but I'm also mindful of other women and girls that need that push in order to realize their full potential because of the barriers they face. Again, to continue to push the envelope for this issue and continue to push this to the front burner of international discussions, issues around gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls because that is very crucial. Why does gender disparity persist? We have the social patriarchy, social norms, stereotypes in every aspect including if you look at judicial stereotypes. How does the world and our communities continue to reproduce the stereotype that reinforces gender inequalities? How do we challenge that? How do we bargain in a constructive manner, this patriarchy, without saying we are throwing our culture away? Without also succumbing to cultural relativist theory or relativism<sup>32</sup> that will not accept universal human rights because universal human

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<sup>29</sup> The General Assembly is a forum for discussion among the members of the United Nations to the effect of peacekeeping through deliberation and policymaking. A key component of this arm of the UN is financing peace operations. ("Role of the General Assembly." United Nations Peacekeeping. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/role-of-general-assembly>)

<sup>30</sup> Geneva, in Switzerland, is the site of the headquarters of the United Nations. ("Geneva". Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva>)

<sup>31</sup> The General Assembly meets annually in New York City to discuss progress and goals for the coming year. ("About the General Assembly". United Nations. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/>)

<sup>32</sup> Cultural relativist theory, or relativism, is the idea that one's practices and beliefs should be understood only in the context of their own culture rather than compared or evaluated across cultures. Current debates or critiques

rights is for the enjoyment of men, women, boys, and girls, period. I will not accept any difference between a man and a woman except as related to biological differences. Those biological differences don't mean the acceptance of construction of gender bias policies and rules except if it is sensitive to the needs of each group because of those biological differences, but not to create inequalities or inequities or to place limits or create false dichotomies between the public and the private spheres and limiting women's role, for example, as reproductive or as one that should be in the domestic sphere, and having the good women, the bad women, and the feminists or radical.

I think that we have gone beyond the issue of radical feminism, if I describe myself as a feminist it doesn't mean that I want throw away my bra, or don't want to have a family or that I don't want a husband or children. One of the things we've been able to do, especially for African feminist and this is where we are different, from the African feminism<sup>33</sup> and Western feminism. You have to think of the western metaphysical framework. If you say you are an African feminist, we believe in duality, and then have a family and a husband but we are also constructing new roles and partnerships and gender roles. These include that I have to work, recognize and respect my space but if you are not able to do that we might not be partners and that is partnership that we are doing. We are refining all of those roles and it is working, without making it all about segregated discussion of men and women because if we are African Feminists, we realize what the impediments or roadblocks are, and how they can be overcome and what we need to prioritize even as we are promoting human rights. We are still talking about basic human rights in Africa, the right to life is abrogated<sup>34</sup> every day. When women die from pregnancy that is not a disease, women should have rights to safe motherhood as a right. Society should treat the reproductive role of women as a social function, but they are not doing so. Women pay so much to have a baby that is supposed to help reproducing society. How do we begin to deconstruct and break these barriers and myths around womanhood, and treating women like full people, a person with a full legal personality under the law.

It is not easy; but for example, some women in Nigeria have succeeded in different aspects. Politically, women are still marginalized; economically, they are also marginalized and that also results in a failure of women to occupy strategic decisions where they can also influence the law in their favor. It is not that easy but we have to, and once they say you are a feminist

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of relativism argue that if all beliefs and practices are isolated by individual cultures, the assertion of the existence of universal human rights is challenged. ("Cultural relativism." Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_relativism#Statement\\_on\\_human\\_rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_relativism#Statement_on_human_rights))

<sup>33</sup> 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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_feminism))

<sup>34</sup> Here, to be abrogated is to be treated as nonexistent, or violated. ("abrogate". Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abrogate>)

in our environment, people look at you again and say that since you're a feminist all you want is LGBT rights. They base your world view on their understanding, but it is also from the perspective of someone you could call a pioneer feminist which is a group in the western world. These days I try to see myself as an African feminist but I am a feminist without 'if' and/or 'but'. I don't want people to think that if you were feminist it is all pejorative terms that feminism means no marriage, no family, no children. For some that is how people look at it like if you were a feminist he must not be married. For some, that's how they look at it. "She's a feminist? And married? How?" There is a misconception and because of that some people say they are womanists, but I don't know what that means. I am a feminist because I believe in equal worth of men and women, as human beings that should enjoy equal rights.

