

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

SITE: NIGERIA

**Transcript of Mairo Mandara
Interviewer: Elisha Renne**

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Dr. Mairo Usman Mandara was born on June 5, 1965 in Bukuru, just outside of Jos, the capital of Plateau State, Nigeria. She first attended primary school in Bukuru and continued her post-secondary education at the University of Jos. There she studied medicine, specifically women's health issues, an interest that expanded to include the socioeconomic issues associated with women's health such as VVF (vesico-vaginal fistula), e.g., early marriage and stunting due to malnutrition. Her work as an obstetric-gynaecologist led to a broader feminist concern with girl-child education, the founding of the Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), and with the NGO, Girl-Child Concerns. Between 2005 and 2010, Dr. Mandara was a Senior Country Adviser in Nigeria to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and more recently worked with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as the Country Representative to Nigeria. Her current activist and scholarly work reflect her belief in the importance of working with traditional political and religious leaders in encouraging parents enable their daughters to complete their secondary school education.

Elisha P. Renne is Professor Emerita in the Departments of Anthropology and of Afroamerican and African Studies, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. She has conducted ethnographic research in Nigeria, Ghana, and the US. Her interests include African ethnology and infectious disease; gender and reproductive health; and religion and the anthropology of textiles. She is the author of *Cloth That Does Not Die* (1995); *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town*(2003); *The Politics of Polio in Northern Nigeria*(2010);and *Veils, Turbans, and Islamic Reform in Northern Nigeria*(2018). She has also edited the volume, *Veiling in Africa*(2013),has co-edited the volume, *Textile Ascendancies: Aesthetics, Production, and Trade in Northern Nigeria*(2020)and has published in the journals *Africa*, *American Anthropologist*, *CSSH*, *Islamic Africa*, *JRAI*,*RES*, and *Textile History*. Her recent study, *Death and the Textile Industry in Nigeria*, of the consequences of textile mill closures in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, included interviews with 105 widows and will be published in November 2020.

But growing up as a young girl in Bukuru, a Muslim girl growing up among others, I'd always wanted to be a pilot. I had a lot of obsession with the sky, with the moon, but unfortunately when I finished secondary school, girls at that time were not taken into the Nigerian Pilots' School, so I ended up getting admission to either engineering or medicine, so I had to take a tough choice between engineering and medicine, and I think because at that time my mom was sick, so I decided to go into medicine. So, it's purely by accident, but my first choice was to be a pilot. Other than that, to be an engineer. But I'm so glad I turned out to be a doctor because then I'm able to work with humans and I think that's where my strength lies.

ER: Yes, I agree; I think so. So, you weren't thinking of being a doctor when you first started your educational career. Once you started taking classes at University of Jos in medical school, was there a specialty that interested you in particular?

MM: The first three years were uneventful—the preclinical years. And quite honestly, I was busy playing basketball for the school tournament and stuff. Those were the most interesting things I can remember in the first three years—playing basketball across the university and inter-university sports.

But by the time I got to the fourth year—when we started going to the clinic, and I was confronted with realities of health—I got interested in health issues that had to do with social inequity and diseases that affect the very poor. I think this stemmed from the fact that since I was a student, I had been in student union and in the university I was in the student union and I spent quite a lot of my time as a Muslim student activist and so therefore I had a very strong—and I still do have a strong—opinion about issues about social justice and social inequity.

So, what really struck me, and it was my undergraduate project, was on vesicovaginal fistulae.⁷ I was shocked to see young girls that smelled like urine. They were made outcasts, they were rejected by their parents, by their husbands, even the husband who got them pregnant, as a result of which, they got vesicovaginal fistulae, were divorced. In most cases, it was only their mothers who stood by them. That really interested me, and I was very upset, so I used it—I studied vesicovaginal fistula for my undergraduate research. So that set the stage for me actually to be an obstetrician/gynecologist.

⁷ VVF, or vesicovaginal fistula, is an abnormal tract connecting the bladder and the vagina that allows constant involuntary entry of urine into the vagina. It can occur as a result of rape, especially more violent rape. ("Vesicovaginal fistula." Wikipedia. Accessed July 15, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesicovaginal_fistula)

So when I finished, I then continued to do residency in obstetrics and gynecology, and even as a resident I was teaching social obstetrics and gynecology and it was something that I've grown to work in and is why I'm more even grounded in global health than you would in obstetrics and gynecology because I always look at the link between social justice/social inequity, women's rights, women's ability to make decisions for themselves, and their health and how that ultimately impacts not just in their health but sometimes decides whether they live or they die, and whether their children live or die. So that's what really sparked my interest in obstetrics and gynecology.

And as I worked as an obstetrician/gynecologist, training, and so you would see that for my postgraduate residency in the West African College of Surgeons, my research was based on female genital mutilation—again social gynecology. I looked at the demography of women who had the vesicovaginal fistulae in Zaria,⁸ looked at the social context, the types, and so on and so forth. And so again, social gynecology. After graduating, I realized that as a doctor I was treating one patient at a time. And quite frankly I was impatient to treat one person at a time. So, I moved quite significantly into public health. So that even as I worked as a gynecologist, I spent a lot of time—most of my weekends were in villages—trying to make sure girls don't get vesicovaginal fistulae and come to me. Women are educated around female genital mutilation, and they don't get it.

