

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

SITE: NIGERIA

**Transcript of Interview with
Aisha Yusuf
Interviewer: Elisha Renne**

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Aisha Isa Yusuf was born on February 14, 1992 in Kano, the capital of Kano State, Nigeria. She first attended primary school in Kano and continued her education at Bayero University Kano where she received a Bachelor of Law degree in 2014. She then attended the Nigeria Law School, Bagauda-Kano, where she studied federal and Islamic law, graduating in 2015. She was particularly interested in legal cases involving women. This work led to a broader feminist concern with working for women's rights in the Kano State Public Defender's Office as a lawyer with the NGO, Partners West Africa-Nigeria, office in Kano. She is also a member of the Federation of Women Lawyers of Nigeria and of the Islamic Lawyers' Group in Kano. Her most recent legal work which focuses on women's legal rights in marriage and sexual violence reflects her belief in the importance of educating women in Northern Nigeria about their rights under federal and Islamic law.

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.

Elisha Renne: I just wanted to thank you for coming. I appreciate your participation in the Global Feminisms Project at the University of Michigan. If we can begin: could you please tell me your name and how you would like me to address you?

Aisha Yusuf: My name is Aisha Isa Yusuf and I would like you to address me as Aisha.

ER: Okay, thank you very much. [comments that “it’s working.”] Just to begin: this is interview #2 and today is January 26, 2020 [she says 2002, which is an error]; and we are in the office in Federal College of Education, Kano.¹ I should call you Aisha? [confirms]. So, Aisha, could you tell me a little bit about your background, your life? You grew up in Kano so

AY: I’m Aisha. I started my primary school here in Kano—I was born in Kano State.² I attended Intercontinental School³ here in Kano and Kano Capital School. And then I proceeded—I had this passion of law in me, especially in helping women and children because of the culture and background we’re in, so I proceeded to Bayero University, Kano,⁴ where I studied law. I specialized in common and islamic law.⁵ And then to the Nigerian Law School⁶ where I obtained my B.L. in Law⁷ and got a certificate of practice as a barrister and solicitor in the Supreme Court of Nigeria. From there on I gained a little experience of prosecution from the Ministry of Justice, and I realized I don’t have the

¹ The Federal College of Education Kano (FCE, Kno), established in 1961, is a college specializing in education programs, and grants students teaching certificates. (“About Federal College of Education Kano.” FCE Kano. Accessed June 26, 2020. <http://fcekano.edu.ng/about.php>)

² Kano State is located in the central part of northern Nigeria. The capital city of the state is also called Kano. (“Kano State.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kano_State)

³ Intercontinental School is a British international school in Kano established in 1997. Students are accepted on an application basis; it educates students at the pre-school, primary, and college levels. (“About”. Intercontinental Schools. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://intercontinentalsch.com/about-us/>)

⁴ Bayero University Kano, founded in 1975, is located in Kano city in Kano State. It offers a range of degree programs, including education, engineering, life sciences, and law. (“Bayero University Kano.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayero_University_Kano)

⁵ Common law refers to law based on precedent. Islamic law, or Sharia law, is a form of religious law. With respect to estate inheritance, these forms of law generally limit the amount of property a widow can inherit from her deceased husband. (“Law of Nigeria”. Wikipedia. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Nigeria)

⁶ The Nigerian Law School, founded in 1962, is a legal education institution funded by the Nigerian government to allow lawyers to be trained in Nigeria, as opposed to England. The school provides education on Nigerian law to lawyers trained outside the country, and a practical legal training to aspiring Nigerian lawyers. (“Nigerian Law School.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_Law_School)

⁷ A B.L in Law is an undergraduate bachelor’s degree that allows one to become a lawyer in Nigeria and some other countries, including England. (“Bachelor of Laws.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bachelor_of_Laws)

passion for it, so I went back to the public defender office in Kano where we offer free legal services to indigents.⁸ Yeah, in Kano State.

ER: That's very interesting. I can see why you might not want to be in the Supreme Court. [yeah] I'm just curious—do they have a lot of cases that women come into the Supreme Court?

AY: Yeah, they do. They do. They do have a lot of cases for women. However there's just a fear and stigma of the society; it really bars them away from coming for their rights.

ER: Yes.

AY: Yes, that stigma and fear of the culture and traditions. Usually keeps them in silence. They suffer in silence. They usually don't open up because of the fear of stigmatization and the fear of the society.

