

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

**SITE: NIGERIA**

**Transcript of Ngozi Iwere  
Interviewer: Ronke Olawale**

**Location: Lagos, Nigeria  
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**Ngozi Iwere** was born on August 12, 1956 in Illah Delta State Nigeria. As a lifelong activist, she played a major role in the creation of the organization, Women in Nigeria (WIN). Ngozi Iwere attended the College of Education, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria where she received a National Certificate in Education (NCE, 1977). In 1980, she enrolled in undergraduate degree program at the Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria and graduated Cum Laude in French. An activist in college, Ngozi Iwere worked briefly as a journalist with the now-defunct African Guardian, a weekly news/features magazine in Lagos, Nigeria and the Business in ECOWAS, a bilingual Sub-regional news/features magazine. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Community Life Project (CLP), a not-for-profit participatory, grassroots development organization (1992) and the Reclaim Naija Grassroots Movement (2010), a movement for civic engagement. The CLP program works with existing community networks like hair and beauty salon unions, artisans, traders in market places, small business unions, and schools to develop and disseminate health information and health education. She is also the coordinator of the African Feminist Forum (AFF), a diverse group of self-identified African feminist, activists, researchers, and practitioners from across Africa. As an HIV/AIDS and women's reproductive health and rights activist, Ngozi Iwere designed a community-based model for HIV/AIDS prevention that targets the entire community rather than small, high-risk populations. The strategy seeks to reduce stigma by promoting health-seeking behaviors among communities.

**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, Mrs. Ngozi Iwere. I know I may have not introduced you properly, my name is Ronke Olawale. On this project, as part of the Global Feminisms Project, a multi-site international project sponsored by the University of Michigan. Our goal in undertaking these oral histories is to create and preserve conversations with women whose scholarship and/or activism has contributed to women's activism, as that is broadly conceived, or other women's whose scholarship and/or activism has contributed in very critical ways to issues that are important to women. We are glad and privileged that you agreed to participate in this project. I will start off by asking you to introduce yourself, tell me your name, kindly spell it so I do not misrepresent you, and also let me understand how you would like to be addressed.**

Ngozi Iwere: Good Afternoon and thank you for including me in this important process. My name is Ngozi Iwere, Ngozi is N-g-o-z-i and my surname is I-w-e-r-e, Iwere. I like to be addressed as Ngozi Iwere or Mrs. Ngozi Iwere. I am the founder and executive director of Community Life Project and also the Reclaim Naija Grassroots Movement.

**RO: Thank you very much. What do you mean by Reclaim Naija? I do not really understand that.**

NI: Reclaim Nigeria is a platform which we started and launched in 2010. We have been working with grassroots organizations. Those we call grassroots civil society, organizations, mutual interest groups, artisan groups, over the years since we started Community Life Projects. We have done a lot of work in the area of health, sexuality, and livelihood. We found that there was a problem because governance was not really working for the poor, it was undermining some of the gains we had made with these groups, so we decided to launch a grassroots movement for civic engagement, so that these groups who represent voices that are excluded from decision-making tables as far as civic engagements was concerned, that they find a place around the table. The sector has been dominated by elite NGOs, so we launched this platform called Reclaim Naija through which these diverse grassroot groups, women's networks, faith-based networks, and mutual interest groups, trade-based associations can come together all over the country under this grassroots movement and engage with government on different levels, but mostly at the local government level because it is the level that is closest to the people where their influence will be most felt.

**RO: Thank you very much. So, let's start this interview by asking about your background, about your life, so general background as you think about where you are today. How would you depict the journey that brought you to this point?**

NI: It's been a long journey for me, it's actually been the only journey that I've known because I got involved in activism for social justice as an adolescent while I was in the College of Education at Abraka.<sup>1</sup> Then subsequently when I went to university, even though I trained to be a teacher and majored in the languages, French and English, I found that most of my time I was engaged in student's activism as a student. Then, when I graduated from the University, that activism took me into the media. There was a group who had been student union leaders and who felt that with the establishment of the independent media, newspapers, in Nigeria, that we could use the media as well to promote the cause of social justice. I joined the Guardian team, when they were starting the African Guardian and I was reporting on mostly foreign issues and also covered some of the crises we had in the country, like the student crisis and so on.

After that, I found myself starting to engage on health issues, especially HIV/AIDS. In the 80's and early 90's HIV/AIDS was a very big existential threat in Africa, and I joined with a group of women who felt that we needed to respond and to do something to protect women from HIV. Before that, I was already engaged along with other women in starting the first real feminist's organization we've had in this country, Women in Nigeria, WIN.<sup>2</sup> I had been the national coordinator of WIN. And so, we started a society for women and AIDS in Africa, along with health professionals and a few colleagues who were in WIN. Then, when I came to the realization that we couldn't feminize the response to HIV/AIDS, we needed to get the men to get involved and to change their habits and behavior because the women didn't seem to have enough negotiating power. The power dynamics within the families and community did not favor women, and I felt we needed to engage with men. At that time, it was not popular to engage men in the development world because that was the period when we were talking about how to get women in development. But I was very convinced that we needed to engage with men and when I didn't get much support for that, I decided to found Community Life Projects, where, as the name implies, we relate to young people, women, and families from the framework of community life, and that was how we started Community Life Project in 1992. I have already mentioned how that's now led us to found Reclaim Naija in 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Delta State University Abraka, popularly known as DELSU is a government owned university in Nigeria whose main campus is located in Abraka. It was established in 1995. ("Delta State University Abraka." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delta\\_State\\_University,\\_Abraka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delta_State_University,_Abraka))

<sup>2</sup> Women in Nigeria, WIN, is a political interest organization founded in 1982. Their main focuses are women's liberation, gender equality and equity, and social justice. Differing from other early women's groups in Nigeria, WIN conceded that gender equality cannot be secured with addressing the broader issue of human rights, for both men and women. Even at its conception, WIN had male members and looked to garner support from the Nigerian male population. ("Women in Nigeria (organization)." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Nigeria\\_\(organization\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Nigeria_(organization)))

**RO: For instance, what will you describe as your central commitments in life, what does your career look like?**

NI: When I think about my life now, I don't think I ever had a career. I had a mission, but not a career. That mission was to fight for social justice. It so happened that in my adolescent years... people talk about their first love or falling in love or crush, it so happened that mine was with my country and because of what was happening then in the African continent with Africa, I've spent all of my life trying to respond and to reduce human misery. So, I see myself and my life more as an activist for social justice. I passed through different phases in the course of this. I found it difficult to bring myself to think of it as a career because there was always that tension between pursuing the ideal and building a career. I found a career very restricting, there were certain things you couldn't do and even when I had been working in the NGO sector and relying on donor grants, you also find that there are tensions because there are certain things you want to do and there are certain things you know are what is needed in the situation, but it is not a donor priority. But there is that flexibility that you could always choose whether you wanted to get involved or not, whereas if I had a career I think I would have had more restrictions and then there would be tension between my personal dreams, goals, and aspirations in life and what is required.