Linked to my actual undergraduate studies where girls had vesicovaginal fistulae—I looked at the differences between girls that had vesicovaginal fistulae and those that didn't; and there were very significant differences. Those that had it were usually short-statured, less than 1.5, very poor family background, very difficult to get to a clinic, but significantly as children they were short for their age and genetic group, because they had stunting, and they had malnutrition. The girls also had cephalo-pelvic disproportion. So, as I grew older to practice obstetrics, these are the kinds of issues I worked on. But it just dawned on me that—you know what—and I keep reflecting on myself and my other friends that grew up with me, girls that I knew that I grew up with that had maternal mortality early in their lives, that have so many children dying, that have children with malnutrition, and why don't I? And we grew up together, some of the parents were a little richer than my dad, or they were at the same level with my dad, and why is it that I have the opportunity to be who I am, and they didn't? And for me there was only one single denominator—my father saw the sense in getting me educated and they didn't. And so therefore I've spent now a significant part of my life—and I still do—that's where I put most of my energy to date. And I think that's the

⁸ Zaria is a large city in Kaduna State in northern Nigeria and is a Local Government Area, as well. It was one of the original seven Hausa city-states and currently houses Ahmadu Bello University, the largest university in Nigeria. ("Zaria." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaria>)

worthiest investment: to ensure that every girl in Africa at least attends secondary school education.

ER: So that's your trajectory of your career, it has sort of followed that understanding or expanded knowledge about educational experience being so critical for girls. So, what have you done, what organizations have you been involved with or sponsored, or initiated, that relate to the importance of girl child education?

MM: So, as I told you, since I was a student, I was part of the student movement, so I was part of the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria.⁹ And when we graduated we called it Muslim Sisters Organization, which are just like university graduate young Muslim women who are very passionate and activist in nature. And from there we formed the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria¹⁰ in 1985. And one of the key pillars—and the most significant pillar of what FOMWAN does—is ensuring girls are educated. Thereafter I also started an organization called Girl Child Concerns,¹¹ with my very good sister Bilkisu Yusuf,¹² may her soul rest in peace. And we started supporting girls from Zaria, where we lived, to go to secondary school. And we were particularly looking for girls that were from very disadvantaged families who would not go to school without our efforts, and we supported them. And, Alhamdulillah, one is now a lecturer in College of Education, the other is a pharmacist of the first two. And we have supported over 500 girls to complete secondary school. And in the last cohort we have one that is a medical student we took from

⁹ The Muslim Students Society of Nigeria was founded in 1954 by Abdurrahman Sahid, Babs Fafunwa, Tajudeen Aromashodun, and Lateef Adegbite in Lagos. ("Muslim Student Society of Nigeria." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_Students_Society_of_Nigeria)

¹⁰ The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) is an NGO in Nigeria largely funded by GA Canada, DFID, UNICEF, and WHO. The organization focuses on advocacy, civil rights, education, gender, health, and youth. Their most pressing concerns lie with the education of young girls and women. ("The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN)." Development Aid. Accessed July 21, 2020. <https://www.developmentaid.org/#!/organizations/view/62287/the-federation-of-muslim-womens-associations-in-nigeria-fomwan>)

¹¹ Girl Child Concerns (GCC) is a registered non-profit organization whose focus centers on elevating the lives of youth, particularly girls, through improved access to education and opportunities. ("Girl Child Concerns." Girl Child Concerns. Accessed July 21, 2020. <https://www.developmentaid.org/#!/organizations/view/62287/the-federation-of-muslim-womens-associations-in-nigeria-fomwan>)

¹² Bilkisu Yusuf was a Nigerian journalist, columnist, and editor for major newspapers in Abuja, Kano, and Kaduna. She is famous for being the first woman to direct a national newspaper operation. She was a Hausa, Muslim, feminist, and a strong advocate for an interfaith society. She also advised the Nigerian President on International Affairs and was a founder of several NGOs, namely Women in Nigeria (WIN) and Federation of Muslim Women's Association (FOMWAN). She was killed in 2015 during the Mina Stampede while on Haj in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. ("Bilkisu Yusuf." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bilkisu_Yusuf)

the IDP camp¹³—Boko Haram IDP camp—is a medical student. We have four in University of Notre Dame in the US. And we have others in very many universities studying.

But the key to my understanding, in my later life, stems from a book I read as a child. It's called *Muslim Woman*, I think, by Maryam Jameelah.¹⁴ Maryam Jameelah was an American woman who married a Pakistani and she wrote that book. And thereafter I was heavily influenced by the work of Aisha Lemu,¹⁵ the mentorship of Bilkisu Yusuf, and the mentorship of Hassan Al-Turabi.¹⁶ His writings had significant impact on how I think and what I do. And so, working and a lot of my sisters here in the feminist movement—the African feminist movement—in Nigeria. So, it's a mix of lots and lots of influence that has shaped what I do. But the bottom line is the belief that education is the key.

ER: This project that we're taking part of right now is called *Global Feminisms*, so I'm just wondering how you understand the term feminism? How do you think about it?