**RO: Beautifully put together. For that reason, I will ask you one of the last questions. What would be the intersection of your work with the women's movement, generally in Nigeria, maybe globally?**

JE: I am a part of building the women's movement in Nigeria or at least part of it. We have a national Council of women in society,<sup>35</sup> but the first feminist group was Women in Nigeria. It was formed following the first ever conference of women, Women in Nigeria, that was convoked then at ABU<sup>36</sup> in 1985, and under the military regime,<sup>37</sup> played an active role which is also another part of my work that I that I didn't have time to say but it also started and I was part of the pro-democracy movement.<sup>38</sup> I was recalling an experience during the Abacha time,<sup>39</sup> when I had to stay in London to work with Human Rights Watch<sup>40</sup> as an intern. The issue for me, the movement, the women's rights movement, we are not homogeneous in Nigeria as a women's group. The culture and religion impact a lot and create differences among women's groups and also impact on women's ability to speak with one voice, and condemn a

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<sup>35</sup> The National Council of Women's Societies is a non-governmental women's organization in Nigeria advocating for gender welfare issues across the country. ("National Council of Women's Societies." Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Council\\_of\\_Women%27s\\_Societies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Council_of_Women%27s_Societies))

<sup>36</sup> Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) is a research university in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. The university was established in 1962 as the University of Northern Nigeria and was then named after Ahmadu Bello, the first premier of Northern Nigeria. ("History of Ahmadu Bello University." Ahmadu Bello University.)

<sup>37</sup> Nigeria was under military regimes (with a military authoritarian government), transitions in power punctuated by military coups, from 1983-1999. ("Nigeria - Military regimes". Britannica. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Military-regimes-1983-99>)

<sup>38</sup> Through the 1990s, the Nigerian pro-democracy movement opposed the military regimes controlling the country in favor of a democratic government. ("The history of Nigeria's 1990s democracy movement". Africa is a Country. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://africasacountry.com/2014/12/the-history-of-nigerias-democracy-movement>)

<sup>39</sup> Abacha time refers to the period from 1993-1998 when General Sani Abacha was the military head of state of Nigeria. ("Sani Abacha". Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sani\\_Abacha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sani_Abacha))

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch is an international non-governmental organization that investigates and reports human rights abuses globally, with the goal of effecting change through exposing these abuses and meeting with governments and organizations to push for policy and law enforcement change. ("About Us." Human Rights Watch. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us>)

cultural practice or harmful traditional practices. For example, issues like female genital mutilation, child marriage and you will find women who say, "But it's acceptable in my culture." They won't be forceful even though they identify themselves as feminist or activists, you cannot hear them publicly speaking against this. This is so divisive in Nigeria and I think it is about time that we see our differences as a political resource, that there is a minimum, a common ground that we can use and build upon instead of allowing men and social norms and patriarchy to continue to divide the movement. We have women's movements that might not be as strong as we wish, but we are continuing to grow it and invest in this area. Globally, I have been part and parcel of other things happening around the world in terms of women's movements and I've been following through on that. I think it must start closest to home and that's where we are.