When you have been at the community level, where we have been since 1992 in Nigeria, you see the suffering of people that shaped our mission statement. Our mission statement when we started Community Life Project was to radically reduce human misery by engaging the people as agents of change. We wanted to promote agency on the part of the innocent part, and I learned that it had a transformative impact on my life, on my philosophy of life, on what I think that life is. When I started this, it was just "Oh, I need to respond to HIV and I need to engage the men," but once I got in there, I saw the real challenges that the poor face. It's about their dignity – that impoverishment is an impoverishment of human dignity. Whereas the narrative out there sees it as "bread and butter," I saw it as, "Did people have enough food to eat? What's their purchasing power? How many dollars do they make a day?" But I saw that this is something that is really questioning the humanity of people, and the kind of existence they live. Also, I began to learn that part of the suffering that people face, that the majority faces, is also caused by those of us who are privileged, not really understanding the realities of what people really face and how bad it is.

I think that when I got into the grassroots community work, I started becoming. I'll put it that way. I started to become more human and to understand the connectedness between all human life, and really not just human life but all life. Sometimes I say that I was destined because having engaged at this level it became hard for me to move on. So, even when you could think of career prospects like openings for jobs or international

engagements, I knew I couldn't move because it would be irresponsible of me knowing what I have come to know, to move away from this place where I am. It's been very fulfilling, it's been a painful journey, but it's also been a very fulfilling journey because it helped me clarify my values, to sharpen my philosophy of life, to put money and social advancements and material success in proper perspective. Even my colleagues who work with me and those who have worked with us all through the years, people come here and people have stayed with us for 20 something years working with us, they come and know that it's really not a place for career advancements. It is a place to learn, to unlearn, and to learn, and a place to make what we do and to make our presence in the world felt, to add value. It is a place where you can justify why you are here, why you are alive, and why you get up every day to do something. If I were to look at my life as my career, one can say if we use the normal yardsticks, that I haven't done much for myself. But if we see this as a vocation, as the mission it is, and a conscious choice that I've made, then I think it's been a fulfilling journey for me.

**RO: A quick wrap up of that, what are some of your most significant lifetime achievements, professionally now, because this is all you've learned to do?**

NI: I think that the opportunity that one has been able to create and a space one has been able to create for people who didn't have much of a voice to find their voices and to express their voices. For me, I think that that would be, for me, the major contribution because it has implications or ramifications that even me, who expresses their voice, will not understand. There are a lot of good things that come from that, just beyond the engaging. I think that for me, that one has been able to through the work we have done, have a critical mass of people out there who have agency who have been able to take back their dignity, pick up their dignity that was being trampled upon, and decide to live a life of dignity even with the deprivations that they still face. There are people who through the work that one has done, no matter their socio-economic circumstances, they are human beings and they can speak, they can take their place somewhere and they can speak.

In terms of the gains that one has made, in the areas of HIV/AIDS being able to be part of the global conversations and decision making about what global response should be to HIV and seeing that response materialize, even though one was just a tiny voice among so many voices, but the fact that somehow you are connected with that process and through that process there is the proper response to HIV that is going on. People have access to treatment now, and HIV now is routine. They were simple things, but they were difficult to achieve at that time. Being part of international best practices that have been adopted, scaled up, which is benefiting millions of people. If I look back to my little participation in the preparations for the UN general assembly on HIV/AIDS, my little participation in the expert meetings that were set up for this process including the one that was set up to

address HIV as a security issue, that was to prepare recommendations for the UN Security Council. Being part of that process was a gratifying moment and seeing that faith-based organizations are engaged now in HIV/AIDS as part of the solution and not the problem are some of the things we have had to struggle against.

The opportunities I've had to be part of the voice for Africa, I find that very satisfying. In terms of our governance work in Nigeria. Some of the gains that we have made, we find them being reversed. It is the nightmare that we all live here, it's frustrating. Sometimes one needs to just fall back on resilience and the support of other colleagues that are doing the same thing, leaning on each other and collaborating just to keep on going. Here it can be gloomy because we made some gains, we've achieved things and then, especially in the area of women's representation, we find those gains being rolled back. I still think that the capacity we have built, the consciousness we have raised out there in society is an achievement because with that consciousness, people can exercise agency where there was no agency.

**RO: Wonderful, thank you. Just to go quickly to the next question, I know you already reflected a little bit about your work, how you got there, your life, and your work, and I think the other question therefore will be... I know you spoke about what drew you to the work, at what point did you think it was important enough to get started? How did you first become involved in this work area?**

NI: In college of education, what got me started was issues around students' welfare, students' wellbeing, democratization of education. I got involved with a group of radical students on campus and I got into student parliament. I think that for my generation of feminists and activists, the time—the early 80's and the late 70's—was a time where we had a left movement in the country, or we had lecturers and pockets of places in the academic system where you found people who had the leftist leanings. Because it was the period of the Cold War and also the time when we were having quite a number of struggles on the continent for the decolonization of Africa, I got drawn to the left because they were those who were championing the cause of the downtrodden, of the workers, of the proletariat. There was a vision of an egalitarian society that appealed to me: the whole idea that wealth should not be concentrated in the hands of a few like we have it now, where you have a small percentage of people controlling the larger portion of the wealth of the country that majority of the people out there do not have.

I loved the fact that socialism and communism was talking about how to distribute wealth, what is the legitimacy of having wealth. I was at Bayero University,<sup>3</sup> which had just been carved out of Ahmadu Bello University<sup>4</sup> and there were quite a number of radical lecturers there. Even while I was doing my Youth Corps<sup>5</sup> and before I went back to the university to get my degree since I did my NCE<sup>6</sup> earlier. I started to read a lot of literature, so I happen to be part of that generation that consumed Karl Marx,<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels,<sup>8</sup> read about capitalism, and Adam Smith.<sup>9</sup> A load of literature that was being churned out and we had to study the history of revolutions around the world, the Bolshevik Revolution,<sup>10</sup> the French Revolution.<sup>11</sup> We tried to understand the history of humanity, how we got where we were, and the political systems that were in place. I also took a course in political science when I

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<sup>3</sup> Bayero University is located in Kano State, Nigeria and was founded in 1975. ("Bayero University, Kano." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayero\\_University\\_Kano](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayero_University_Kano))

<sup>4</sup> Ahmadu Bello University is a federally funded research university in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. It was founded in 1962 by Ahmadu Bello and operates two campuses. ("Ahmadu Bello University." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadu\\_Bello\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadu_Bello_University))

<sup>5</sup> The National Youth Service Corps was set up by the Nigerian government to involve Nigerian graduates in nation building and development. University graduates are set to complete one year of service doing a variety of jobs, and young adults are placed in regions different from where they grew up. ("National Youth Service Corps." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020.)