MM: There is a quote—I should have worn that t-shirt for this interview! There's a quote that really defines what—I don't know who made that statement. But it really defines my understanding of feminism: for me feminism is just the radical idea that women are human. So, for me, feminism is the right of a woman to express herself, primarily as a human being, and then with some additional, if you like, like salt and pepper—of being a female. So, for me, it's the ability to define who I am, to chart my destiny, and to live to the fullest potential that God has given me. So—and in that I look at feminism within the milieu that I find myself

¹³ IDP is an acronym for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. The UNHCR defines this group as refugees who have not crossed a border to find safety and remain under the protection of their government, even if that government is the reason for their displacement. ("Internally Displaced People." UNHCR. Accessed July 21, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/internally-displaced-people.html>)

¹⁴ Known for her writings about the West, Maryam Jameelah was an American-Pakistani author of over thirty books on Islamic culture and history and was a strong voice for conservative and fundamentalist Islam. She was born Margret Marcus to a non-observant Jewish family and explored Judaism and other religions before converting to Islam in 1961 and emigrating to Pakistan where she married Muhammad Yusuf Khan, a leader in the Jamaat-e-Islami political party. ("Maryam Jameelah." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryam_Jameelah)

¹⁵ Aisha Lemu was a British author and religious educator who converted to Islam in 1961 and lived most of her life in Nigeria. ("Aisha Lemu." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aisha_Lemu)

¹⁶ Hassan Al-Turabi was a Sudanese Islamist politician who played a critical role in the success of the 1989 coup that brought Omar Al-Bashir to power. He has been regarded as one of the most influential figures in Sudanese politics as the leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), a political movement that held vast political power without significant popularity among Sudanese voters. However, Turabi remains highly controversial and reportedly committed several human rights abuses, such as summary executions, arbitrary detentions, denials of freedoms of speech, assembly and religion, and violations of war rules, especially in southern Sudan. ("Hassan Al-Turabi." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_Al-Turabi)

is about respect for men, is about complementarity with men, is about love and sharing with my sisters, is about my core duty of ensuring that any woman and girl I come across I give a helping hand to take the next step. So, for me this is feminism and what is not feminism for me is fighting men. I believe that men are an integral part of feminism and anybody who believes that women are primarily human beings I think is a feminist but with the addition that the person behaves in that sense—not just say it but behaves in that sense.

ER: That's a really interesting observation, because I think to me feminism globally has many different interpretations, and I think what you're talking about is a particular Nigerian interpretation.

MM: I think it's an African women's feminist interpretation. And I'm part of the African women's feminist movement, and so this is our interpretation of what feminism is, full potential of women, women having what they need to chart their path, being supported by men, respecting men and actually giving men the opportunity to also chart their lives.

ER: Okay. I think that's very good. So, then you consider yourself a feminist.

MM: Absolutely.

ER: Okay. So, has being a feminist affected your work in terms of girlchild education or in other ways perhaps too?

MM: Yes, it has. It has because my being a feminist opened up opportunities for me to meet my sisters across the world. I remember when I went to the Beijing Conference,¹⁷ it was beautiful. I was so young, I was still a resident in obstetrics and gynecology, and I met this amazing number of women that are really struggling. And listening to their stories gives you wisdom, listening to the stories gives you hope, and listening to the stories gives you what you need to keep pushing. But importantly listening to the stories helps you shape your own story. But it's not all of their story that is true for you. I've been married 34 years. So that's a significant portion of my story.

¹⁷ The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was organized by the United Nations with more than 17,000 participants. It marked a turning point for global gender equality movements by putting forth a widely accepted 12-platform agenda, the Beijing Platform for Action, highlighting critical areas. This conference was followed by a series of five-year reviews to assess implementation of this agenda. ("World Conferences on Women." UN Women. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>)

I have children and my children are absolutely feminist in their nature. My boys are feminist, my son—I'm so proud of him; my son has a daughter and his daughter's surname is a combination of his wife's surname and his surname. So, they're sharing the ownership of the child, and the responsibility of the child. This is the context of African feminism—is about family, is about husband, is about your children, is about your sisters, your grandmother—and I think what has shaped that is that it's a bit difficult to be individualistic in Africa. So, we're a community. Whatever you do, if you really want to succeed has to be community-based, has to be contextually based, and has a lot of respect for the values and culture.

And I'll tell you what we did in FOMWAN, for example. FOMWAN, by the way, is the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria. In FOMWAN, we believe that every woman is primarily a human being. And in trying to get every girl to be educated, we worked on the principle of Islam that says, "we must seek for knowledge from cradle to grave." So therefore, every woman has to keep seeking for knowledge from cradle to grave! That means you don't finish at a first degree, or a second degree, or even a Ph.D.! For as long as you have the ability you just keep pursuing. But in pushing, in asking for that, and in advocating for that and in demanding for that, we chose as Muslim women to actually behave like Muslim women. To dress like Muslim women, to behave like Muslim women, to uphold the values of what Muslim should be. Because we believe that every action I take as a person, as Mairo, the way I dress as Mairo, the way I go out, the way I interact with people, is not going to affect me alone. It's going to determine whether 1000 girls go to school or don't. So therefore, I choose to behave and to dress and to behave like a Muslim woman because I know for every behavior, I do a thousand or more girls get to go to school. And for every misbehavior I do—that's not conforming to the social norm—it gets 1000 children or more don't go to school. Is that a restriction on my part? No—it's a choice I make, it's a choice I deliberately make.

ER: Okay. You know, also in the Koran it speaks about marriage. I just wonder—that may be something that would be a bone of contention with some Western feminists about the issue of polygamy. I just wonder if you could just...

MM: So, as I said, you know, one thing that as I grew up and worked globally and as I meet different people, there's something that comes along with being "educated" or being "modern"—we think our values are the ultimate. I think that's an arrogance that comes with education. That you think one way doesn't mean everybody should think the same way as you. What is crucial is the freedom to choose what I want to be. If Western feminists have a view, they are my sisters. I absolutely respect them. But that doesn't mean I should hold their views. I'm an African woman and I'm choosing to be an African woman. So therefore I'm not going to force my views on them, neither can they think they can force their views

on me. And that's the power of being human—the ability to choose, and the ability to say, “No, I disagree. This is where we agree, and this is where we part ways, but that doesn't make us any less sisters in the struggle to be women.” So that's a choice.

