

GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP
SITE: NIGERIA

Transcript of Olanike Olugboji
Interviewer: Ronke Olawale

Location: Abuja, Nigeria
Date: November 10, 2019

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Olanike Olugboji An award-winning environmentalist and advocate, Olanike Olugboji works primarily with women in northern Nigeria to build a sustainable and safe environment. As a founding member of the Women’s Earth Alliance (WEA), in 2006 she participated in a global forum with several other organizations and later in WEA’s first ever Women and Water Training in Kenya (2008). Thereafter, she went on to establish her own NGO, Women’s Initiative for Sustainable Environment (WISE). Through both organizations, Olugboji has successfully supported and encouraged up to 9,000 women to launch clean cookstoves. Up to 30 others have been trained and empowered to start their clean cookstoves businesses. Following a recent “catch them young” awareness program, Olugboji launched a school-based tree-planting initiative aimed at promoting the practice among younger generations and encouraging them to become aware of and care for their environment. Olugbogi is a correspondent for World Pulse, an organization that focuses on amplifying women’s voices where she speaks especially on the environment and climate change. Her writing has been featured in *Time* magazine.

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 evening, miss. My name is Ronke Olawale. I'm part of the Global Feminists Program at the University of Michigan, and we have this program ongoing right now which we are inviting you to participate in. It is the Global Feminism Project, a multi-site, international project sponsored by the University of Michigan, and our goal is to archive oral histories of women to create and preserve conversations with women whose scholarship and/or activism has contributed to women's activism. We're also thinking about women whose work generally have contributed in very critical ways to issues that are very important to women. Ma, I'm glad you have accepted to, you know, to talk with us, and I'll start out by asking that you tell me your name, and do me the favor of spelling them so I don't misrepresent you, and briefly how you would like to be addressed.

Olanike Olugboji: So, thank you so much – excited to be a part of this project. I'll say that it is a very welcome initiative, and I look forward to being a part of how far this will go. So, my name is Olanike Olugboji.

RO: How would you like to be addressed?

OO: Miss.

RO: Miss, okay. Thank you so much for accepting to participate. Let us just start out by delving a little bit into your background, and as you think about the place where you are today, how would you depict the journey that brought you to this point? That is, I'm looking at this central commitment in your life, and how it all started, and the road you've passed through thus far.

OO: Okay so, your question takes me down memory lane because I would say as far back as when I was maybe about five, six, seven years old, yes, I recall that I always felt bad when I see people throw things around, and then incidentally I attended a military-like school, you know, primary school. Even my Nursery school, I went to Air Force Nursery school before I went to an army nursery school. For some reasons, I had to be moved from one school to another and then attended Command Children's School which is a military school,¹ and finding myself in that kind of space also brought to bear that connection I had with the environment because there we were taught to pick, when we see anything that's like a litter –anywhere on the school ground, we were taught to pick and take. You know, I always loved it because it was like, "I'm taking care of the environment – the environment I love", and

¹ The Nigerian military funds schools for children of military personnel. They allow children to be educated on base for additional safety, and advertise an additional emphasis on teaching discipline, unique from other types of schools. Primary schools and nurseries are typically associated with the Nigerian army, navy, or Air Force, and secondary schools are called Command Schools. ("Full List of All Military/Command Schools in Nigeria's 36 States." Nigerian Infopedia. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://nigerianinfopedia.com.ng/list-of-military-command-schools-in-nigeria/>)

then one other thing I can remember as a child is each time we had to travel, either by road or train, I would just observe. I didn't know what was rural. I didn't know what was urban, and of course, I probably wasn't knowledgeable enough to ask those questions. But just within me all those things play on my mind. I'd see maybe women, children carrying water over long distances. I grew up in Kaduna state² within the metropolitan area, and what I was used to is just turning on the tap and getting water. But now seeing this other side of life, you know, left some images in my mind which I didn't even realize as a child would come back someday. Okay, I have a background in Urban & Regional Planning, first and second degree,³ and I would say to an extent my interest in the environment also influenced my field of study. Upon graduation, I worked for some time, but deep within me I always knew that I was going to follow my passion someday which is taking care of the environment, caring for the environment. After, I think in 2003, after I left a job, I resigned, it's like my childhood dream of really doing something proactive to take care of the environment started coming back again. Those images started showing up. All the things I did as a child doing my bit, sweeping, picking litters within the school premises started adding up. Then, I talked to myself, I said I think it's time that I follow my passion, my dream of doing something that would help the environment. In 2003 up until 2004, I started trying to find organizations who were already doing something. Apparently, I had even formed an organization that was not registered, and the name I came up with back then was Environmental Management and Protection Network, and the idea I had then was to look for organizations who were already doing something to protect our environment or help manage our resources well, and I didn't find any. The only I heard about then was a women's environmental program, and I started trying to track whoever the founder was, and I learned she had left Kaduna state. So, I just felt I think I should just keep doing the bits I could do, and back then I was trying to address every environmental problem. The issue of water, waste management, land rights for women, and a lot of other things that I had become aware of. But one thing that struck me from that 2004 to 2008 was that most of the issues I was trying to address would always take me back to women in the community. I became more conscious of how a lot of the environmental challenges we have in our communities affect the lives of women. A lot of them, their lives are tied to natural resources. Yet, I found out that they had no say, they had no control over some of these things. I would say that between 2004 and 2005 I was fortunate to have been interviewed by New Nigerian Newspaper,⁴ and then I was asked a question about Maathai Wangari, if I knew Maathai Wangari.⁵ Back then I didn't even know anything about her, and then the

² Kaduna state is located in the northwest of Nigeria. ("Kaduna State". Wikipedia. Accessed June 15, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaduna_State)

³ Here, Olugboji says first and second degree to refer to her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees.

⁴ *New Nigerian Newspaper*, established in 1966, covers Nigerian news and entertainment. ("About Us." New Nigerian Newspapers. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://newnigeriannewspaper.com>)

⁵ Maathi Wangari (1940-2011) was a political and environmental activist in Kenya, launching the Green Belt Movement in 1977 to restore forests in Kenya, planting more than 30 million trees. She was the first woman

journalist told me, he said “you may be the next Maathai Wangari”. I said I don’t even know this person so I started researching about Maathai Wangari, and I found out, you know, she became like an inspiration for me. Somebody who understood what I was working towards. Somebody who had insight into what I would love to see happen in the environment. So, I started reading about her, researching about her work. Then in 2005, I was sent an invitation to apply for a strategic meeting that was being championed by the now rested Women’s Global Green Action Network.⁶ They found 32 women across the world who all were doing maybe things to help the environment, and I happened to be one of them. But I wasn’t able to make it to that meeting in Mexico, but I stayed in touch with the people, the brains, behind it. I’ll want to talk about some of the experiences I had in my community as I journeyed on. Because I didn’t have the resources to do much of what I was trying to do. I tried to identify organizations that I could pay a courtesy call to and tell them what I was doing. Then the Ministry of Environment in the state where I’m based, I sent them a letter, I was invited, and I was so excited that the then, one of the key people, I don’t want to mention the person’s position for some reasons. One of the key people there, it was a more like a challenge, and what struck me was that it was coming from a woman. She said “do you want to take over our jobs?”, and I was like “no, I’m only trying to complement your efforts.” I thought as a woman she should celebrate what I was up to, what I represented, and see how she could support what I was doing. So that kind of, you know, shook me a bit, and I had to withdraw. That was, I think, around 2006. So in 2007, like I said I stayed in touch with the brains behind the strategy committee that was supposed to happen in Mexico, I got a letter telling me that there was World Pulse,⁷ an organization that gives women a platform to be heard and also create visibility for them and their work. So since in my community I didn’t feel that I got the kind of reception that I thought would help me or propel my work, I started expressing myself through my writings, sharing my experiences, what I was finding in my community and all that. Then a woman from somewhere, that I don’t know because it’s more like a social talking platform, but the vision of the founder is to create visibility for women and also get them heard. So I started feeling heard, and this time around coming from women too, so it was a different feeling from what I had experienced in my community which was almost going to discourage me. I started spending more time writing about my experiences, what women were facing when it comes to having access to land, when it comes to taking decisions, when it comes to water supply, water management, when it

in East or Central Africa to earn a doctorate and won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. (“Wangari Maathai”. Biography. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>)