<sup>6</sup> NCE is the acronym for the Nigerian Certificate of Education, the bare minimum qualification for all teachers in Nigerian schools. ("Nigeria Certificate in Education NCE." National Teachers Institute. Accessed June 4, 2020. <http://www.nti.edu.ng/programmes/nigeria-certificate-in-education-nce/>)

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, political theorist, and socialist revolutionary. His critical theories on society, economics, and politics, an ideology known as Marxism, argues for a controlling of the means of productions by the proletariat or the working class, either through cooperation or by public ownership. He wished this to occur via an economic transition from capitalism to what he believed to be a much fairer and egalitarian way of life. ("Karl Marx." Wikipedia. Accessed May 24, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl\\_Marx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx))

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Engels was a German philosopher, historian, and communist. He helped develop Marxist theory with Karl Marx and co-authored *The Communist Manifesto*. He died in 1895. ("Friedrich Engels." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich\\_Engels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Engels))

<sup>9</sup> Adam Smith was a Scottish economist, philosopher, and key figure during the Scottish Enlightenment. He is known as the "The Father of Capitalism" and died in 1790. ("Adam Smith." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Smith))

<sup>10</sup> Historically, the Bolshevik Revolution encompasses both the Russian political and social revolution between the years of 1917 and 1923. It began with the fall of the monarchy and ended with the establishment of the Soviet Union at the end of the Civil War. ("Russian Revolution." History. Accessed June 4, 2020.

<https://www.history.com/topics/russia/russian-revolution#:~:text=Bolshevik%20Revolution.against%20the%20Duma's%20provisional%20government.>)

<sup>11</sup> The French Revolution began in 1789 and ended in 1799 and was a period of great social and political upheaval. Its causes included the French government's debt, class inequality, the rising popularity of social reform, and a crumbling monarchy. At the end of the revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power and with him came the establishment of the French Republic. The new government established civil equality in the country and abolished feudalism. The monarchy was abolished, and King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were both executed for treason. ("French Revolution." Britannica. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution>)



was in University, as an elective. We read a lot of those and then we also read Frantz Fanon,<sup>12</sup> Walter Rodney,<sup>13</sup> how Europe underdeveloped Africa, and so on.

The issue of the relationship between us South countries, and the North countries and the question of the unequal terms of trade and the decolonization of Africa, apartheid,<sup>14</sup> and all of that, we got involved in those as the student union. We had groups of us who shared the same ideology, perspective, in school, trying to see what we could do in solidarity with other African countries and other third-world countries. We saw those countries and our countries as the underdogs in the global economic framework that was operationalized at that time. So yes, that is what deepened that. There were debates at that time about the national question and the woman's question. It was framed as "the national question" and "the woman's question." All of these movements were going on in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and South Africa. We were very familiar with the conditions there and the issue of the role of women in the liberation struggles.

There were all these debates we were having about "how are you going to address the subordination of women?" and, "Are we going to address it on its own or is it going to be part of the global agenda, the general agenda to liberate society?" There was the view that if you liberated the working people and the other downtrodden members, automatically, women would get liberated, we used to call it the emancipation of women then. There were those that felt it had to be both, you have to address the women's issues that are specific to women's emancipation. When WIN was formed, Women in Nigeria, was formed, it was on this basis. What WIN stated as part of its understanding of the situation was that, yes, women are doubly oppressed. They are oppressed as working people, as part of the working class and then they are oppressed and exploited as women. WIN was going to address that, and Women in Nigeria had male members coming from the leftist ideology that were supportive of the liberation of women. It has been a journey, and we have tried to understand what happened—whether it was a strength to have men in Women in Nigeria, or it wasn't. This is how I got engaged. Over the years, like I said to you, I began to clarify more of my own values, my own ideological position, my own philosophy and understanding of change and what it should be. All of that idealism that we had as young people, all of us started to moderate it

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<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon was a French West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher. His works centered around post-colonialism, Marxism, and critical theory. He died in 1961. ("Frantz Fanon." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frantz\\_Fanon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frantz_Fanon))

<sup>13</sup> Walter Rodney was a Guyanese historian, political activist, and academic. He was a Pan-African and was interested in the struggles of the working class. Influenced by the Black Power Movement in America and the teachings of Karl Marx, Rodney devoted this life to challenging the status quo. He was assassinated in 1980. ("Walter Rodney." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Rodney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Rodney))

<sup>14</sup> Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation put in place in South Africa. It lasted from 1948 to the early 1990s. ("Apartheid." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>)

with the different realities that were going and the dynamism of social change movements and political movements all over the world. That was the tradition of struggle that I happen to belong to or where I am coming from.

**RO: Thank you so much. You actually began to address some of the questions that were going to be follow up questions, like how your involvement might have changed over the years. The only question I would like to add is, do you think these changes have been influenced by your personal experiences through life?**

NI: Yes, largely so.

**RO: How?**

NI: First of all, I grew up in a home where there wasn't a distinction between the male children and the female children. My brothers were expected to cook, back the younger ones, feed them, take care of them and the same as us. When I started to grow up, interact with different people, and then go to university, I began to experience the discrimination. I began to hear narratives that made women a little bit less than the men in terms of their humanity, in terms of their capacity. I saw that going on and that was a big shock for me. Living in the Northern part of the country even, and schooling there, also heightened my feminine consciousness. First of all, because of my engagements, I found myself in situations where I would be the only female among men. Socially, in the North where I worked for years and schooled, somebody would step into a room and shake everybody's hands and just skip me. There were subjects I wanted to discuss, such as football, my dad loved football and part of what he did was a football administrator. I knew quite a bit about football, and I would try to discuss football and people would just shut me out and didn't like that.

**RO: How long have you been here? I know it has been a number of years.**

NI: 1993, because I started Community Life Projects from my house, so it was there the first year. Then, in 1993 or 1994, we were able to secure a part of this place and then we have been here since then.

**RO: At what age would you say that you actually began?**

NI: From a very early age, I was aware, or I had a keen sense of justice and injustice. I didn't like unfair treatment of anyone and then my first consciousness of gender inequality was when I left home, when I finished my secondary school. I grew up in a home where my parents didn't distinguish between the male child and the female child. My parents didn't have any feminist consciousness. I know that my mom is traditional, but possibly because

her father, my grandfather, sent the girls to school as well as his male children. My mother had gone to school and was working as a teacher, maybe that contributed to the way we were treated at home, but us going to school was a given.

When it came to domestic chores, although we had people helping out at home who were employed. After the Civil War,<sup>15</sup> we went back home as refugees and when my parents finally got a teaching job, we didn't have the house help that we had before, so we did all of our cooking, cleaning, and laundry. We shared all of the chores. The tradition here is that the older kids take care of the younger siblings, so my brothers would take the wrapper and back the younger ones, just like us. Just like the females. Anyone would back them, feed them, bathe them, so we didn't have that discrimination.

When I left home, I started to see the kinds of language people used—I was exposed to misogyny—to talk about women. I was hearing people tell me, “You act like a man, you are like a man, you are not like a woman,” and that was a bit of a shock for me. Going to do my National Youth Service Corp in the northern part of the country, working there for three years, and then going to school there. I had about six or seven years when I got this, what I call a personal culture shock. First of all, as an activist and someone who leans left, there were very few women going with the radical left movement and leftist ideology. Oftentimes, I was the only female in the midst of men and boys. When we were interacting with others, culturally, for instance someone would come into a place and find me and maybe three other men and they would shake the hands of all men and just skip me and shake the other person's hand, as if I wasn't there. That irked me a lot but our comrades, as we call ourselves, would say “Don't take it personal, that is the culture, it is their respect that they are not going to shake the hand of a woman.” Or maybe they are having conversations about football, because my dad was a football administrator, we all loved football, we grew up knowing football, he was a coach and referee and then he was the chair of the football association for our state, for Bendel state. We knew about football, it's not like now, where Nigeria has started winning international competitions, so you have a lot of women and girls now interested in football. At that time, it was very rare to find women interested in football, if I wanted to voice an opinion, people just ignored you and brushed it aside like “Don't come and put your two grains of salt into the soup.”