ER: Very well stated.

MM: That's theirs, and I respect it, and so therefore I expect every Western feminist to respect my opinion.

ER: I agree. So, you mentioned FOMWAN and GCC—the Girl Child Initiative—could you say: are there any expectations; these organizations, FOMWAN has been here since 1985, and GCC started when?

MM: We started Girl Child Concerns unofficially around 1998, but we registered in 2003. Since 2003 we've been working as an organization basically supporting girls to have the highest educational attainment irrespective of financial constraint. So that's what we do, and basically we look at the data for girls' education, particularly in the North of Nigeria where the data is worst—the statistics is worst—and we go, based on the data from government, we go to villages where girls hardly go to school and we fish out girls that are smart from primary school and we support them to finish secondary school. And it does two things: 1) it gives them an opportunity to go to school and finish secondary school; and then secondly it actually keeps them away from marriage till they are about 19. Because if these girls are not in school quite a number of them will be married and will have their first child before the age of 15. So, by keeping them in school we actually get them educated and we also delay the age of marriage for these girls. By about 6 years.

ER: I have a question about going to school. Is it in their communities? Some of them are from small, rural communities; maybe they don't have secondary schools, and how do you manage that?

MM: So, what we do is... actually most of our students we put them in boarding school. So, we scout for boarding schools, and we pay for the tuition and we take them to boarding school, buy what they need, and the same boarding schools, during holidays we transport them back to their parents.

ER: Okay. And I've been reading some Hausa novels¹⁸ that are about this very issue—about girl education and pressure from, especially parents—let's just say parents—

¹⁸ Hausa is one of six major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are primarily located in both northern and southern Nigeria and are the largest ethnic group in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most Hausa speak Hausa and

that a girl should marry. Somebody approaches them and says we want to marry your daughter. We can do everything for her; please we want to marry your daughter. So, then the parents put pressure on the daughter to leave school. I don't know if this is still an issue, or if some of the girls you've been helping are facing this challenge.

MM: Yeah, we've had—we've actually had girls under our care that have had that challenge. The parents wanting to take them out of school—and we've had one that the parents really insisted on taking her out of school-- by the time she finished secondary school with us, she had her second child. Because we also refused to let her go. So... but now we are wiser, and what we do with parents now is that we sign a contract. So, we sign a contract with the parents under the leadership of the village head. So he signs as a guarantor that once a girl is under our scholarship, she may not be taken—she must not be taken out of school for marriage until she finishes secondary school, which takes her to age 19 or 18. And then if the father removes her then he pays us every dollar we spent on her, which we know he can't, so that's it. We've had a few parents who attempted, and the village head insists that they paid us every dollar we had ever spent on her, and the father gave up, and she finished secondary school. So yes, this is real. And girls face it. Two years ago, we had a girl run away during holiday from her parents and she came and lived with me for two weeks. And they didn't know where she was until we finished the negotiations before we let them know that she was with me, because they wanted to marry her, and she did not want to marry. So, in the end she won. She continued going to school. In a respectful way and with the support from the leaders, they also see us. You see the good thing about building confidence is they are not worried when they come to my house. When the parents see that the girls are with me, they're not worried because they know that I share the same cultural values, the same respect and so on and so forth. And that I'm not going to trade their daughters. So ultimately the girl won, and she finished secondary school. Coincidentally, that girl was even a Christian girl. **[ER: I was just going to ask you]**. Yeah, she was a Christian girl from southern Kaduna.¹⁹

ER: Because you grew up in the Jos area with many Christians. So, do they also have a problem with girls marrying early?

MM: Yes, they do. In fact, in some of those cultures they even have not just the girls being forced to marry, the girls actually abscond with the boy. To go and marry themselves off. So,

practice Islam. ("Culture of Nigeria." Wikipedia. Accessed July 15, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Nigeria#Yoruba_Culture)

¹⁹ Kaduna is a state in north-western Nigeria and borders the Kaduna River. ("Kaduna." Wikipedia. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaduna>)

you find a 15-year-old girl absconding with an 18- or 20-year old boy and that's it. So that's also common. That's also found.

ER: It's interesting—there was a story in the Daily Trust—I think it was last week; it was a full-page article about the states in Nigeria that have low-levels of girl-child education, and a lot of them were in the North. Not all, but most.

MM: Most of them are in the North except one or two states in the South. And quite frankly it's very, very, very worrying. And that's why in this work that we've just started last year around advocacy for keeping girls in school we're starting a movement in Africa to ensure every girl finishes secondary school education. And in this movement, we're working with—as the key actors driving this—we're working to cultivate traditional religious leaders as drivers. And the reason for that is that for years, for years, feminists, activists, educators, international development partners, actors, governors, governments, donors—we've all worked and tried to push girls' education and we've failed. We've made some success but it's not commensurate to the effort. And the amount of money that is spent. So, my hypothesis is that I think we failed because we failed to realize that we really are not as influential as we think we are.