⁶ Women’s Global Green Action Network, launched in 2004 and since has closed, was a project for the Earth Island Institute (an environmental non-profit group) to provide networking opportunities and support to women environmental activists and community leaders. (“Women’s Global Green Action Network.” Earth Island Journal. Accessed June 17, 2020.

https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/womens_global_green_action_network1/)

⁷ World Pulse is an online network for women around the world to connect with each other and share stories and resources and provides free online training programs to empower women to effect change in their communities. (“About Us”. World Pulse. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.worldpulse.com/about-us>)

comes to access to cooking energy because some of these women, I'll tell you that especially in Africa, and Nigeria, where I'm from, women till the land day in day out, and they don't own those lands because of traditional practices, laws, norms, and all that that denied them those rights. When you talk about agriculture I'll say that they're the ones feeding my nation in particular, but yet they can't lay claim to those lands. When you look at even access to cooking energy, most families across the world it's estimated that maybe about, don't want to give wrong statistics, but I know that not less than maybe a billion of the world's population still relies on traditional means of cooking, using biomass, unsustainable means, inefficient means. Looking at a lot of these women and speaking about those images of those women I said keeps coming back to me, you find out some of them would trek – I met women who would tell me that they trek 2 kilometers, 3 kilometers to go and fetch firewood. Same thing for water, some go that far to fetch water from sources that are contaminated. But, the sad reality is across all these communities that I go to and I meet these women, you find they don't have a say in terms of taking decisions about if interventions have been brought to their community, whether by the government, whether by the traditional body in their community – their voices are always missing. I kept sharing all these stories about these women and from 2013 I had applied in 2011 because World Pulse has something they call Voice of Our Future,⁸ the name has been changed now. There was a call for applications for a six month citizen journalism and digital empowerment training, and then I put up some writings. But then I was doing a master's program and combining all these things I really couldn't meet up, I just did my bits, and I didn't make it among the thirty finalists. But one of the, I remember his name –Scott Beck,⁹ he's no longer with World Pulse, but he reached out to me, he said "I love your writings, I love what you're doing. Can you reapply for the next Voice of Our Future? You have something you're saying." When he said that it helped me look inwards again and say "no, I know I can do this." There's a reason why I couldn't meet up. Why were those other types of women selected? I'll tell you that there's a lot that can shift and happen for women when we support ourselves, when we walk together, when we are not in competition with each other. What I did was I went back and I started studying the writings of those thirty women, and I was like what was it about them that was missing from my writings? I tell you that I learned a lot from reading what they were writing even though it had nothing to do with environment, but I learned so much from it. And then I reapplied in 2013, and then I became one of the thirty that was selected and then three among the thirty were supposed to go on something that is called "World Pulse's live

⁸ World Pulse's Voices of Our Future program welcomes 30 women each November and runs for five months. includes journalism training and mentorship, opportunities for publication and connecting with other women leaders worldwide, and greater visibility to issues pertaining to program participants' communities. ("Apply to Become a Voices of Our Future Correspondent." World Pulse. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.worldpulse.com/about-us/newsroom/apply-become-voices-our-future-correspondent>)

⁹ Scott Beck was the Programs Coordinator for the Voices of Our Future program from 2009-2012, and the Online Community Manager for World Pulse from 2012-2014. ("Scott Beck." LinkedIn. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/scottbeck1>)

speaking tour”. Out of the six semi-finalists, I became one of the three, and that earned me an opportunity to, I think I had about sixteen speaking engagements across the United States. You know, that was a wow experience for me and I’m like yes. I’m guessing that what I’m doing is important. The stories of these women need to be heard because I remember one of the questions that was asked during the interview. I didn’t even know that a decision had been taken, I’d made it, but they sent me an email and said “we have one other question for you.” And I was wondering “what is this?” I almost had sleepless nights trying to prepare myself for it, and one thing I missed saying again was that during the six month citizen journalism and digital empowerment training we had a vision mentor for each one of us, we had a vision mentor and an editorial mentor assigned to us. So, I would eventually, as I speak on, talk about mentoring. That is also important for bringing about transformation, change, fast transformation in the lives of women. Because if you have gone through a process that took you maybe ten, twenty years before you could achieve your dream you could help other women achieve it faster. When we’re talking about helping each other, we’re making the world better for ourselves, better for our families, better for our communities, and better for the whole world. So, when this happened, one of the things I remember I said to the interview panel when they asked me “what is it you would like the US audience to hear about your work and your community?”, I went back to my vision mentor who had answered the questions they had sent to me and she was like “Olanike, this is, I love everything you’ve written, but do you know one thing I want you to do? Just be all that you have said.” And so I dropped all those notes, and when they called me it was like – I don’t know what to call that moment – the moment I said something about “I want the audience, every audience that I’m going to come across to know about that woman who is at the backside of nowhere, probably her community is not even, you cannot even find it on a map, but that woman exists, and she doesn’t even have a clean glass of water. She doesn’t even know what a clean glass of water is. I want everyone sitting in the audience wherever I go to know that such a woman exists.” I think for me that was one of the things that also probably stood me out because a lot of these women don’t have a voice, they are not visible. So some of us can be their voices and not just be their voices, we must be available to also help them get to the point where we have been. So that has been the approach of my work. It’s not something I’ll say I had all the way, but I was able to pick this up, but of the kind of support I got from the contact I made with the Women’s Global Green Action Network, which is now Women’s Earth Alliance because one of the founders then moved on to found Women’s Earth Alliance,¹⁰ and today they’re one of my key partners. One of the things that has also done for me, because when I started this work I wasn’t seeing it as something that could ever pay me something or I could earn anything from. I was just following my heart,

¹⁰ Women’s Earth Alliance is a global organization with the goal of empowering women to lead grassroots efforts to solve environmental problems. They provide training programs for women to run organizations and lead movements. (“What We Do.” Women’s Earth Alliance. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://womensearthalliance.org/about-us/what-we-do/>)

and I'll tell you that for eleven years I self-funded the work. The first even funding I got came through a recommendation by Women's Earth Alliance to Global Green Grants fund.¹¹ We got \$5,000 to help expand our women's waste recycling project. To date, we've done a lot of work with women across communities in Nigeria on waste recycling, digital empowerment training because of my experience with World Pulse, I've won a lot of awards on World Pulse and then gained other recognition for my work. One exciting thing that also happened for me during the World Pulse living speaking tour was the opportunity to speak at the Clinton Global Initiative¹² where the co-founder of the Empowerment Institute¹³ found me. She offered me a scholarship to attend the Empowerment Institute, and my experience with the Empowerment Institute has been transformational because in the midst of, because I'm so passionate about my work, one of the things I didn't realize was I wasn't even paying attention to myself, I was driving myself to more like the breaking point. I wasn't allowing myself to drive the work, but rather the work was driving me so I was always overstretched, trying to be everywhere, and that wasn't healthy. But because I was not even aware. So in 2016 I had the opportunity to go for my first in-class training at the Empowerment Institute, but prior to that, I think sometime in 2015 around October/November, I was to attend an in-country training by the first Nigerian who I think got a scholarship to attend the Empowerment Institute. When I got to that training, as she kept talking about agency and empowerment and looking at my own life I knew where I wasn't feeling too healthy. I felt I could drop down, drop dead, at any moment because I was really tired, overstretched and when she kept talking about the seven key areas of life that the empowerment model looks at, I realized, there's the usual: emotion, relationship, money, work, body, spirituality, and sexuality. As she kept talking about the seven areas of life I just realized that I wasn't paying attention to body, and I felt that if only I could have a vision in that area, I think maybe other things will fall in place because that was the point where I was at. I'm telling you that that was a good decision for me to go ahead with the empowerment experience because that has been a game changer also for me, for my work. Because a lot of things that I used to struggle with in terms of maybe my delegation skills, I always wanted to do everything, I had people around me who could help, but I grew up in a family where I was taught never to ask people for anything. Don't expect anything from anybody. I guess that was one of the reasons why