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<sup>15</sup> The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War, was fought between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra from July 6, 1967 to January 15, 1970. Biafra represented the nationalist dreams of the Igbo people who felt as though they could not live under a Northern-dominated government. During the war, the federal government initiated a blockade around Biafra, causing mass starvation among the Biafran people. There were about 100,000 military casualties for the government, but somewhere between 500,000 and 3 million Biafran civilians died of starvation. Biafra never achieved secession. (“Nigerian Civil War.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian\\_Civil\\_War#:~:text=The%20Nigerian%20Civil%20War%20\(also,1967%20to%2015%20January%201970.\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_Civil_War#:~:text=The%20Nigerian%20Civil%20War%20(also,1967%20to%2015%20January%201970.)))

All of those things actually added my feminist consciousness to my consciousness of injustice that was already there, and my solidarity with the working people, with labor, and then with women now. I became very combative, I'll put it that way.

Maybe one could have overreacted or overdone it sometimes, but I was always trying to assert myself, my right to be, to express my voice anywhere. What it meant was that one was always fighting everywhere you went, you were arguing, whether you went to the bank for any services, the way you were treated, you refused to accept it, and then I would say, "I want to see the manager." All of this added a little bit of stress to the life, but one didn't think about it then as stress, you just talk about it as you just have to assert yourself, you just have to show that you are not what society says you are, you are not inferior to any man.

**RO: Let's just continue with the time you became aware of gender discrimination and became more involved in feminist activism.**

NI: I think I became more aware after my secondary school, that would be about the age of 19/20. It became a real cause for me, something that I wanted to get involved in when I was about 21 years old. I had left home and finished my college of education and I was working in the northern part of the country and I was teaching in a girls' school. During my youth service in the girls' school, I saw parents come withdraw their daughters from school. Governments were trying to give them incentives to keep the girls in school. I also saw that the younger girls I was teaching were not very motivated because as far as they were concerned, they were going to get married. A girl's life is: you are born and then you get married. These were girls who were too young to get married. So apart from my personal experience, being discriminated against in social settings when people wanted to shake hands, they would shake the men's hands and skip me. The conversations I wanted to get involved in, and people just shut me down and were not even paying attention.

Apart from those, the incident that had a very profound impact on me was during my National Youth Service in Bauchi, I was serving in Azare,<sup>16</sup> and one of the permanent teachers in the school was a friend of mine and I traveled with her. We were visiting her relatives, and at this compound there was a policeman, at that time I believe he was probably in his 40s, and there was this 12-year-old, and they were teasing her. The other wives in the house were teasing her, saying, "When our husband goes in to sleep with you, you are going to have a baby." She was playing with the young children of the other wives, they were about her age and a little younger than her, in the sand. They were teasing her, and she said "No, I am not going to have a baby," they will say, "You will have a baby!" She said, "But he has been

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<sup>16</sup> Azare is a town in Bauchi State, Nigeria and was founded by Mallam Zaki. ("Azare." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azare>)

coming to lay with me and I have not gotten pregnant.” It turned out that she just started to menstruate and that was why they started saying that to her, she had no clue about the connection between menstruation and pregnancy. This was a child, playing with other children and she is supposedly somebody’s wife. I think that had a very powerful impact on me and made me more determined to do something. First of all, to assert my own humanity as a person, as a human being, and also the realization that I happen to be among privileged people. The fact that I was growing up in the same society and I had the privilege of education which I took for granted and nobody had forced me into any marriage, which I took for granted, that I was going to fall in love some day and marry someone of my choice, or if I decided not to get married it would be my choice and I was seeing this reality. It made me very committed to teaching the young women, to try to give them a sense of value for themselves, that they are not just here to get married.

At the same time, at an early age I learned some of the things that helped me in the community organization that I am doing now. You have to be sensitive to the cultures that people are growing up in, you cannot just come and bring, “It’s your right. Nobody should treat you like this.” Those are not the way to say those things. I had to look for subtle ways, incentives, and ways of communicating these, that is not going to completely tear people away from what they know, the life they have known or their culture. There is how to balance the ‘new’ that you are bringing into a place where people already have a whole life and a whole world view, a whole narrative of their existence, how do you introduce new values, how do you add value to their life without disrupting things. For me, it was part of the apprenticeships that helped me today in the work we are doing and why we are so successful in the community organizing work we do because we realize that you are not in people’s shoes. It is very easy to say from the outside, “Don’t take that from them.” When we started the HIV/AIDS work and people thought, “The men are exposing their wives to risk, you should just tell her to have it out with him,” and so on. It’s not that easy, what we want is to get this woman to not be exposed to the risk of HIV and the children she is going to have, that is your goal. There are ways you can approach it: you can approach it in the way that reinforces the cohesion in the family, or you can approach it in the way that destroys that cohesion. We have to bear that in mind. I’m taking these things the way they come because in my feminist consciousness, one became aware of tension between the way we see our issues as women here and the way in the western countries, feminists solve their issues.

For us, here, even what you think is just a health problem, a rights issue, or a relationship issue, it has an existential undertone, and you have to approach it carefully. For instance,

women are not assured of custody of their children, of alimony,<sup>17</sup> if they decide they want a divorce or if they want to go. There are no social safety nets or support systems that she could fall back on, our support system is embedded in the communal life, in the extended family system. There is a way the women would go about her issues and she would alienate herself from the extended family members that should support. You are addressing a social problem, but it's like you are trying to walk on a rope and maintain your balance. You find that because we are pronatalists,<sup>18</sup> and we are proudly so, a woman is prepared to risk her life for the sake of her children, she doesn't want to leave the marriage and abandon the children to whatever fate. She would rather sacrifice her own self, her own safety, in order to stay. We did a study of the factors that influence a women's ability to practice safe sex, as part of the response to HIV. We assumed that it was the economic consideration, but we found that was not it. It was cultural and socio-psychological factors that were more important in her decision than economic, because we found households where women were actually the breadwinners, but still couldn't make the kind of decisions we thought they would make considering other things.