Now look back, Elisha, and see: these girls that don't go to school in Africa do not decide that they do not want to go to school by themselves. The decision is being made by their parents or caregivers. The caregivers think the girls should not go to school. Now these caregivers themselves do not have an education, so what happens? We go and do policies, we put laws, we create schools, and we say girls go to school, and the girls have no say, and the parents have every say. Now the key for me in ensuring every girl in Africa goes to school is actually influencing those parents to be able to decide by themselves that their children are worth going to school. And in every community, we still have this odd girl—regardless of how bad the school—you see that one odd girl that travels 12 miles, 10 miles, to go to school and comes back. What is going in the head of that one parent? Who risks everything to put his or her daughter through school? So, this is the mindset we need to bring people to. But the truth is, in Africa a lot of the parents that have no education themselves that make these decisions do not trust government. Politicians have failed them. Even military rulers have failed them. They do not have any benefit of government. They don't have electricity, they don't have water, they don't have health—they actually have nothing that they are benefiting from government, so they do not trust government. And for politicians—they see politicians cyclically every four years, so why should they trust politicians? They don't trust development actors because we go to the villages with 4-wheel drive, with bottled water at the back of our car, and we speak some foreign language, and we sit around them, and we tell them, "You do this, you do this. This is wrong, this is right." We kind of take a god-position and prescribe. They clap. Usually we go with some goodies; they join us, we

eat the biscuits and take the Coca-Cola, they tell us exactly what we want to hear and we're happy and we go away. But if you look, these people have their own government that they trust, they have their informal policies that they believe in, their government are their traditional leaders, because when they give birth, it's the traditional leader that is there; when their child dies, it's the traditional leader that is there; when they have a marriage, it's a traditional leader that helps them buy rice; if there's a crisis in the family, it's a traditional leader that settles the crisis. Everything they need they can run to the traditional leader—it's a 5-minute walk! So, they trust their traditional leaders; for them, they are government.

And they also have their own policy. The policy is their religious leaders. When their religious leaders say this, they believe in it. So, their religious leaders: look at the case of polio. You worked a lot on polio. There was progress on polio; one religious leader questioned the side effects of polio and polio immunization went down. And every effort by government to undo that failed. Until the same religious leaders and traditional leaders came to the Sultan of Sokoto²⁰ and his team and everything turned around. So, this you could see here the example of the power of those

ER: Okay, so I'm just wondering in the small village—it may be Christian and there's a church leader or it's Muslim and there's an Imam in a mosque—how would they go about convincing parents that it's important to educate your daughters?

MM: So, the first thing is: those of us that are messengers have to rethink how we do things. Everything has to be—in my opinion—everything has to be within their prism. For a change, we take a total backstage. For the church leader: What does the Bible say about education? And what is in there for him if the congregation are educated? For the Imam, what does Islam say about education? And what do they stand to gain by having women educated? For the parents, I can tell you an example of what I did in Zaria in a village in Zaria. We went for an advocacy discussion around girls' education and what did I do? I went in dressed like any one of them with my hijab and everything and I drove my own car and it was a 4-wheel drive and I parked it and I spoke to the women in their language and I discussed nuances of what they talk about everyday around the last wedding, around childbirth. We discussed women talk and then I told them who I was and that I was a doctor, and that I am educated and that because I'm educated, I have this beautiful car and I can take my mom for Hajj and I can refurnish my mom's room, I can redo my dad's roof, and I do have my own house, and they all sat up and you could see the glow in their eyes. Every

²⁰ The Sultan of Sokoto is considered a spiritual leader in the Muslim community of Nigeria and carries significant weight with Fulani and Hausa people from northern Nigeria. After the end of British rule, this post has become largely ceremonial. ("List of Sultans of Sokoto." Wikipedia. Accessed July 21, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Sultans_of_Sokoto)

one of them wanted their daughter to be like me. And I told them that it's possible. All they need to do is be determined that they are going to educate their daughters, whatever it takes. It might mean that the mother has to start selling zobo,²¹ it might be that the mother has to start selling salt, but the mother has to do something, and the father also has to do something. So, you see in that case I'm not telling them this is right, or this is wrong, I'm telling them the benefit for them. And the benefit for their children. But is also exciting when I tell them that or when teachers or others that we work with tell them that "You know what, and your daughter is able to read the Bible by herself and know what God wants her to do. And your daughter read the Koran, not just in Arabic, but in English, so that she sees exactly what god is telling her to do or in Hausa." So ultimately you get the world and you get the hereafter. That gets them sitting! Can you imagine the contrast if I come and tell them, "Oh guys are uneducated, you're ignorant, you're not respecting your girls. You're very backward." They'll kick me out of the village. So, I think this comes from two things in my opinion. First, respect for the people we are trying to serve, and therefore, being able to see things from their perspective with respect. And then secondly stepping out and getting out of our arrogance of thinking we will tell people what to do. We help them understand what the situation is, and they will find their solutions.