¹¹ Global Greengrants Fund is an organization that provides grants to grassroots activists through a network of activists and donors working to solve environmental issues around the world. ("Who We Are." Global Greengrants Fund. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.greengrants.org/who-we-are/>)

¹² The Clinton Global Initiative was founded in 2005 to connect interdisciplinary leaders with the goal of solving global issues, facilitating connection and collaboration to form specific and measureable plans to achieve these goals. ("Mission & Model." Clinton Global Initiative. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.clintonfoundation.org/clinton-global-initiative/about-us/cgi-mission>)

¹³ The Empowerment Institute was founded in 1981 by David Gershon and Gail Straub (the woman referenced by Olugboji) as a consulting and training organization with the goal of empowering community leaders and activists, particularly regarding sustainability, peace building, and women's empowerment. ("About Empowerment Institute." Empowerment Institute. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.empowermentinstitute.net/about/about-empowerment-institute>)

I self-funded my work for eleven years because I couldn't. But all that has changed, helping me move from a place of pathology to vision, which these are some of the terms we use at the Empowerment Institute.

RA: I guess the other question I wanted to ask is that over the years, therefore, how has your career changed?

OO: Like I mentioned earlier, that I studied urban Urban & Regional planning first and second degree, for all the time after, I think I graduated in 1998, I served in 1999,¹⁴ I returned to the state where I grew up which is where I still reside and started looking out for employment. Eventually, I had to, because I just didn't want to stay at home, I had to take on a job with an environmental consulting firm. I wasn't on salary, but I was just glad about the opportunity to be able to leave home, go somewhere, and learn. I was there for I think almost a year when my dad spoke to one of his friends who has a, it's acclaimed that it's the first private TV station in Nigeria. Khalifa Baba-Ahmed,¹⁵ he's now late may his soul rest in peace, he's one of the foremost media personalities in Nigeria up until the time he passed on. My dad had spoken to him, and then he offered me a job as his special assistant and also promised to help me find a job that suits my academic background. We were looking at the Federal Capital Development Authority,¹⁶ but after working with him for about a month, he got used to me, he felt I was going even beyond his expectations so he decided to offer me a full-time job and asked me to go to the Nigerian Television Authority¹⁷ to find out how much their graduates are being paid, and then he placed me on that salary. Then I was his special assistant. While working with him I was able to develop the brochure for, more like a book, that contains everything about the different positions available, job schedules, and things like that. So, that was a new learning for me. Most of the time he would ask me to write his

¹⁴ Olugboji is referencing the National Youth Service Corps, a program that requires university graduates to complete one year of service doing a variety of jobs to promote the development of Nigeria. Young adults are placed in regions different from where they grew up, where they work for a year after a short training period. ("National Youth Service Corps." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020.

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

¹⁵ Khalifa Baba-Ahmed (1944-2018) was a Nigerian journalist who reported for multiple Nigerian news outlets, and served in various director positions for a few outlets later in his life. ("Veteran Nigerian journalist Mahmoon Baba-Ahmed is dead." Premium Times Nigeria. Accessed June 12, 2020.

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/258092-veteran-nigerian-journalist-mahmoon-baba-ahmed-dead.html>)

¹⁶ The Federal Capital Development Authority was established in 1976 in Nigeria to organize the infrastructure and physical development of the federal territory called the Federal Capital Territory bordering Kaduna in the northwest. ("Federal Capital Territory Administration." Wikipedia. Accessed June 12, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Capital_Territory_Administration#Federal_Capital_Development_Authority)

¹⁷ The Nigerian Television Authority is a government-owned broadcasting network, and runs the largest television network in the country, viewed as the "authentic voice" of the Nigerian government. ("Nigerian Television Authority." Wikipedia. Accessed June 12, 2020.

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

letters, whether to the governor and things like that. Initially, maybe after writing the letter sometimes I'm wondering in my mind "why's he giving me this kind of task to do? Why can't he just write the letter, and I give it to his secretary?" But one thing I found out was that as I kept, maybe he would just dictate to me, and as I kept writing, sometimes he would change a few words initially, maybe more words. But eventually it was reducing, and then one day he gave me one million percent when he asked me to write to the then-governor. I just knew I had picked something from him in terms of maybe letter writing skill. After I left there, of course that worked for me, when I left there I got a job with a legal firm as the personal assistant to the principal partner. But, for some reasons I had to leave. Actually, I faced sexual harassment, and I had to just resign. That was in 2003. Now imagine leaving two jobs consecutively, I just told myself, I said, "there's something I've always wanted to do, fix the environment" that was my childhood mentality. I said I think it's time to go back. So I started asking questions from my friends who know someone who is already running maybe a non-governmental organization, a non-profit organization, and then I had this friend who I had introduced to the media house where I was working. He later became the anchor for the sports program. So through him I was able to find someone who was running a youth organization, and then he started guiding me. That was when I came about the Environmental Management & Protection and Management network, we sat down together. So some of the experiences that I had gathered while working with Khalifa... When I got to the legal firm, I was adjudged the best staff after one week and within me I knew the credit should go to my previous boss. And everything I had learned in terms of time, report writing, supervision, and all that helped me when I started my organization because I didn't have the resources to employ anyone. So I could be the founder, the program director, the program coordinator, the program officer, I was everything, and the funder - I was the funder too. Eventually I had some friends who would go along with me for courtesy visits, and it wasn't such a smooth experience particularly because funds that I didn't have any reasonable savings, and then funds that I made from the environmental consulting firm. I said I left because I wasn't being paid, so when I had a job that would at least give me a stipend, I opted for it before I was placed on full salary, but I was still consulting for the environmental firm so I get some money from them. So when I left my job, I was still able to get by. And then because I knew I wanted to reach out to some of these women in communities, I'll just use some of my funds, go to communities, identify certain issues around maybe how can we - I remember when we were doing something about waste plastic recycling with women - how can we get rid of some of this waste as women, what can we make with some of this polythene waste littering the whole place and all that. So one of the things I found out about most of these women when I go to their communities and bring them together was that they didn't have financial wherewithal. And then because I didn't want these women to just feel used and dumped, I started thinking of how to support

them no matter how little the resources is, and so I launched a microcredit scheme. We started with five thousand naira which is just, how much is five thousand naira now?¹⁸

RA: It's actually less than twenty dollars.