Going backwards, when I had this experience in the North, when I finished my youth school, I decided to teach at an all-girls school in Kaduna state.<sup>19</sup> There I tried to work with the young girls because of the automatic promotion that the girls were getting. At that time, it was class five, in class five you took the West African Examination, they had collected all of the girls from different arms of the classes that they felt were not going anywhere and they had lumped them in one arm of the class. I came in to teach and I found out teachers didn't take them seriously, the girls were not serious about their education, they giggled, they already knew they were going to be married as soon as they left there. I had to go back with them to see what the minimum thing I could achieve, working with them. I said "Okay, let me achieve literacy in English language." I mean if these girls can show that they went to secondary school for five years, being able to read and write in English, and being able to communicate in English, then if that is all I can achieve as an English teacher, I was not talking about teaching them French. That is what we did, I befriended them; I tried to know where they were coming from. And part of the incentive to get them to be serious about education, I said to them "You're going to be married, so if you get married you are going to be getting correspondence coming to your house, you can't even read, you don't even know what's in it. It is in your enlightened self-interest to learn to do that." It hit me again that teenage girls

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<sup>17</sup> Alimony is a court-ordered allowance made from one spouse to another after a legal separation or divorce. ("Alimony." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alimony>)

<sup>18</sup> Being pronatalist signifies support for a high, or increased, birthrate. ("Pronatalist." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pronatalist>)

<sup>19</sup> Kaduna is a state in north-western Nigeria and borders the Kaduna River. ("Kaduna." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaduna>)

were already betrothed to be married. In life, you confront the child marriage issue and you see it, their parents are giving them away to be married. These children are not in the position to negotiate anything, to make any decisions of their own, that is their own reality. Those are the things that really influenced me. In the early 80s, when we started Women In Nigeria, the conference on women's rights and feminism had already been held while I was away in Europe. I came down and became a part of it and tried to work with a few other women to start the branch in Kano.<sup>20</sup> Then I went on to become the national coordinator, we change our coordinators yearly, I was the coordinator at some point. I was doing all of this within the framework of the left movement in the country, we are going to liberate all of society and then we are going to make sure women's specific interests were taken care of. It also affected me in terms of my personal life.

**RO: Okay.**

NI: I didn't think about marriage in the same way as young girls, my peers, might think about marriage. I was reluctant to get into a relationship where my interests, dreams, passions were subordinated to someone else's. Where I have to fetch and carry and do all of the chores for somebody else. I didn't really think about marriage, but then I think that looking back, those of us that started Women In Nigeria and who pushed, because Women In Nigeria was quite radical in the way it was talking about equality with men. It was talking about a woman being a full-fledged human being, having the right to leave and realize their full potentials. Women In Nigeria was looking at discrimination, in different spheres--contexts--of life, we were also addressing the issues of women's unpaid domestic labor, which wasn't something that if someone wanted to sympathize that: "Okay, we need more women in this," no one wanted you to challenge what was going on in your domestic situation. When we look back, we found that, we realized that patriarchy was the issue, it wasn't the men, it was patriarchy. The enemy was patriarchy, what we had to challenge were patriarchal values. We needed to look at how we were going to address and begin to challenge patriarchal values.

We looked back and realized that most of us wound up married, wound up being parents, but for us, we looked at it like we have to build those kinds of homes that we are telling people are possible. You do not say this way of living and this norm is wrong, we should be jettisoning<sup>21</sup> it and you want to replace it with something else without showing people that what you want to replace it with is possible and demonstrating that it has more value than what people are practicing already, than the culture that is there. At the end of the day, we

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<sup>20</sup> Kano is the capital of Kano State in north-western Nigeria. It is the commercial center of Northern Nigeria and the second largest city in the country. ("Kano." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kano>)

<sup>21</sup> To jettison something is to push it aside due to it being unnecessary. ("Jettison." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jettison>)

become parents and we want to raise those children that will see themselves as people and not as male or female. When I look back at our peers, I know most of us have achieved that, it's also been part of the conversation with colleagues, and I think probably a part of scholarship, people have documented that. For us here, yes, we are part of the pronatalist culture of the society, it's not about the men or not getting married. It's about the ideology, that way of seeing things that has graded the humanity of people according to their gender or their sex.

It is also about division of labor, the dynamism of society on its own is helping to redefine that and it's about introducing justice and peace in the home. This is where religion comes in, even though the communist and socialist ideology appealed to us, the atheism didn't have as strong an appeal. What we found was that there was a minority of our comrades and those who went through the struggle with us who were atheists. But the majority of us still practiced our other faiths and other religions, we may have had that rebellion in the early days against religion because it did not provide a solution to the issue of women's exploitation and oppression. Eventually, we were able to see the practice of religion and we decided to study 'what is the teaching of religion?' and 'what is the practice of religion?' We were able to understand how cultural influences shape religious practices and religious rights and how religion itself is used to rationalize things that are injustices and that are embedded in the culture of the society. That made our work cut out for us about knowing what to do. Within our faith communities, those of who are beginning to go in there and influence the narrative and try to change the narrative, our major partners are faith-based organizations, women's networks, youth networks, but even the clergy.

One of the things we do is look at the Catholic church, for instance, that has pre-marriage instruction classes for people preparing to be married. We started at community level to go in and work with the clergy, to design the syllabus and curriculum and put in things like justice in the home. We are not just looking at men or women. The injustice in the family setup is not just about men and women, it is about the children, the elderly, and the domestic help, because that is the reality that we live in. Most people in the middle class, even people in the lower classes have relations and people who come in to help out domestically. How are they treated? We are using religion and the values of religion to now defend justice in the home and the practice of justice in the home. It is easy for the clergy we are working with or the lay leaders to see that you are not outside of scripture. The same weapon that was used to subordinate women, we are flipping it over as a weapon for emancipating women and assuring justice for them. We put in family health issues there, we put in the issue of sexuality and what it should be, women's rights to enjoy sex and to decide whether they want to have it or not, even within marriage. Within that framework we are able to sensitize people to the fact that there can be rape within marriage, if consent is not given. We are gradually able to do all of those things, even in that area. You have religious fundamentalism,



on one hand, growing and trying to undermine that, but we are also building within those structures, patriarchal structures, a critical mass of people with a new kind of consciousness. That is the story in terms of...

**RO: The collections and all of that.**

NI: Yes.

**RO: Specifically, if you were asked to define feminism. What is feminism? What has it meant to your work?**

NI: I don't remember who said it, but it is not mine, I read it somewhere. I think this definition is very profound for me. Feminism is the radical notion that women are persons. For me, that is feminism. It doesn't matter the form of inequality, the form of oppression we are dealing with. At the root of it is actually how people perceive a woman. It is about who they think a woman is. If we look at the injustices, we find that it's because people do not accept that a woman is equal to a man in dignity. For some reason she is inferior in some ways. For me, feminism is just to ascertain the full personhood of the girl-child and the woman.

**RO: What is the relationship between gender feminism and activism? What do you think of the connection between feminist scholarship and activism? Do you perceive a dichotomy, a separation, or do you see them as interrelated?**

NI: I think that feminism is a lived experience, and that in practice, feminism, for me, is something that people live and practice. When we looked back, we found feminist activists who did not know the word 'feminism,' who did not make any analysis of the structures of oppression or injustice in society. They just felt like, "We were persons and that we deserved this." They fought for universal adult suffrage. For me, it was the feminists' struggle. For women to go to work, have equal pay, for women to go to school, those were all feminist struggles that women have had. I think there is feminist consciousness and there is feminists' experiences or practices, or I will call it 'feminist activism.' Consciousness is those who are involved in feminist activism, who understand, are conscious that is what they are doing, and who have taken time to reflect and analyze the situation.