And quite frankly I got into this understanding of how arrogant we sometimes could be. When I did research on female genital mutilation, and I no longer call it female genital mutilation, by the way, I call it female genital cutting, as a scientist my job is to describe it, but not to be judgmental. And so, it's therefore female genital cutting. I was working as a principal researcher for WHO on female genital mutilation and also, I—at about the same time I was working as a lead researcher on female genital mutilation work that was done in Nigeria. And I went to a village in the Southwest; Southwest is a place where female genital cutting was very prevalent and, in this village, we asked what the cause was, why were people doing female genital cutting. And they told us that a long time ago they had a neonatal mortality—a lot of their babies were dying after birth, for whatever reason. And they went—they didn't know what was happening, but so many kids were dying so they went to the oracle. The oracle told them because the head of the baby on delivery were touching the clitoris of the woman—children-loving Africans; what do they do? Chop off the clitoris so that the baby can survive. This is an altruistic thing that any sensible human being will do. Now with what we've learned with science is that the children were not dying because of touching the clitoris, so our job is to tell them, to show that these babies don't die because the head touched the clitoris, and if we do that, and if they see that that's not it,

²¹ Zobo, also known as zoborado, is a locally sourced non-alcoholic beverage from Nigeria. It is made from dried roselle leaves, water, garlic, ginger, and pineapple, and is used to stabilize blood pressure, reduce cholesterol, and reduce stress. ("Zobo." TasteAtlas. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://www.tasteatlas.com/zobo>)

they'll leave the clitoris alone. And what did we do; we went and said, "Oh, you guys are barbaric, you don't women to enjoy their sexual encounter, you're demeaning women, da da da da," and they look at us and they think we're idiots. So, while we think they're uneducated, they think we're idiots. We're not even having a conversation. From the day I learned that, I was humbled. I was coming from a very young, activist background; women's rights, da da da, and then I was so humbled by the time we published that I went back to interview Nigerian doctors to see how they think, what a priority female genital cutting is, in the medical hierarchy of things that are killing women, that are killing children, that are killing babies. It was so insignificant—way behind. I then looked at myself and I said okay, I've done this celebrated work, published in the dedicated journal and recognized but is this where I want to spend my energy? I said, no, I probably want to spend it on education. Because with education I think you can solve quite a lot. Quite frankly I think if you give a woman education, just leave her alone! Just leave her alone. She'll sort out maternal mortality, she'll sort out child mortality, and you know what: she'll chart her way and she'll find what she needs without anybody telling her what she needs.

ER: I'm just wondering: do you remember we did some research in Zaria about TBAs²²?

MM: Yes, I remember a long time ago, Elisha!

ER: I'm just wondering: I know the government is still supporting a program for TBAs; have you been involved in that in any way or supporting it indirectly?

MM: Yes! Right now I'm actually training village health workers in Borno,²³ so in the Boko Haram, northeast Nigeria where people are resettling into their communities after Boko Haram had destroyed it, a lot of nurses and midwives don't want to go back and there are very few doctors—hardly any doctors—and wherever you see health workers, the health workers are working for international NGOs that have come and therefore they will go. And a lot actually also do not understand the culture. So what I have done in Girl Child Concerns, along with others and we're so grateful we're supported by Merck for Mothers,²⁴ so we went

²² Interviewer's Note: TBA means Traditional Birth Attendant, in Zaria it's a traditional midwife who has had some health department training.

²³ Borno, also known as Borno State, is located in north-eastern Nigeria and its capital is Maiduguri. It is the homeland of the Kanuri people and several other ethnic groups. Recently, the state has become the epicenter of Boko Haram activity with conflict continuously brewing between the group and government forces. ("Borno State." Wikipedia. Accessed July 23, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borno_State)

²⁴ Merck for Mothers is Merck's \$500 million initiative to combat maternal mortality. ("Who We Are." MERCK for Mothers. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://www.merckformothers.com/who-we-are.html>)

to 3 local governments—Bama,²⁵ Konduga²⁶ and Gwoza²⁷—where communities have resettled, and we went to the communities and we asked them to help us get their own daughters that have at least primary education and some have secondary education, and we gathered them under a tree—and I’ll show you some pictures, or you can see the pictures on our website actually, lots of the pictures on our website [**ER: this is the Girl Child Concerns?**] Yes, www.girlchildconcerns.org. So, we interviewed them, we got those that were literate—literate meaning being able to read or write in Hausa or whatever. So, we gathered them and brought them to Maiduguri²⁸ and we trained them as village health workers. And they’ve been working as volunteer village health workers for over a year now in their own communities. And at the moment we have trained over 240 village health workers in these three local governments and we also trained nurses and midwives and choose to supervise them. So, we have supportive supervision that these nurses are helping supervise them. But what is important is that wherever we train these village health workers, immunization rate went up. Attendant to antenatal went up. Facility delivery went up. But you know the other thing that went up? The nutrition of kids went up. And hygiene. And they’re competing within themselves: which compound, which surrounding catchment area of a particular village health worker is cleaner than the rest. The government of Borno State saw what we did, and they’ve asked us to train village health workers across the 27 local governments, which we just concluded. Yes, so I’m still training village health workers.

ER: Is the state government giving you some funding? Is there any way that these women can get some form of support?

MM: At the moment the government is looking to see, for those that they trained, they want to include them in a package of social safety net, so they get a monthly stipend. For those that we trained, we are trying to give them a trade, so that they earn—they continue to do this job as volunteers, but then they have a trade. They have work they’re doing and they’re earning money.

ER: Okay. In Zaria the women who were working as TBAs or traditional midwives will be helping the people they help deliver?

²⁵ Bama is a Local Government Area of Borno State. (“Bama, Borno.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 22, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bama,_Borno)

²⁶ Konduga is also a Local Government Area in Borno State and is located southeast of Maiduguri. (“Konduga.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konduga>)

²⁷ Gwoza is a Local Government area in Borno State with its headquarters situated in the town of Gwoza. (“Gwoza.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gwoza>)

²⁸ Maiduguri is the capital and largest city of Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria. (“Maiduguri.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiduguri>)

MM: Yes.

ER: You mentioned that you published several public health journal articles and also that you're an activist, so could you say something about the relationship between scholarship and activism—how you see it?