OO: About ten dollars or fifteen dollars. So that was the best that we could give to some of these women to say "we're giving you this as a loan". But today, we are at a point where we are able to give up to two hundred thousand naira, which is how much? Up to three hundred dollars. But so much has changed about my work because funding was a big issue. I remember at a time my elder sister, I can imagine if she gets hold of this interview [laughs] she would re-interview me because at some point she got worried for me and she would be like "do you know what you're doing- you keep saying you are empowering women all over the place and all that and you come to us you are asking for money to get by and all that, why don't you just go and get a job?" And you can imagine what I sacrificed. After I left my last job in 2003, I launched out in 2004, so I had sacrificed maybe my sister was telling me this, almost like ten years later. And I was looking back, I said I hope I haven't actually made a mistake. But thank god for my dad, he's late now - he passed on in 2015, he said "don't stop, just stay at what you're doing, just stay at what you're doing". And I would say that he is a pillar of my work, and I see him as that. There's also a role that, of course, men can play in helping women find whether their career path or the path to whatever dream they want to pursue. I may have missed out on a lot in between, but I think this is just the transition that has happened for me as someone who started Urban & Regional planning and just practiced for a very minimal number of years, probably just about two years and then here I am, a social... I don't use activist, I always use advocate so I describe myself as an environmental and women's empowerment advocate, so that's where I am now. And also I've become an entrepreneur because one of the focus of WISE (Women's Initiative for Sustainable Environment)¹⁹ - I came up with that name in 2008 after being selected to attend the Women Leader's for the World training,²⁰ leadership training at Santa Clara University. Because from 2004 to 2008 I was trying to do everything environment, but I said it always took me to the women in the communities. So I couldn't really align the environment and women, how do I merge these together and be able to run with it? So after

¹⁸ Naira (NGN) is the currency of Nigeria. The current exchange rate is 1 naira to 0.0026 USD. ("Nigerian naira." Wikipedia. Accessed June 12, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_naira)

¹⁹ Women's Initiative for Sustainable Environment (WISE) is a grassroots nonprofit organization with the goal of environmental sustainability. They pursue this goal by strengthening the roles that women play in their communities' environmental efforts, offering programs that provide awareness and education on relevant issues and empowering individuals to be leaders in their communities. ("About." WISE Nigeria. Accessed June 15, 2020. <http://wisenigeria.org/about/>)

²⁰ Women Leaders for the World is a fellowship in California for women leaders solving community issues, providing mentorship and coaching, with 6 months of coaching and a year of technical support and advising. In addition to coaching from experts in change, the program also connects women activists from around the world to share stories and ideas. ("Women Leaders for the World." How Women Lead. Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://www.howwomenlead.com/women-leaders-for-the-world-1>)

I went to the Women Leaders for the World training, it's now called How Women Lead,²¹ so that's why I think I'm struggling with those titles. By the time I came back I had kind of become more informed, knowledgeable about how I could strategize to achieve what I wanted, and I knew the first place to start would be to have a name that is representative of the cause I was set to champion so that was how we came up with the name Women's Initiative for Sustainable Environment. It was legally registered in 2009.

RA: Wow, wonderful. In all of this would you say that you have experienced any personal changes as a result of your engagement in the kind of work you do?

OO: Ah, yes. Because when I tell people that I'm a shy person they don't believe. I'm somebody that is pretty conservative when I get into a space. I just want to be quiet. I don't want to be identified. But one of the things that my work has made happen for me is giving me a kind of this ability. And even the name WISE, there are places that that name has gone to that I'm not even aware of. And then when somebody sees me, and maybe I get introduced, and they realize there's a connection between me and WISE they're like, "oh we've heard so much about you", and I'm wondering just the way I think your projects probably found me. So more visibility and then voice. A powerful voice.

RA: Thank you. Next, on reflecting upon your work - how do you understand the term feminism?

OO: Hm, I actually came into Abuja for a meeting,²² it's something that is about to be launched - a partnership between Equal Access,²³ Equal Access is also an American organization, and then Empowerment Institute US. I don't want to talk too much about the initiative that we're launching, but that word, feminism, came up while we were having our discussions because this is a kind of intervention that would be going into communities. And then I started explaining to them the approach to the cause I'm advancing because you go to communities and then sometimes men are very uncomfortable when they hear you say something about women's empowerment or gender equality. But, way back even on my experience during the World Pulse live speaking tour, I got asked that question in the United States. That, how are you able to communicate with men in communities or to get them to accept what you're doing. And one of the things that we need to deconstruct which I know

²¹ How Women Lead is a global women's organization that connects activists to share ideas, and also provides training programs and funds to change-makers worldwide. ("Who We Are." How Women Lead. Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://www.howwomenlead.com/about/howwomenlead>)

²² Abuja is the capital city of Nigeria, in the Federal Capital Territory in the northwest of the country. ("Abuja." Wikipedia. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abuja>)

²³ Equal Access International is a non-governmental organization with the goal of community change on a variety of issues, focusing on community-led movements and combining local outreach with larger media coverage and research. ("About." Equal Access International. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.equalaccess.org/about/>)

that has helped me work with men and also opened up other communities to us or made our work acceptable in the communities that we're reaching is that we define feminism as a call to partnership between men and women. It's not a contest. It's not a competition. And I tell the women that we're working with that if you as a woman you feel okay, this space, it's been your space all these years and all that and then somebody just comes and says "move, I want to take part of the space" how would you feel? As again somebody coming to say oh, you've been occupying this space, I think there's room for one more person or more. We can share the space and so much can work better. So the feminism thing, I see it as an opportunity for women to contribute to development, contribute to societal change. It's not a fight, or it's not an attack on men. I'm actually engaged, I'm in a relationship, and one of the things I know that my partner has accepted, which is helping us move forward, is because he understands and appreciates what I'm doing. He doesn't see it as a threat. And I think that if we as women are able to spread the feminism message in a manner that is not offensive to people. In a manner that people are able to understand that this is an opportunity for everybody - male, female - to contribute to a better world, I think would win men over. Because I grew up in Northern Nigeria, and I think I would say that Northern Nigeria is more conservative than the Southwest. But people are not repulsed by our work because you can imagine when a man knows that when you're telling his wife that adopt an improved cookstove instead of using the traditional fire, and the man knows that this new improved cookstove that we're bringing to his wife is going to free up her time. She's going to have more time for him, have more time for the children, have more time for herself. The money that he's giving her that she's burning in inefficient means of cooking or more expensive cooking fuel, like kerosene, is now going to add to the family savings. I'm not sure that any man would... And in the process when you are asking or supporting these women to make these changes, they are becoming more empowered. And when there's value-addition to herself, to the husband, to the brother, to the male gender, I'm not sure the concept of feminism would be misunderstood or challenged.

RA: I really would like you to, at this point, talk about your work and for that, can you tell me what the improved clean stove is? And then we'll go into the larger question of the interconnection between feminism and global climate change.