ER: So as a public defender are you more likely to see women?

AY: Yes

ER: And they're more likely to speak about their problems?

AY: Yes we do. We organize awareness activities. We go to the villages in Kano State—into the—deep inside the towns and the old cities of Kano State where we create awareness for women and their rights.

ER: Wow. So could you give me an example of one time when you went to a village and how you were received and what you talked about?

AY: We were one time in Yariyasa community, that's a village in Kano, 30 minutes' drive away from the city in Kano State. We were welcomed warmly because we dress like them, we speak like them, so they welcomed us. And then we told them about their rights. Know your rights, you have the right under section 36 of the Constitution—the right to personal liberty, right to your own dignity, right to private and personal family life. You all have those rights. Right to a fair hearing. You have the right to be heard under the Constitution. Right against degrading treatment. Simply because you're a woman you don't have to be degraded or tortured, you know? And they were so happy! And we received a lot of cases there. We

⁸ An indigent is one who suffers from extreme poverty. ("indigent." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigent>)

even had a legal clinic there, where we situate our tables, and then they come and register their complaints. We do mediation, some of them there we called their husbands, mediate between them or the family—mediate between them. And so on. And we also had a case of one student in FCE, Kno. Her name is Amina and her parents died. The brothers refused her inheritance. They refused to pay her school fees for her.

They refused to pay her school fees, they refused the inheritance, and her father left a lot of property for her, so she complained in our office. We called the brothers and mediate between them. So she currently has graduated and they paid her school fees and they gave her all her money. We threatened them that we will take a legal action against them if they refused to give her her inheritance.

ER: Was her inheritance equal to the brothers?

AY: No, it's not equal according to Islamic law.⁹ She received half of what the brothers received. But still, because of greed, they refused to give her her own share [ER: exactly—even though they were getting more they were refusing her] And we did many cases of women in abusive relationships and marriages.

ER: You don't need to give a name, but if you could give an example of what happened and how you resolved it.

AY: The lady was suffering in silence in her husband's home, not knowing that even under the Islamic laws she can seek—she had the right to seek for divorce. So he refused to let her go to school, and he doesn't give her food at home, he used to beat her. An abusive marriage. She's even a friend of mine. So, I took her to our office. I didn't partake the case because of conflict of interest. My colleagues did, they took her to court, she requested a divorce, and she was divorced. She's now happy.

ER: Has she remarried?

AY: Yeah! [oh good] She's now happily married to another person. So we receive a lot of heartbreaking cases.

ER: It's not easy.

AY: Yeah, it's not.

⁹ According to Islamic law, the deceased's son receives double the share of property and money that the daughter does. ("Islamic inheritance jurisprudence." Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_inheritance_jurisprudence#Women_and_inheritance)

ER: You've told us that you first worked [with the Ministry of Justice as a pupil state counsel]—what did you do when you were..?

AY: We assisted prosecuting cases of the state. Assisted in giving legal advice to the police.

ER: So could you give an example of one case you were involved in?

AY: I didn't do much cases at the Ministry, I did a lot of assistance, I worked with the Deputy Director of Public Prosecution,¹⁰ so it's a lot of prosecution. But I didn't really have the passion for it. I prefer defense.

ER: Is prosecution mainly for cases that involve men or is it both?

AY: All cases that involve the state—against the state.

ER: So could you give an example of one case against the state.

AY: Yeah a murder case: homicide. One girl—a lady of 19 years mistakenly stabbed her brother and her brother died.

ER: How was it a mistake?

AY: They had a fight with the brother at night, so the next morning she was peeling pumpkin at home, so the brother comes out and started shouting at her. She didn't know when she used the knife she was peeling pumpkin with and stabbed him on his arm. So maybe she hit an artery or a vein and then blood started. Before you know it she removed her headscarf and tied the place for him, but he ran out of blood and he died. She was accused of murder by the state and was taken to prison. She spent some days in prison and I interviewed her in prison and she was crying "It was a mistake, it was my favorite brother", she couldn't help it. She was breastfeeding, she had a seven months old baby; so they would bring the baby for her morning, evening and night to breastfeed and then send the baby back. It's really unfortunate. So we applied for her bail, the state came to prosecute, because all offenses are against the state. So after a long argument we got her bail. She's now free.

ER: That's great. That was partly at your..

AY: Yeah.