MM: For me the relationship between scholarship and activism stems from the fact that the world is now so small, it's such a really global village, that scholarship gives you an opportunity to share your ideas in activism. It also grounds you to work with data. So, you're not working on hypothetical evidence; you're working on data. And so therefore you're able to prove "this is—this is this statistical thing." We recently, for example, have been working around drug abuse in Nigeria and we had a BBC documentary called Sweet Sweet Codeine, which because we had strong evidence captured on camera in the documentary within 24 hours, we had codeine²⁹ banned in Nigeria.

ER: I remember that. That was a tremendous contribution you made.

MM: So that's...the two are so intricately related that without scholarship, activism will be full of emotions and we need to grow past emotions. If it's—anything we do that's sustainable, has to be grounded looking at the roots. And also, being a feminist has also opened up opportunities for me to actually meet other scholars—like Elisha! And it creates opportunity to collaborate, to do research together, to share ideas. Has that been exploited to the maximum? No. Because in my opinion there's a disconnect between academic feminists and political feminists. Political feminists are right there, moving, shaking, pushing things. Academic activists are right there checking, researching, documenting. The two need to sit face-to-face to each other and actually find a way of becoming one. So, I think there's a lot we can do to bridge the gap—there's a lot.

ER: Could you say something...? You know, you mentioned you've been working with GCC and FOMWAN. Could you say something about your NGO work with foundations—your foundation work?

MM: Okay, so all the work I do with FOMWAN and GCC are things I do as a volunteer. And so, they were like on the side for me. The—I have done paid job in the development work, in the development world, I think for the last probably 20—getting to 20 years, I think, I've

²⁹ Codeine is an opioid pain reliever that is used to treat mild to moderately severe pain. It is also used to reduce coughing. ("Codeine Information." FDA. Accessed July 22, 2020. <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/postmarket-drug-safety-information-patients-and-providers/codeine-information>)

been working in the development world. First, I started as the head of Reproductive Health and HIV with USAID-funded Project Compass. Thereafter, I left and worked as the head of Packard Foundation in Nigeria—Hewlett Packard. Following September 11 crash—financial crash they merged the offices and had one office in Ethiopia, so we—the office in Nigeria was closed. And I then moved to work with The Earth Institute, Columbia, where I was a health systems advisor replicating the Millennium Village³⁰ experience which I think to date is the biggest scale-up in the world, taking the experience of two villages—millennial villages—in Nigeria under the leadership of Professor Jeffrey Sachs³¹, and replicating in 130 local governments across the country with Nigerian government’s own money. This was led by Amina Mohammed, DSG [Deputy Secretary General of the UN]. So, I worked there as health system advisor. From there I moved to the Gates Foundation³² as the country representative for the Gates Foundation, where I set up the Nigeria office from my bedroom and built it up to what it was until I left 2 years ago, and to go to work as a Senior Fellow with the Children Investment Fund Foundation³³ in the UK, which was a very fantastic experience and it’s given me the opportunity to now continue to work on this movement around keeping girls’ in school in Africa. So, you’ll be seeing more of us working around; how do we ensure every single girl in Africa completes at least secondary school? Which

³⁰ The Millennium Villages Project was a joint demonstration project from the Earth Institute at Columbia University, the United Nations Development Program, and Millennium Promise. It aimed to prove that an integrated approach to rural development could be used to achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals, goals that address the problems rooted and associated with health, poverty, gender, equality, and disease. By improving access to clean water, primary education, basic health care, sanitation through evidence-backed interventions, this project looked to ensure that communities living in extreme poverty had a real and sustainable opportunity to lift themselves out of the poverty trap. The first village was launched in 2005 in Sauri, Kenya, with the project being heavily championed by Jeffrey Sachs. (“Millennium Villages Project.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 23, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium_Villages_Project)

³¹ Jeffrey Sachs is an American economist, academic, public policy analyst, and the former director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University. He is widely regarded as one of the world’s leading experts on economic development and the fight against poverty. (“Jeffrey Sachs.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 23, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Sachs)

³² The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) is an American private foundation co-founded by Bill and Melinda Gates. It was launched in 2000 and its headquarters are in Seattle, Washington. BMGF is reportedly the largest private foundation in the world with an estimated \$46.8 billion in assets. The foundation looks to universalize quality healthcare, reduce extreme poverty, and to expand educational opportunities and access to information technology in the United States. (“Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 24, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_%26_Melinda_Gates_Foundation)

³³ The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) is a UK-based independent philanthropic organization with offices in Addis Ababa, Beijing, London, Nairobi, and New Delhi. With an estimated \$6.6 billion in assets, CIFF is the fifth largest global development philanthropy in the world and the world’s largest philanthropy that focuses specifically on improving the lives of children. (“The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 24, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Children%27s_Investment_Fund_Foundation)

gives her the first leap to ensure that we address the issue of maternal mortality and child mortality. So, you could see the power of education.

ER: So, these foundation and NGO positions that you've held; how do you see them intersecting—you've just told us one—how do they intersect with your feminism, with a feminist perspective, or with the women's movement in Nigeria?