OO: Okay. In fact, I think I love this question so much because the projects that we've been working on for the past four years is centered on access to cooking energy for women. So in 2014, I came across a World Health Organization publication, more like research that they did and put out the report, so I saw in that report that 98,000 Nigerian women were dying annually from smoke related illnesses, and then in addition to that they also estimated that any women who cooks breakfast, lunch, and supper using firewood is considered to have smoked twenty four packets of cigarettes in a day. And Nigeria tops the list of countries where women were dying from smoke related illnesses. Three astonishing and alarming

statistics. And so I talked to myself, I said, could this be real? I now decided to do like a mini research in Kaduna state, and I was thinking of going to high density communities because I felt okay maybe those who use firewood, they are the poor people or people at the bottom of the pyramid. And then somebody came to make my hair at home one day, and I was talking to her, sharing my thoughts with her, and she said “No, you don’t have to go that far. This estate where we’re living, I know a particular portion where people are living as if they are in the rural area. It’s a kind government owned area within the state, government properties.” And then I got there and I could see goats, whatever, types of firewood. I saw the means of cooking and all that, I said okay these are probably part of the number of people that the World Health Organization is pointing to. But I now thought again, I said what about those people who don’t have access to even the least of primary health care. They probably would be missing out in the number that is put out there. So I started doing my projections, and I started going from communities to communities, and I found out that the use of traditional mode of cooking, as in the tripod or the three stone fireplace, is even used in some of the larger homes, not because they are poor, but people give different reasons why these use this wood. And when you go to a lot of schools, especially public boarding schools - yes even private - private secondary schools or boarding schools, you find out that a lot of them are still using the traditional means of cooking. And then you see that a lot of these women are exposed to so much fumes, and they are ignorant of the health implications. So we’re not just talking about the environmental implication. There’s the health implication, the financial implication on the family because a lot of them don’t even know that it is more expensive than using cleaner options like gas. And there are some of them who still tell you they are afraid of gas and all that. So a lot of these findings, I put it together, and I published it on my World Pulse journal. The current board chair of World Pulse found that article and she said to me “Olanike, how can I help? You know I see that you are trying to find solutions to this, as soon as you find any solution I am willing to invest five hundred dollars to support you.” So I started searching online, and then I found the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, which is now the Clean Cooking Alliance,²⁴ and then I joined that group online, and eventually they sent my information - I didn’t even know there was a Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves²⁵ - they send my details to the Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, and then I got invited for one of their partner meetings. So that was how I registered and started attending. I started meeting stove producers. That

²⁴ Clean Cooking Alliance is a non-governmental organization that focuses on improving livelihood and the environment through access to clean cooking, specifically cookstoves. The organization partners with a global network to promote consumer demand, investment in clean cooking businesses, and advocating for cleaner practices. (“About.” Clean Cooking Alliance. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.cleancookingalliance.org/about/>)

²⁵ The Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, established under the umbrella of Clean Cooking Alliance in 2011, is a partnership of governmental and private organizations promoting the transition to and use of cleaner cookstove and cooking fuels in Nigeria through advocacy and investments, with the goal of placing 10 million fuel-efficient stoves in Nigerian homes by 2021. (“Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves.” Clean Cooking Alliance. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.cleancookingalliance.org/partners/item/25/36>)

was how I learned about improved cookstoves, or you may want to call it clean cookstoves. During one of the meetings I attended, I found this young lady who had launched a cookstove manufacturing or production business. And then I started talking to her, of course there were men there, but I have nothing against men because we engage them. Our approach to work is gender sensitive, and we found out we can't leave the men behind when you're talking to the women and empowering these women we must gain the support of the men so that they don't have problems. I found out the Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves' space was dominated by men, but I was just joining and I didn't want anyone to blacklist me or something. So I started thinking, I said why would men be taking this issue on? They don't do the cooking. And then most of them who are designing stoves, they don't do the cooking. Are they really in communication with women who need the stoves? So I picked more interest in the lady, Happy Amos,²⁶ and I started talking to her. I asked her to show me a sample of her stove and all that. When I got that five hundred dollars, I bought fifty stoves because the exchange rate then was I think two hundred naira to a dollar. So I had about a hundred thousand, and each of her stoves cost about two thousand five hundred back then, so I bought fifty of the stoves, about a hundred thousand naira worth. Then I started going back to all those women that I had identified who were still using firewood. I remember one of them, I can't remember her name now, but that story I said I published in my online journal was picked up by TIME magazine and published in TIME magazine. So that was also exciting and motivating for me, that I think I can really do something on the platform of WISE to bring about a difference in the lives of women, to change the game for women. We gave out those stoves. But then Happy came back and told me, she named her stove after herself - she called her stove Happy, so she came back and told me she said "Oh, please I know you're doing well supporting me, buying my stoves, but if you keep giving out the stoves to people across communities then some people will never buy my stove. They will wait until you are able to come and gift them a stove." So I said okay we'll change our strategy. So we started giving out the stoves as flexible payment rates, but, or people who can pay make the down payment but at no single profit to us. We started selling at the cost price just to make it accessible to women. And then we gave out some during the World Health day of that year. We went to a community, sensitized them about the health implication of the traditional means of cooking and then the benefits of the clean or improved cookstoves over other unclean sources, dirty sources. I sent an update back to the president who had gifted me five hundred dollars, and then she gave me another one thousand dollars so we were able to buy one thousand stoves. And then I think I gifted about

²⁶ Happy Amos is the founder and Managing Director of Roshan Renewables, the first female-owned stove manufacturing company in Nigeria. The company produces fuel-efficient stoves and employs women throughout Nigeria with the goal of improving women's lives across the country. ("Happy Amos." Vital Voices. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.vitalvoices.org/people/happy-amos/>)

fifty of those stoves to women in an IDP camp,²⁷ where I had gone to deliver agency and empowerment to them. And then, Women's Earth Alliance, our long term partner, now reached out to me, in say in 2015, that they wanted to come and do a water sanitation and hygiene project in Nigeria. I said wow, I know that is equally important in the lives of women, but this is, what we're currently working on, is an area where not too many people are even aware that women were actually dying as a result of having to perform their traditional role of cooking for their families. And so they picked interest and started talking to me back and forth, and that was how we launched a fifty thousand dollars worth of project which helped us identify thirty grassroots women leaders across communities in Kaduna state, our base, where we were able to bring these women together for two weeks of residential training. We developed a curriculum that would support developing their enterprise skills, leadership skills, and under leadership we had agency/empowerment and multimedia storytelling because digital empowerment was key to helping me find my voice and also visibility. So that's also incorporated into our curriculum. And we wanted these women to be able to capture the stories of the experiences of women in their communities when it comes to how they access cooking energy because we've heard women get raped when they go into the forest to search for firewood. Some get snake bites. Some get scorpion bites. Some are just assaulted by whoever they find, maybe they go to somebody's farm and the person comes and assaults them. Things like that. And then some of them, using all these dirty forms like the traditional means, they would have to scrub soot of their pots, spending productive hours that they could use. So we wanted all those stories captured by these women that we were sending back into their communities, and we didn't impose anything on them. The first week of training we asked them to go back to their communities in the light of the information that they have gotten about improved cookstoves, how will this help their communities, what kind of stoves would women in their communities accept, what kinds of fuels do they have that are accessible that would reduce the time they have to go into the forest to search for firewood or the costs that they have to spend, the cost implication. So we did a kind of questionnaire that they took back and brought back all that information to us. As I speak to you today, one of those thirty women has become a cookstove producer, and they go by the name Cookstove Entrepreneurs and Advocates.²⁸ We have our anthem. And then today, as I speak to you, we have trained about two hundred and seventy six clean cookstove entrepreneurs and advocates because after that training in 2017, we did a lot around advocacy in 2018, early 2018. So later part of 2018, when the

²⁷ An IDP camp is a place for internally displaced persons, people who are forced to leave their homes but stay within country borders, to seek shelter and refuge. ("Internally displaced person." Wikipedia. Accessed June 17, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internally_displaced_person)

²⁸ Cookstove Entrepreneurs and Advocates is a nickname given to women who train with the Women's Earth Alliance to be a leader in clean cookstove transitions in their communities.