Then you have the other group of activists who are doing it because it is intuitive, because they accept that definition of feminism that I talked about: "Listen, I am a full person and I want to assert my full personhood. I want the same rights that humans have." When it comes to scholarship, I think that scholarship, this is my personal view, needs to be democratized because it has not been. It has been made very elitist because of the tools that it is using, the kind of standards that have been set, the kind of language that is used for scholarship. It

excludes, it does not include. There is a certain kind of rigor that has been introduced into scholarship that I think has made scholarship, for me, a sectarian thing. People who have the capacity to analyze their realities and get to the same conclusion as a PHD candidate or university professor, but because they are not in the school system, they cannot speak the language of scholarship, they cannot write and cite the sources where they got the things; they are not recognized as scholars. For me, there is a disconnect between the way knowledge is processed and disseminated in the scholarly circle and the way knowledge is processed and disseminated at the community level by people. For us, CLP, one of our values is the respect of indigenous knowledge and culture. Scholarship is increasingly becoming aware, there is awareness that there is indigenous knowledge, indigenous science, and indigenous practice. Their language is different. They do all of the same things, they do observations, through interviews, case studies through what is going on in society. People arrive at conclusions about realities, but they don't have scholarly framework. It is not present...

**RO: The theories.**

NI: Yes, the theories. You have to put it in a theory. I think that theory informs practice, but more than practice informs theory, I think that is an imbalance. I know people are beginning to talk about 'pracademics' - all of the knowledge and experience you have from practitioners. The other thing that I struggle with is when people say you cannot base scholarship or social science, they say you cannot base it on anecdotes; that it is anecdotal. To me, quantitative research is just a quantification of anecdotes, because somebody brings a questionnaire and asks me a question, "How many hours do you sleep at night?" and I say, "Four hours." This is just me telling you a story, as a researcher you have no means of knowing if I actually sleep four hours or if I sleep ten, I may be lying to you. You could ask me "when was your first time having intercourse?" and I say I was a virgin until I got married at the age of 42. They could say "okay, virgins... or people marry at this age or that age," but I am lying to you. MY first experience was probably at 17 years old, but the researcher does not know. All the researcher does in this so-called science is take all of the answers people have given you, which you are not in a position to know whether they are factual. There is a difference between fact and truth. If I tell you that I sleep for four hours, you take it as a fact because I said it to you, but it is not true because that is not how many hours I sleep. What is the difference between you just aggregating anecdotes and analyzing them, and me telling you my life story in a qualitative study? I think that some of these things need to be connected; that things are more connected in real life than in theoretical constructs or scholarly constructs.

**RO: What is the relationship between your work, for instance, and other feminist activists and scholars in Nigeria?**

NI: I think that...

**RO: Then we will go onto the global connections.**

NI: I think that maybe because of my trajectory, that connection was made objectively and not subjectively, for me, because the values I shared were shared by people in academia, so we were able to get literature to read, analyze, and organize seminars along with them. That connectedness was established right in the beginning of my activism. We made the link between what we were doing and labor. When I was one of the NANS leaders, National Association of Nigerian Students, we started the process of forming an alliance with the academic staff union of universities because there were times that they did not agree with us. We found that we shared common interests and objectives, we wanted the democratization of education and they wanted the same thing; we wanted standards. We started the process of making a link with the labor movement. Those connections were made ideologically.

Those of us who came out of the students' movement and the labor movement, many of us today run non-profits or run civil societies organizations, but we have a long history of being in the trenches together. Abiola herself is coming from a Students Union tradition,<sup>22</sup> even with the media, we have connections with the media, people like Owei Lakemfa,<sup>23</sup> Kayode Komolafe,<sup>24</sup> Edwin Madunagu<sup>25</sup> when he went to the Guardian on the editorial board. Quite a number of our colleagues and comrades were working in the university, the media, or running non-government organizations and human rights groups. We are friends, we are buddies, we know each other, we struggled together, we have been in the same trenches, we are really close. For us, collaborating comes naturally because we have done it before. In a way, it is an advantage, but there is also a downside. That downside is that we find that we don't bother to document the collaboration we are doing. We say things like we are going to partner with somebody, we don't have a partnership agreement, we have not signed anything. You just call up your colleague and say, "There is this thing to work on," and you

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<sup>22</sup> The Global Feminisms Project has an interview with Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi on the Nigeria Interviews site.

<sup>23</sup> Owei Lakemfa is a trade unionist, journalist, human rights activist, author, historian, and was recently elected the Secretary-General of the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). ("Owei Lakemfa." International Labour Organization. Accessed June 5, 2020. [https://www.ilo.org/aids/Publications/WCMS\\_245705/lang--en/index.html](https://www.ilo.org/aids/Publications/WCMS_245705/lang--en/index.html))

<sup>24</sup> Kayode Komolafe is a journalist who has held various executive positions in the Nigerian Union of Journalists and the Nigeria Guild of Editors. ("Kayode Komolafe." Inoyo Toro Foundation. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://inoyotorofoundation.org/team/ime-ekpo/>)

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Madunagu is a freelance journalist and author who has written for the likes of The Guardian Africa, Premium Times, The Nigerian Voice, and All Africa. ("Edwin Madunagu." Muck Rack. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://muckrack.com/edwin-madunagu/articles>)

just do the work. And you don't bother about who gets the credit for the work. That kind of collaboration and networking is going on because of our history together. If I didn't have that history or was somebody who didn't have that history, I wouldn't know how that collaboration was happening for them. For a lot of what we are doing now, we are just falling back on each other, doing what we have always done, just with different platforms.

**RO: Internationally, what connections do you have? Are there ways your work intersects other global movements? Feminist movements, for instance?**

NI: Internationally, the fact that I started Community Life Project and also co-founded The Society for Women and AIDS in Africa<sup>26</sup> gave us links to organizations and foundations outside of Africa that are supporting this kind of work and doing this kind of work. The Society for Women and AIDS was born as a result of the fourth international conference on AIDS in Sweden. The African women that went there agreed among themselves that what they were learning about this virus, African women were in serious trouble. They knew they had to go back to their countries and do something to target women. SWA was a Pan-African thing, Society for Women and AIDS in Africa.

**RO: Okay, SWAAN.**

NI: Yes, and then an N for Nigeria.

**RO: Okay.**

NI: We had that in other countries. We kept trying to organize conferences, to bring people together to learn, support each other, and think about what we were going to do. With respect to work on other gender issues at the community level, we linked with other organizations that supported our work. Through that process, taking part in a number of international conferences on either women and health issues, or just women's issues in general, where feminist issues are discussed and exchanged. In those international conferences, we had the opportunity to network with colleagues from other parts of the country and be part of a global movement. I already mentioned the movement for treatment access for HIV, we were also part of that international movement, we took part in the debates

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<sup>26</sup> The Society for Women and AIDS in Africa (SWAA) promotes AIDS prevention through increasing awareness of the disease among African women. The organization also analyzes the effect of AIDS on families as a unit and the communities to which they belong. SWAA has national branches in 27 countries and holds four annual meetings. ("The Society for Women and AIDS in Africa: The Experiences of a Developing Federation." National Library of Medicine. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12318082/?otool=umichlib#:~:text=PIP%3A%20The%20Society%20for%20Women,children%2C%20families%2C%20and%20communities.>)

on the international level, and discussions to put Africa's voice and African issues on the table, and also to win support from women in other developing countries.