**RO: In two minutes, can you do an evaluation of your expectations of the development of feminism in Nigeria?**

JE: I think there's a consciousness, the feminism has also come of age in Nigeria, but again I can say in the same breath it is emerging, or evolving, it is at infancy. There are different understandings of what we mean by feminism and we need to begin to do that clarification because there are many that don't want to identify themselves as feminists because of those pejorative terms that have been used to describe how feminists are seen. We need to build their confidence and make them understand that. There are people that ask questions regarding if men can be feminists, can men do feminism and I think yes. Men can also do feminism, we need an exclusive space but this is where our particularities, our issues as Africans will begin to come in. What sorts of spaces are available for a discussion for us to evolve and for us to shape this ideology? We also have to navigate the cultural and also build partnerships with men who are progressive, why not? That is also important, that is part of our duality. I think if we bring men effectively in, progressive men, not all men, then we are going to succeed. In Nigeria, I think there is a need to prioritize, most of the things that divide us are areas where women agree and maybe we need to begin to work more on the areas where we have a common voice because we need all the voices across different ethnic and religious groups to make the kind of progress that we want to make. We still have problems with the laws, both in adequacy and lack of implementation of the ones that already exist, we have to continue to build that solidarity and accountability, advocacy, sisterhood, they are all important in the kind of feminism that we want to see while being culturally sensitive and not subscribing to cultural relativist positions that reject universal human rights.

**RO: What would be a short response to speaking a little about your work on the African Feminist Network?**

JE: Is it African Feminist movement?

**RO: I know that there is a big organization in each country.**

JE: There is Women in Africa, and Women in the Diaspora. There is also the African Feminist Forum. I remember being a part of the foundation of that coalition, West African Women's rights Coalition which was also trying to galvanize common voices and building bridges for women to advocate for realization of women's human rights in west Africa. The African feminist forum was also like that, through that we were grappling with the leadership challenge in Africa and development of constitutionalism in Africa and all the other issues. It was a major breakthrough. Femnet<sup>41</sup> is still going on; we are also part of the network that originated from Nairobi and African women are doing particularly well given all the challenges we have. We also have linked to the global with a commission on the status of women that comes up every year, now you see a forum that even African women gather and are able to discuss with their sisters, not just from the diaspora,<sup>42</sup> but from around the world. It is quite interesting.

**RO: I think so too.**

JE: It is quite interesting to have those interplay. We have forces, especially men, that are not very happy that women are organizing.

**RO: One other thing I want to speak on is on global climate change and women.**

JE: There's a problem of gender and climate change. Gender and climate change do not get a lot of attention around here. You have to pay attention because women are the ones closest to the environment and you can't be talking about environmental issues without women, if you're looking at the environment what do women do? Women are the first to manage waste, waste management. They are child rearers and every day they are dealing with child stool, even in villages where they still don't have diapers, the ones that deal with that, the ones to deal with family waste, the ones who cook, who have to fetch water and firewood, sanitation, water, they're dealing with those issues so women are closer. Who are the farmers? Who are the ones that face the food security challenges? They are all women. If women are doing all of this and given their role, they still don't have a voice? The issues are not covered, and they are not on the table for climate change discussions. We have to talk about

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<sup>41</sup> FEMNET, the African Women's Development and Communication Network, is a non-governmental organization that serves as an advocacy network where African women network and build community by sharing information, their experiences, and their ideas. ("About FEMNET". FEMNET. Accessed June 9, 2020.

<https://femnet.org/about/>)

<sup>42</sup> A diaspora is a dispersal of a population from its geographic homeland. ("Diaspora". Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>)

participation rights for women, women have to be on the table where these issues are discussed because it affects them. Women have to be given a greater voice, they have to be given the tools to adapt to climate changes so adaptation is very important, they also have to be given the resources and the technology in order to adapt. For example, if a woman is a farmer and they have suffered famine or there's a particular climate change, how do they get the information that will give them improved crops or resistance because of the climate, we need to provide that. If you look at African women and in Nigeria it is double digits in terms of the divide between men and women. Women that are farmers do not own the land that they cultivate. We still have to talk about ownership of land, access to important means of production, how do you give women not just farming rights, but how do they own the land that they are farming on otherwise they're farming and someone can come and uproot their crops overnight because they do not have ownership and if it was farmed by their husband or their late father, they feel they don't have any power. We need to put all of that into perspective, so that when we begin to make laws whether at an international or national level, they are still not sensitive to gender issues and there are gender-particular issues with regard to climate change and the environment that we must address.

**RO: Thank you so much.**