Energy Commission of Nigeria,²⁹ with the support of UNDP³⁰ and Global Environment Facility,³¹ launched an intervention tagged Sustainable Fuelwood Management Project,³² they heard about our model and then invited us. So last year on the platform of UNDP sustainable Fuelwood management project, we trained another twenty entrepreneurs then brought ten from the first set of thirty entrepreneurs to become mentors. That was why I said, I'll come back to mentoring because when you have had an experience and you're able to guide another woman, it will help her move faster or she'll have somebody she can look up to anytime she needs counsel, support, or whatever assistance. We did that training in Kaduna, but for the one we implemented last year in Delta and Cross River state³³ because under the project we had three pilot states. But in Delta it was a different approach because they insisted it has to be a gender sensitive training where we have both men and women who come in to work together - how can the men support the women? Because you have cases where a woman has gone to fetch firewood, she's almost dying, she comes home, she starts cooking, the baby is crying, probably the husband is watching TV or just playing games whereas this woman is overstretched. So we've also been able to bring on the voices of the men and they are not telling us or, some of them were not even aware. Because sometimes you will be amazed that because we as women we don't even know what we want so we don't even ask for that kind of help then you think the man is also wicked. The man may not even be aware. But if now that man is aware, how can we get the man to help or support these women without feeling that his male ego has been eroded or corroded. These are some of the things we are teaching these people. And then we had about fifty four participants, a balance of men and women in Delta last year. And then in Calabar,³⁴ we had forty - a balance of men and women. Twenty men and twenty women, thereabouts, including the clan head in that community, being a participant to get his buy in, and then his

²⁹ The Energy Commission of Nigeria, established by the Nigerian government in 1989, serves as the educational and governing body for energy use in Nigeria. The organization produces guidelines for energy use, conducts research and shares data on energy use in the country. ("Mission and Vision." Energy Commission of Nigeria. Accessed June 16, 2020. http://www.energy.gov.ng/mission_vision.php)

³⁰ The UNDP is the United Nations Development Programme, an organization that tackles issues of poverty, inequality, and exclusion in about 170 countries by providing countries aid in creating policies and community-empowerment for the production of sustainable change. ("About Us." UNDP. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/about-us.html>)

³¹ The Global Environment Facility, established in 1992, is an organization that provides funding for environmental projects around the world by partnering with international organizations and private institutions. ("Global Environment Facility." Wikipedia. Accessed June 16, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Environment_Facility)

³² Sustainable Fuelwood Management, started in 2016, is a project supported by the UNDP focused in Nigeria. It promotes sustainable production and use of fuel wood at the market level, including supporting transition to more fuel-efficient cookstoves. ("Sustainable Fuelwood Management." UNDP. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.ng.undp.org/content/nigeria/en/home/projects/sustainable-fuelwood-management-.html>)

³³ Delta state and Cross River state are states in the south of Nigeria. ("Delta state." Wikipedia. Accessed June 16, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delta_State) ("Cross River State." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_River_State)

³⁴ Calabar is the capital of Cross River State. ("Cross River State." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross_River_State)

wife too was also represented. So our approach is also identifying people who can influence others, and the national coordinator was very impressed with what we did, and then this year we secured the contract to train one hundred and twenty new clean cookstove entrepreneurs across the three states again. And so that's how we arrived at that number of two hundred and seventy six. And then another organization has also heard about what we are doing, and then we have a project that will be launching in Gombe state³⁵ which is one of the states that is affected by the insurgency that Nigeria has witnessed for a couple of years now. And we're looking at how we could use this intervention to support women and men who have been affected by the conflict and all the violence that has happened around there to see how we could also empower some women to become entrepreneurs and advocates who would spread the word to make the change happen very fast that in this age and time no woman should have to die from cooking for her family.

RA: Great job that you are doing, and I was just going to ask this other question. What would be some of your other expectations from your organization in terms of the work that you do?

OO: Scaling up our work because we found out that our work is having very tangible impacts on the lives of communities that we're serving. So we need to find more partners to be able to scale our work. And then also one of our long term vision, which I have shared with a couple of our partners and which needs to also happen for the organization real fast because right now yes, we have partnership projects that are funded by some of those partners, but it is not yet kind of positioning us to be self-sustaining. So we are looking at getting to that place where even if we're not getting donor funds, we should be able to survive because our work is very key, very strategic. In the face of climate change now, a lot of women's livelihoods are threatened. And not just their livelihoods, other things that humanity relies on for survival because now you can't predict the rains. And then you can see that it is even resulting in conflict. You have farmer-herder clashes and things like that, and a lot of women are caught in the web. So all these issues have to be addressed in a manner that helps us protect our environment and helps humanity live up to that goal of sustaining the environment. You hear that from the mission that I shared with you. What we're looking at is positioning women as solutions, not victims. Authors of their own change. People who will rewrite the stories for other women so that we don't have a kind of situation. Yes, we're talking about sustainable development which is just about the current generation meeting their needs and also making sure that the ability of those coming after us to meet their own needs is not compromised. So women need to become more informed. Their capacities need to be built. They need to be equipped well enough to be able to stand for themselves, stand for their families, stand for their communities. We will continue to position ourselves as an

³⁵ Gombe state is located in northeastern Nigeria. ("Gombe State." Wikipedia. Accessed June 16, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gombe_State)

organization and align with others whether individuals or corporate organizations, bilateral organizations³⁶ - anybody that is committed to seeing women advance and will know that justice is being served to everyone.

RA: Thank you. I know you talked a lot about your work, research, and writings. What do you consider to be the relationship between scholarship and activism, in terms of feminist scholarship and feminist activism, what is that relationship in your work, for instance?

OO: I'm trying to figure out if I should just say that there is a very thin line between both, and I will say that they are interconnected. Because I have a part of me that represents the scholarship or that has passed through the scholarship, and there is that part of me that is an advocate or call it an activist. So it's kind of interrelated. It supports each other. There's a kind of support, you can't separate them because you can't give what you don't have. I will say the scholarship part can also prepare you, equip you, to do what you have to do and do it well. And then the activism is you taking on all that the scholarship has equipped you with to actually take action and make impact.

RA: Sounds good. Then for you personally, what is the intersection of your work with the women's women as it were in Nigeria and then maybe globally?

OO: Okay, so we have a face that we call WE, that is women and environment, and in all that we do the four cardinal things that we look at in our work is leadership development, agency, economic empowerment, and peer support. All of these are very key in the feminism movement. And where we also come in in terms of addressing environmental issues that have direct bearings on the lives of women and position them to be at the front lines of leading the solutions, identifying solutions and leading those solutions. So it's like we're building a movement of women environmental stewards. People who will take on the responsibility to take care of the environment and also teach others to do it. The environment is a very big section, and we can not leave it out so we're just playing our parts just like every other person has a cause they are advancing which is also channeled or targeted towards making the world a better place for everyone, but of course women. I'm not saying first, and I'm not saying last. But women in the face of making sure that the world is better, we're considering that the lives of women must not just be better it must be excellent. And so everything we're doing must be targeted towards all arriving. We're all going to arrive at the point, but we must work in a manner that we are supporting each

³⁶ Bilateral organizations use funds from the government of the country where the organization is based to aid developing countries. ("Multilateral and Bilateral Organizations." Unite for Sight. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.uniteforsight.org/global-health-careers/module5>)

other actually no matter the angle we're coming from. And I'm sure that in no time, if we spread the message constructively and progressively, we'll sure get there.

RA: And then what would be your analysis, evaluation, and expectations of the development of feminism and in this country, in relation specifically to the environment? Do you think a lot is happening? Are feminists, activists, and scholars at the stage of realization and understanding of the impact of the environment and all the changes that we are seeing for the now and even the future?