**RO: How would you describe a feminist movement in Nigeria? What is your analysis, evaluation, and expectation, of the development of feminism in Nigeria?**

NI: We are debating whether we have a feminist movement, or we don't have a feminist movement. That is still something we are talking about, and what is a movement? There are people who have different perspectives on what a movement is supposed to be. My take on this is that when we have different groups of people in different places sharing a common ideal and each one bringing different things to the table, resources, strengths, what else they have, and even their perspectives to the table, to drive and push for change in any given area. I see that as a movement, working towards that.

What we have had in Nigeria, we had—tracing back, we can talk about the Aba Women's anti-colonial struggles,<sup>27</sup> we can talk about the Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti<sup>28</sup> contributions and the struggles she led with people like Margaret Ekpo,<sup>29</sup> people like Hajia Gambo Sawaba<sup>30</sup> who organized women's groups, and women around the common agenda to confront the colonial forces and what they say as economic injustice from the colonialists. Being able to win concessions from the colonial administrators or to sack an Oba<sup>31</sup> as in the case of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti... Those were movements. Did these movements go on chronologically or without interruptions or long periods of time when they were not active and organizing? No. That is what I see as a movement. It is at a historical moment that something is happening, and women organize themselves, and put women's interests on the agenda and fight for it.

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<sup>27</sup> The Aba Women's Riots, also known as the Women's War, was a period of unrest in British Nigeria in November of 1929. It was caused by a combination of factors: the protest against the Warrant Chiefs, the introduction of new taxes, and increasingly lower prices of agricultural products. The women rioted for an end of the warrant chief system and an appointment of indigenous leaders as clan heads as opposed to British figure heads. The revolt resulted in the resignation of several Warrant Chiefs and the appointment of women to serve on Native Courts. Perhaps most significantly, the riots are widely regarded as the prelude to the emergence of pan-African anti-colonial nationalism. ("Women's War." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_War))

<sup>28</sup> Chief Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a Nigerian educator, political campaigner, women's rights activist, and aristocrat. She was also the first female student to attend Abeokuta Grammar School. She was born in 1900 and died in 1978. ("Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funmilayo\\_Ransome-Kuti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funmilayo_Ransome-Kuti))

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Ekpo was a Nigerian women's rights activist and pioneering female politician. She died in 2006. ("Margaret Ekpo." Wikipedia. Accessed June 5, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Ekpo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Ekpo))

<sup>30</sup> Gambo Sawaba was a Nigerian women's rights activist, politician, philanthropist, and elected leader of the national women's wing of the Northern Element Progressive Union. She was born in 1933 and died in 2001. ("Gambo Sawaba." Wikipedia. Accessed June 4, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gambo\\_Sawaba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gambo_Sawaba))

<sup>31</sup> Oba means "ruler" in the Yoruba and Bini languages of West Africa. ("Oba (ruler)." Wikipedia. Accessed June 5, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oba\\_\(ruler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oba_(ruler)))

Then we had the NCWS, The National Council of Women's Society.<sup>32</sup> NCWS existed all over the country. It was getting subscriptions from the government. Because they were getting subscriptions from the government, to us, that sort of compromised voice. When we started WIN, we saw NCWS as the women's wing of the establishment of the status quo. They achieved a number of things for women and to improve their conditions, but they were not a political organization. For me a movement is political, it could be social but even if it is social, it is addressing the political issues or at least it is engaging the political system. That is another feature of the kind of movements we have had. We started with, not confrontation, but with tension. WIN started with tension with NCWS. We were more radical in terms of analyzing and engaging the states and the kinds of demands we were putting forward and our approach to resolve these issues. We took on the state. As I said earlier, we saw patriarchy as the enemy; we also saw the state as the enemy and that nature of the state as what we needed to confront and that we had to influence political decisions. WIN came up as a movement, and it was linked to the larger struggle for democratization. In the struggle to keep the military out of the political space, WIN was an active participant in that.

WIN was also a strong voice along with the students, asking for the Ministry of Women's Affairs.<sup>33</sup> New actors came on the scene after the ICPD, International Conference of Population and Development,<sup>34</sup> that took place in Cairo and then the Beijing conference that followed. Quite a number of women went from participating in these conferences and then came back and that created a whole new set of actors who promoted women's rights and the language was changing. They talked about women's rights, they talked about gender rights for women and gender inequality. Where WIN talked about the 'emancipation of women,' where we talked about 'oppression and exploitation of women,' it was 'injustice' that replaced that. There are some of us who felt that these euphemisms took the wind out the sails of what would have been a robust feminist movement that was going to the root issues

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<sup>32</sup> National Council of Women's Societies is a Nigerian non-governmental and non-partisan women's organization that advocates for gender welfare issues. It is composed of several independent women's rights organizations that combine to use the NCWS platform. The organization was founded in 1959. ("National Council of Women's Societies." Wikipedia. Accessed June 5, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Council\\_of\\_Women%27s\\_Societies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Council_of_Women%27s_Societies))

<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Women's Affairs promotes the development of women and children in Nigeria. The ministry strives to build a Nigerian society that guarantees equal access to social, economic and wealth creation opportunities to all, regardless of age and gender. ("Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development." Wikipedia. Accessed June 5, 2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Ministry\\_of\\_Women\\_Affairs\\_and\\_Social\\_Development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Ministry_of_Women_Affairs_and_Social_Development))

<sup>34</sup> The International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) looks to analyze the relationships between population, development, and individual well-being. The conference's 20-year Program of Action serves as a guide to people-centered development progress. This program also recognizes reproductive health, women's rights and empowerment, and gender equality as cornerstones of population and development programs. ("International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action." United Nations Population Fund. Accessed June 5, 2020.

<https://www.unfpa.org/publications/international-conference-population-and-development-programme-action>)

because we feel that this new gender rights consciousness, achieves tokenisms.<sup>35</sup> They don't touch the structures that give rise to this. While in some countries, progress may have been made that way. What we are finding in Nigeria is with all of these conservative men getting into political office and us doing all this... Yes, there have been gains we have made, but we see the gains being reversed.

There is a movement that is going on now that some people say is womanism, others say is feminism, but I see a women's movement in Nigeria growing and becoming more powerful in terms of expression of voice. In the leadership of that, this movement, are feminists that are driving this movement. You have people from the feminist movement and the others who don't see themselves as feminists. They have reservations about what is feminism, they have their own notion of what is feminism, so that is why we, in the African feminist forum, we agree that they are feminisms. There are people that are afraid of what they call the western feminism, the feminism that people see to be anti-men, anti-marriage, anti-childbearing, that is the way people perceive that. Which for them, is culturally not acceptable. But they are all part of this movement. They agree that we should have child rights protection laws, that we should have laws for violence against women, that people should be jailed for violence towards women. They believe that we should curb sexual abuse and the government should create regulations against that. They are ready to organize on this. When it came to female circumcision, or FGM, they are ready to work to stop that. That whole movement has been growing and becoming quite powerful. It is not very coherent, as I just described, and the conference that is being planned is to try to achieve some of that coherence and come up with a minimum program of action and charter of demands that we all agreed on that movement that can positively work on. But, yes, there is a movement.