MM: I had to create with the Earth Institute Columbia there was not much issue because it was an academic environment. So, the university has not much restrictions. And the Packard Foundation was also fluid for as long as we did not say Packard Foundation doing what I was doing. And they also had an approach where you were encouraged to use whatever opportunity you have to ensure that you have improved reproductive health of women and children. Working with the Gates Foundation—the Gates Foundation was very clear—as I worked in the Gates Foundation I had to have two distinct lives: as a country representative of the Gates Foundation, because the Gates Foundation has something that I believe in, that all lives have equal value, which for me is a fundamental principle of social justice. So, for that, I would do anything. But when I come to my social activism, social feminism, I could work on women's reproductive health all right, women's, children's rights to live, children's rights to nutrition, the need to include women in agriculture, but working in Nigeria there's no way you could be an activist and not be politically active. Now that was where the strain was. I could not be politically active overtly without declaring that I am—this is Mairo Mandara, this is not Gates Foundation. So, my political activism actually slowed down when I was the country rep for Gates Foundation. I literally was not politically active, but of course I used my political network to get what the Gates Foundation wanted us to do which is ensuring that all lives have equal value, and all poor people, and everybody has an opportunity to live their best.

ER: Yes. So, let's see. I have a question about activism and scholarship globally. So, the...is the FOMWAN, you mentioned that FOMWAN has international networks. Can you say something about that?

MM: Yes, I remember in 19 - 25 years ago, 1990, no—25 years ago—when we just started, when we had our first FOMWAN National Conference, we decided that in a word we needed to create network with other Muslim women across West Africa. I was seven months pregnant, and we started on a journey from Nigeria—it was in the middle of the Liberian War—and then we took flights to Ghana, to establish FOMWAN Ghana, and then went to Liberia in the middle of the war. The president of Liberia actually came to receive us. He said, “who are these two strange women and one was a pregnant woman? And Aisha Lemu was a white British old woman [ER: Is that Aisha Lemu?} Yes, it was Aisha Lemu and I, and I was pregnant; I was 20-something and I was heavily pregnant. The president actually

came to the airport to receive us; he said, “What on Earth are you doing in the middle of the War?” We said, “No, we came to see our Muslim sisters that are in the war.” He said, “So what is the mission?” I said, “No, we came to tell them that we care about them and we want them to form FOMWAN Federation of Muslim Women Association in Liberia.” And there we were. We went—it was memorable. I just saw the pictures yesterday in Minna³⁴ during her commemoration. And we stayed in this hotel that was all full of bullets. And we were supposed to stay three days in Liberia, and we couldn’t leave till after a week, because no plane could land. It was fantastic. So, we formed a federation of women association in Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone... **[ER: Where in Ghana was that? Was that in the northern part of the country near Tamale? Or was it...?]** In Ghana? **[ER: yes, I’m just curious.]** No, in Accra in Ghana. So we went to Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Dakar [in Senegal], in one go. And we had FOMWAN sister organizations formed there and the following year they all came for our international conference here. And now we have FOMWAN in the UK, we have FOMWAN in the US, so it’s rolling. And for a long time, we were the only NGO that had—in Nigeria—that had a UN observer status.

ER: That’s great. That’s a great organization, you should be very proud. I’m very impressed.

MM: Thank you.

ER: So, I’m just wondering: Are there any, can you make sense of differences or similarities of the issues. I think you mentioned this when we first began about how there are different feminists from different parts of the world who have different issues so do you...

MM: Yes, and even within the same issue; we work very closely with the CAN Women—the Christian Association of Nigeria Women³⁵—and also the women that have no religious affiliation. So even in Nigeria you find that women face different things. While, for example, in part of—southern parts of Nigeria, there’s still inheritance of women. When a husband dies, the husband has a right, primary right to inherit the wife of his brother, with the property and everything. We don’t have that in the North. But that doesn’t mean we ignore that. We still take it as a collective responsibility. In the North there’s a lot of child

³⁴ Minna is a city in Nigeria and is the capital of Niger State, one of Nigeria’s 36 federal states. The city is home to two major ethnic groups: the Nupe and the Gwari. (“Minna.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 23, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minna>)

³⁵ The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is an umbrella organization with both Women and Youth Wings. The group focuses on issues that disproportionately affect Christians in Nigeria and they wield significant political power. (“Christian Association of Nigeria.” Wikipedia. Accessed July 23, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Association_of_Nigeria)

marriage—they may not have that. They have a different kind of thing—they have early sexual debut. They actually have child sex trading. So, we talk to each other. And similarly in different parts of the world different women have different issues that are affecting them, so the bottom line is: wherever a woman has an issue, it is our collective issue, because if you don't deal with it, the world is a global village—it will gravitate to you. And in any case every woman has the right to live as a human being, so it's our collective responsibility to see how we can support each other.

ER: That's very good. So, I think I've asked everything that I was going to ask you, so I'm just wondering if you have any questions for me or comments?

MM: The only comment I have is just a call for us as women activists that honestly while I agree that we need to share, we need to have information, we need to help each other, luckily there's not much money these days for conferences. We need to de-emphasize conferences and focus on the work. Attending one conference could sponsor maybe 3 girls to go to secondary school. So quite frankly I feel we need to from time to time reflect, sit back and reflect, and recalibrate our priorities and see what we do right and what we're not doing right. Secondly, as we work with different cultures, different norms, I think we also need to respect other people's norms and cultures, and not assume that ours is the best or that we know. We actually don't know, and the more arrogant we are, the less we know. And the more we want to push our own opinion the less effective we will be. So, that's it.

ER: Thank you very much. I really appreciate your work, and you telling us about these things—many things I didn't know!

MM: Yes, I knew as I was looking at your face, I was surprised—I thought you knew everything about me, Elisha.

ER: It's been a real pleasure to interview you. We thank you.

MM: I thank you very much. This is great work you're doing. Keep it up.