OO: The awareness is spreading. Things are happening. Maybe what has not happened just yet is to have a coordinated voice where everyone knows that okay this is what women in Nigeria, that means whoever because I can rightly say it can't be just WISE. I know about WEP, Women Environmental Program,³⁷ it can't be just WEP, it can't be just WISE that is doing something around the environment. There are many more. Maybe their organization or their work is not centered on the environment, but probably they are doing things to contribute to the center which is the environment. So what I think needs to happen is to have it all coordinated, structured maybe at some point. Maybe in the nearest time to come - I don't want to use 'future' - the nearest time to come. It could be tomorrow, it could be next tomorrow, but where we could all find ourselves, eventually find ourselves, and just be one formidable voice for the environment and where we would be reckoned with at every level because that is happening for me as an individual. That is happening for a lot of the women who are involved in our work. A lot of them didn't even know anything about environment. Like Hajiya Binta, who has become a stove producer--that was one of the first eighty women we trained. Today the Sustainable Firewood Management Project has bought over two thousand stoves from her. This is a woman who was just unassuming, doing her business in Saminaka.³⁸ This same woman championed the cause for the Sustainable Fuelwood Management cookstove demonstration center to be sited in Saminaka. So she has put her community on the map. Many more women can do this once they become informed and equipped. And that's why we are saying that the seemingly little thing that we are doing now, we encourage every of these women to go back to their communities and spread the word so that once every woman becomes aware of how she can contribute, she will see it as an opportunity to put herself at the center of being someone who is driving change in very impactful ways.

³⁷ Women Environmental Programme (WEP), formed in 1997, is a non-governmental volunteer organization that seeks primarily to reduce environmental pollution through educating the community on environmental issues and empowering women to engage in civic participation, as well as improve use of the environment through policy and economics. ("Brief About Us." WEP. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://wepnigeria.net/index.php/brief-about-wep/>)

³⁸ Saminaka is a town in Kaduna state near the center of Nigeria. ("Saminaka." Maps. Accessed June 17, 2020. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Saminaka,+Nigeria/@9.1127433,6.7506372,16z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x104e9ff1320b359f:0x10cc2128fd7573d4!8m2!3d9.1127408!4d6.7554214>)

RA: Wonderful. What would you say is your relationship with these other organizations that are working on the environment or maybe feminist advocates and scholars in Nigeria?

OO: WISE is a part of the National Council for Women's Societies in Kaduna state chapter.³⁹ We're part of the Global Peace Women because I am a member,⁴⁰ and we're part of the Imagine Work in Nigeria⁴¹ which is supported by the Empowerment Institute. We belong to a couple of other organizations that are not maybe directly focused on women issues, but by being there. We're also part of the Just Energy Transition Coalition⁴² championed by Environmental Rights Action.⁴³ We're part of the Clean Cooking Alliance, like I told you. We're part of the Nigerian Alliance for Clean Cookstoves. I as an individual am on the board of a couple of other organizations, and I have quite a number of other organizations that I am mentoring.

RA: What about on the international scene?

OO: On the international scene, part of Women Leaders for the World program which is now How Women Lead. So we have an alumni group, and then we're part of World Pulse, Women's Earth Alliance, quite a number.

RA: I think Global Peace Movement is international too.

OO: Yeah, Global Peace Movement is international. And the Empowerment Institute. So others I can probably share with you.

³⁹ The National Council of Women's Societies is a non-governmental women's organization in Nigeria advocating for gender welfare issues across the country. ("National Council of Women's Societies." Wikipedia. Accessed June 9, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Council_of_Women%27s_Societies)

⁴⁰ Global Peace Women is a section of the Global Peace Foundation, which is a non-profit organization that promotes the value of femininity and women leadership in the family through networking opportunities. ("Global Peace Women: About Us." Global Peace Foundation. Accessed June 16, 2020. <https://www.globalpeace.org/issue/women/about-us>)

⁴¹ The IMAGINE Program is a global initiative that aims to empower women, particularly those dealing with social and economic challenges and in developing countries, through a training program designed by David Gershon and Gail Straub ("Imagine Overview." IMAGINE Program. Accessed June 24, 2020. <https://www.imagineprogram.net/>)

⁴² A just energy transition is an avenue of change that balances the needs of impoverished communities with environmental protections. These types of transitions involve promotion of sustainable and affordable alternatives to energy use. ("The Just Energy Transition." Panda. Accessed June 16, 2020. http://awsassets.wwfint.panda.org/downloads/jakobsteckel_2016_jet.pdf)

⁴³ Environmental Rights Action, founded in 1993, is a non-governmental advocacy organization in Nigeria focusing on environmental human rights issues. ("ERA - Environmental Rights Action." Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities, and Trade. Accessed June 16, 2020. <http://www.ejolt.org/2011/09/era/>)

RA: The other thing I wanted to ask you is, in other words we've heard a lot about feminism, global feminism, we talk about strands of it - what do you understand by African feminism for instance? Is there any such thing as African Feminism?

OO: I've not come across that.

RO: Okay, so you've not been involved in the conversation.

OO: No, I've not been involved in the conversation.

RO: Maybe I should ask you therefore in conclusion, to tell me your expectations and aspirations on how you think the world should approach the global climate change and its impact on women? I know you talked about women's health, the economy, so how should the world approach this climate change situation and its impact on women in terms of how we intend to address the challenges?

OO: I would say a lot of us, we started our work probably out of passion, out of interest and all that. We're just doing our bit. There is need to have targeted support for women and especially those that are taking on the cause to build the capacity of other women. There are certain maybe technical capabilities that may be still be lacking, so I think some of those kind of gaps can be filled by probably all these big organizations like United Nations. I know United Nations women's program is doing a lot, generally, but I for one have not had any direct maybe contact or support even though we've just also been listed, our organization has received the ECOSOC Economic Council,⁴⁴ what's the full meaning now. I think I'll confirm that and then share with you. So we've received that, and it's because we were able to find information about it. Some of all these things, a lot of women don't have access to those platforms where they can find the information that would further build our capacities whether in technical terms. All those things also cost money, like I told you that for a very long time I self-funded my work. So there should be more funding targeted towards interventions that support women or interventions that are primarily targeting women to address climate change.

RO: In Nigeria for instance, do you see anything happening in that direction you just talked about, enormity of the damage of climate hazards on women's health, women's economy, the family. Do you see anything happening at the level of the state of Nigeria?

⁴⁴ The ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) is the United Nation's platform for brainstorming and debate about sustainable development, particularly with regards to the environment. ("About ECOSOC." United Nations. Accessed June 17, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/>)

OO: Well, the much that I am aware was when the previous government decided to do an intervention, cookstove intervention, where there was a controversy around the nine billion naira stoves. What of stoves that was ordered I guess much of it from outside the country, and I'm aware that the current government has distributed the stoves now to state governments in Nigeria, and incidentally I was invited by the Ministry of Environment in Kaduna when they did the flag-off for the distribution. We were also marked to get some of the stoves which we haven't collected just yet, but the reality about those stoves is that so much advancement has been made beyond those stoves. So they may serve their purpose but not as what is in the market currently. And then I've been talking with an advocacy group. We've been trying to work out a way we could bring some of the key stakeholders, especially the donors, who have been doing different things because it's all pockets of things scattered all over the place. So we're trying to see how to bring all these people, donors, the Civil Society Organization,⁴⁵ policy makers together to just talk. Like a forum that will bring everybody to talk and share what they've been doing and then see how everybody can work together, especially to get governments buy-in. Because once some of these interventions and things are now supported by maybe policies, regulations, and legislations, at the end of the day over time it will just fizzle out. But when there are policies saying okay probably we have passed that era where maybe a woman or her family have excuse to say we don't have an alternative that's why we can continue to cut down our forest and our trees indiscriminately. But now there are alternatives, but how can these alternatives become accessible?