**RO: Out of all of this, what is your role? Where do you see your work in relation to this movement?**

NI: My role is to look at the class dimensions. All I have been trying to say is that, for me, there is gender and there is class. Women are not heterogeneous as a body. There are women who exploit other women because of their class position. There are women whose class interest is not in harmony with everything that the women's movements represent. We need to address those issues. I want to see inclusion of the excluded, the disadvantaged grassroots women, the low-income grassroots women that I work with. We are having this situation where if we are not careful we are going to replicate the same mistake that we made in governance, where the middle class and the elites capture everything, all of the space, all of the decision making, and they are making decisions using their own realities and self-

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<sup>35</sup> Tokenism is the practice of making only a symbolic effort. ("Tokenism." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tokenism>)

interests because they are completely disconnected from the realities of the majority of Nigerians and at the grassroots.

I see my role as trying to make sure we do not replicate that error, that we don't privilege elite women who have gone to school, who are running NGOs that are registered with the government. We don't see ourselves; we don't become eccentric to the point of thinking that we represent all women and all women's interests, and that those voices don't have to come to the table to be heard. The inclusion of all of these is what I would see as my role in all of this.

**RO: Based on that, what kind of relationship, therefore do you have with other activists in this movement?**

NI: In the women's rights movement?

**RO: Yes.**

NI: We collaborate on issues together. For instance, we do advocacy together. We sign statements together, draft those statements and put them out, we agree on what our position should be on a given issue and negotiate it, and we speak. That is the kind of collaboration that we are having now. If there are cases people want to address, sometimes there are real pathetic cases that the lawyers are taking up and so on, and if we want to take up a collection or something, we make our resources available for that and even if we are going to have a protest march to the seat of government in Alausa,<sup>36</sup> we mobilize our grassroots partners and the women would come out and be a part of all of those. Yes, this is the kind of thing we are dealing with. What we are lacking is a program that we sat down and purposely designed. What is happening is that we are responding to situations; we are not proactive. For this movement to be proactive, we have to have this conversation and look at where we agreed and disagreed and what the minimum programs of action are. Each person decides what part of the agenda they are going to be pushing. We know that as the coherence what successes we are having in different areas can reinforce what people are doing in other areas.

**RO: You said a lot about feminism in Africa, what really is African feminism if you were asked to give a definition.**

NI: I don't know whether African feminism is one feminism. I think that as a practitioner there is a limit to the reading I am doing. What I can say, that is clear from the way we

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<sup>36</sup> Alausa is a principal district in Ikeja, the capital of Lagos State. ("Alausa." Wikipedia. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alausa>)



organize, and the issues we deal with and even the international forums that we participate in, our issues are different; the issues confronting the African feminists are existential issues, these are the issues of life and death. We are dealing with issues of the right to life, access to health care, access to water, access to sanitary facilities, electricity, which is energy, those are the issues we are dealing with. The long hours African women have to put in, access to infrastructure like roads. A lot of our women are in agriculture, so they are not able to generate surplus, and when they do, they do not have access to roads or markets where they are going to market them. We are dealing with real issues that make some of the issues people are dealing with in the West look like “Oh, please” to us.

We recognize that problems are different, I remember going to a conference once and issues were being discussed about women’s rights to enjoy their bodies and stuff like that and we are sitting and looking at ourselves saying, “Our issues are so different,” and what we did was say to the organizers, “Please, we want a space in plenary<sup>37</sup> where we can articulate our own issues.” Because the themes and the issues that have been put out, both for the plenary and the simultaneous sessions don’t quite give room for us to talk about the problems that we have. Girls are being passed over—their education—by parents who prefer to educate their boys. What we are dealing with as African feminists, sometimes you look at it and find it isn’t even so much as what is happening to you, as it is what is happening to the collective, the womanhood. African feminism for me is preoccupation with the dignity of womanhood. Like I said before, it is about gaining societal acceptance of the full personhood of girls and women. We may approach it from different angles, we can use different strategies to address that, but I believe anywhere you go in Africa, this will be the preoccupation of the women’s movement. How do we get laws that guarantee this? How do we get governance that guarantees this interest that we are talking about? That is the preoccupation. People are changing legislation, trying to get women in positions of power and positions of decision-making, trying to influence government decisions, all around these issues. That is the way I have perceived African feminism based on my experience.

**RO: The other question there is, in your own views, do you think there are any ideological differences between African feminism and Western feminism?**

NI: I don’t think I can say that I know for sure that there are ideological differences. Like I said, it is not something that I know that there would have been a lot that is written in terms of scholarship to say what the ideological differences between us and them. I think it is because in my studies and work I have focused more on African and Nigerian reality than I focus on Western feminism and what is their ideology. I know that coming from the Sixties—

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<sup>37</sup> A plenary is a meeting attended by all participants at a conference or assembly. (“Plenary.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plenary>)

I already touched on some of them—individual relationships and the relationship between men and women as an issue, and the kinds of decisions that women can make. I think that the reality of the society, because some of the issues we are dealing with have already been addressed socio-economically, I take it that it may not be the preoccupation of women in Western countries. I know that there are places where we have some similarities in terms of equal pay for equal work done; in those areas we find that we may have some similarities.

I think that the popular narrative about Western feminism, which I think is probably not right, is the question of whether women want to get married or have children and so on. I'm trying to choose my words because I cannot assertively say that I know what the ideology of western feminism is. I have only had the experience in the women's movement and some of the literature I've read which is not sufficient for me to draw conclusions. Which is why I limit myself to saying that our issues are not the same, that is as much as I am confident to assert; our preoccupations and values are not the same, but we do have shared values. I think that the shared values that we have is the principle that there should be gender equality and equity in the public place and in the domestic sphere. I think that is a common ground for all of those who work on women's issues, that is something we all agree on.

What constitutes that equality, what form that should take, the cultural contexts within which that should be actualized, for me is different, and if you look at the African feminism you will find that there is a strong role of culture and religious influences in the way that African feminism is constructed, conceptualized, and the way it is expressed. Culture and religion form a strong part of that feminist ideology. It is not taking place outside the context of religious beliefs and practices and the culture in the different ethnic groups or contexts that we have in the country. I would not know how that plays out. I can give you an example, we did quite a bit of work on unwanted pregnancies and abortions with colleagues. We had colleagues from Western countries, particularly the United States, they used to ask if we were pro-life or pro-choice. We said we are for life, for us, for you, the way we understand abortion is about the women's right to choose and probably who is going to pay for it. For us, it is a public health issue, a life or death issue. If you also look at our family planning policies, one of the policies said that 4 children to 1 woman, people raised a lot of issues including feminist voices, why are you saying 4 children? But what informed it was, again, public and women's health—maternal and child health that is what shaped that policy. Women were having too many children, too frequently, so if you limit the number of children a woman will have to 4, that gives her a higher chance of survival and not die from childbirth and it gives her children a higher chance of survival. Going back to what I've said before, our issues are existential and are existential threats to life and to health and well-being, as against what I like or would prefer to see as my exercise of my decision-making rights, which is not to say we do not recognize the importance of people making their decisions, and women making decisions, we are not underplaying that. We are saying that there are so many priority issues that you

need to address while recognizing women should express their voices, we need to take those things together. In what does a woman express her voice? We want women to express their voices on ending gender-based violence, on ending child marriages, making sure that roads are paved so they have access to markets. These are the features I am more familiar with, those features of the feminisms I've experienced or encountered or read about.