RO: Yeah, you are doing your own work in Kaduna which I know a couple of other states and some things happening in pockets of states and with the clean stove distribution, but do you think that conversation about clean energy, clean stove, sustainable environmental development is happening broadly in Nigeria?

OO: No, it's not. I think the best that is happening, aside from what we are doing currently, is what Environmental Rights Action is doing which is championing a coalition that they formed to support the concept of just energy transition. And to get communities or individuals, the people especially and when I say people every citizen, to own the process of that transition because a lot of times those voices are missing when such decisions are being taken. And because a lot of people don't understand why we should actually go green and begin to become more responsible because of capitalism. So all these things need to be deconstructed in ways that individuals, groups, bodies become well informed, become aware, and become equipped enough because the cost of some of these stoves are prohibitive for some families and all that. Different people, even banks can have a buy-in,

⁴⁵ A Civil Society organization is a non-state, non-profit volunteer organization that operates outside of the governmental and business/economic spheres. ("Civil society organization." Wikipedia. Accessed June 17, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society_organization)

develop financing mechanisms, which also the government can come up with whether you are subsidizing, and when I say subsidizing it is not these people who would get the subsidy it is the manufacturer that would get the subsidy so that they can continue to produce. So we don't want to say okay we're paying you for these stoves but go to the manufacturer and collect it. And that way nobody is shortchanging anyone. It has to be a collective effort. Everybody must play their parts, everybody must take responsibility. It's not time for exchanging blames or saying it's the government, it's the women, it's just has to be a collective effort. If everybody actually comes onboard and people become more informed. I think information is very powerful. Because some of the women, they tell you when they buy these stoves "I used to spend more before, now there's the savings I'm able to make. I can use it to buy clothes for myself. I can use it to invest in my business" and all that. So when people know that this thing is not something that would bring about deprivation but is something that would better their lots, better everybody's lots, then I'm sure that nobody would. And when you're talking about the government because ERA has also championed a cause,⁴⁶ a campaign that was called 'keep the oil in the ground.' There's a current one that is 'life beyond oil.' So, if we also don't begin to prepare for a time where some of the resources that we were are wasting or not managing properly, if we don't prepare for that time where probably they will not be in existence anymore or they will not be useful. Because a country like Norway is targeting becoming a country that does not use fossil fuel driven cars. They are transiting to electric cars soon. So I'm concerned if my country does not begin to take a look at those innovations that are happening. Because even this oil that we are talking about that Nigeria is fully dependent on would become, I don't want to say useless, but probably nobody would be buying it. So we need to begin to develop alternatives that would help us combat climate change and then help us also achieve climate justice where everyone is able to get the best out of what the environment has to offer us.

RO: Alright, finally do you think, from your own assessment, the women, the communities you work with are listening, are understanding, and then actually buying into this campaign?

OO: They are listening in. They are buying in. And more communities continue to demand for our work, demand for our intervention. But of course all this comes with extra financial cost and implication and all that, and that's why we're opening up our door to more partners, probably others who have the resources. We have the knowledge, we have the idea, we have the access to the women. Because to date our work has impacted over seven thousand women across Kaduna state. That's outside those, we have been able to reach in other communities. So every support we can get to sustain our work is very key to us because we cannot afford to stop what we are doing because we've seen the tremendous impact and transformation, it's hard on the communities of women that we've served thus

⁴⁶ ERA stands for Environmental Rights Action

far. And that's why our Women's Equal Learning Center is at the front burner of one of the things we want to achieve because having that space, I think it would be first of its kind in the world, and it would be women driven. I sure look forward to see that dream of the Equal Women's Learning Center become a reality. This I think will also further motivate a lot of women to do more. People will know that women really have something, a lot to offer in terms of solving a lot of these environmental challenges that seems has come to stay. Because we've seen the work, the impact of the work women are doing in their communities is having, and they're gaining attention. Our program is inclusive so we even have physically-challenged, people living with disability, represented also, and we have a woman who I love so much, she's in a wheelchair, but she's always driving the voices of women living with disability in our programs. I can tell you that the last training we had under the UNDP program we had a blind lady, we had a crippled, we had two deaf and dumb women, we had four physically challenged, and they are amongst those who are selling the cookstove products that we distributed to them in high numbers.

RO: Finally, anything else that you want to reflect on that I haven't said or asked our regarding your love and passion for the environment?

OO: Now what is actually crossing my mind is intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Targeting the next generation. We did a tree planting program fifteen years ago as one of our first initiatives in one of the primary schools in Kaduna state. And just this year, we went back later to say oh we've never even visited this school to see whether these trees survived or not. And we got there, everywhere was green. We donated waste bins to them then because they didn't have in their classrooms, and they've maintained that culture of having waste bins at school. It's neat now. If I were to give an award to the neatest public school in Kaduna state, I probably would give it to that school because it is lush green now, and people even come to hold their wedding events and things like that, and the school is making money from it. So even when we went back and we said do you want more trees, they showed us places where we can come and plant new trees. And we handed it over to the prefects in the schools, that's the highest class grade in the school, and then they planted the trees, and we gave them the task of nurturing those plants until they leave, and they can come back some years later to say I planted this tree and all that. So we're looking at targeting the next generation. From next year we probably will be working with teenagers, females, young females across communities. So the key word is intergenerational transfer of knowledge where we are beginning to hand over the capabilities of protecting and managing our resources sustainably to the next generation.

RO: But you do know that some young people are already involved, or what do you think about the fact that young people look at the United States where the young girl

is like championing this cause for global climate change and pushing the big powers to invest in environmental protection, what do you think? Are you excited?

OO: Yeah, I am excited because interestingly my niece who wasn't too aware of the work I was doing, she lives with her mom in the UK, she reached out to me a couple of weeks ago. She's just eight, and her mom told me that she wanted to speak to me so I got a Whatsapp call with her and she said "Auntie, I want to apply to be on the eco committee in my school". So I asked the mom to send me the document. She sent it to me, and I looked at some of the questions because it was indicated on the documents that an adult could guide them to answer those questions. So I put down my thoughts in the light of what I feel was good at her level, and then I decided to interact with her to have her feel about what she knows. And I was wowed by what she knows. The last question on that application form is 'if you were an animal, what animal would you be?' and I had eagle in mind. Interestingly I had eagle or lion. A lion because a lion is courageous and can boldly spread the word and get people to take responsible actions for the environment. And then an eagle because an eagle could soar high, an eagle is a strong bird, you need strength, vitality. You need to be resilient and spread the word because change doesn't come that easy. So you must stand your ground and if you believe in the cause, you must stand for it. And so I asked my niece if you were an animal, what would you be, and she said an eagle. Why an eagle? She said so she could fly around the world and see what people are doing to the environment. So we've just had another conversation, and I think you're supposed to address the assembly in the school. So she was actually selected as one of the eco committee members, and one of the things we jointly wrote down was her Auntie is a passionate environmental advocate, and she knows she can continue to draw inspiration and be guided by her Auntie to champion the cause she believes in.

RO: Wow, thank you so much, Miss Olanike. It's been worth the while, and this interview is completed this day November the 10th, 2019. We appreciate you, and we look forward to working with you maybe in the future or in coming days, you said you don't like to use the future. We wish you well in your work.

OO: Thank you so much. I wanted to say to every woman, every young lady, including men and young males who have an opportunity to watch this interview, just help us spread the word that it is our collective responsibility to make sure that our environment thrives and we get the best out of it. Thank you.