¹⁰ The Deputy Director of Public Prosecution is the federal employee in charge of criminal prosecution by the federal government in Nigeria. ("Director of Public Prosecutions." Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Director_of_Public_Prosecutions)

ER: But that's not a common case, is it for women to be accused of murder?

AY: It is.

ER: It is?

AY: Yeah.

ER: Is it against husband or against?

AY: We have some against husbands, maybe the women in... We have a lot of them in Kano. Some of them are currently in prison, some of them are released on bail and the case is pending, maybe they poisoned the husband.

ER: Yeah, I think I read a case...

AY: There are a lot of cases of women, especially minors, who were married forcefully to husbands and they end up poisoning the husbands to death.

ER: To get out of the marriage.

AY: Yeah. We have a lot and a lot of them are minors under the age of 18.

ER: Because they were married before they could make any choice.

AY: Yes, yes.

ER: So are they changing that at all in families?

AY: They're not really aware of the consequences. So people in our community need to be educated on the consequences of all this forced marriage.

ER: These arranged marriages with young, young girls.

AY: Yeah. It's really unfortunate.

ER: We were talking to somebody last week who was—she's involved in girl-child education, and she's hoping that they can implement some sort of law or just advise

parents that they should let their daughters go to school through secondary school [AY: Yes]. And that way they would be at least 18 by the time they are married.

AY: Yes, that's a very good movement. Because they need to be of age—matured age—before they get married. A lot of consequences—health-wise.

ER: That was the other problem: VVF.

AY: Yes, VVF.¹¹

ER: So then when you—do you see yourself as a feminist? [AY: I do.]. Could you explain what that means to you?

AY: The rights of women—the rights of women. I don't know; I have this passion for human rights, especially women. Whenever I see women involved in a case it touched me. I got touched.

ER: How did you learn about feminism or women's rights? When did you start reading about it?

AY: In school, actually. Early! I learned it in school to become a lawyer. We were taught about rights.

ER: Okay, it was during law school. Did you get any encouragement from your parents to be...

AY: I do.

ER: Could you say something about that?

AY: Yes. I come from a very good background. I like my parents, and they support me in whatever I do. And they usually refer cases of women to me. They usually refer cases of women to me, because they know how I'm charged whenever I come across the cases of women.

ER: This is in the public defender's office—that your parents are .. That's interesting.

¹¹ 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 June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesicovaginal_fistula)

Do you see yourself as an activist? Are you involved with other women that are involved in an activist

AY: yeah, I'm a member of FIDA [ER: FIDA?] FIDA is the Federation of Women Lawyers.¹² It's an international organization and we have a branch in Kano, and I'm a member of FIDA. We also have the Federation of Muslim Women Lawyers, right here, and we defend cases of women; we give preference to cases of women.

ER: Is it pro bono? I mean do they pay you?

AY: Yeah, it's pro bono. They only pay a stipend.

ER: Could you say something more about FIDA? How you found out about it and how you got involved in it?

AY: It's an association here in Kano, there's a secretariat in Kano, and they handle a lot of cases; it's all over the media, the press. Whenever a case where women are involved, it's usually referred to FIDA. Female lawyers volunteer to take up the cases pro bono.

ER: That's what.. I think it was Mallam that was telling me about FIDA—it was very active in Kano.

AY: Yes it's very active.

ER: So could you tell me more about FIDA's specific cases that they've taken up or

AY: Yeah, there are a lot of cases. In fact whenever they hear about a case involved with women they automatically take over the case. And they defend diligently. They have an active chairlady here and an active secretary and other members.

ER: For FEDA, do you have meetings every month? Or how does that work?

AY: Yeah we have meetings every month and we also create awareness in FIDA, to women.

ER: So how do you do that?

AY: We usually meet them in their places, hold programs, or radio.

¹² The International Federation of Women Lawyers ("Federación Internacional de Abogadas", FIDA) is a non-profit, non-political association of women lawyers in Nigeria working to protect women and children by providing free legal representation, education, counseling services, and advocacy. ("About Us." FIDA. Accessed June 8, 2020. <https://fida.org.ng/about-us/>)

ER: Could you tell me more about the programs? The thing is that most people that will be watching this—they may not know where Kano is, so it’s better that you can really fill out the details so that they understand—you know,

AY: It’s an association of women lawyers who are out to help their fellow women and also children.

ER: Give me some examples of some specific cases that they’ve been involved in.

AY: Okay. There’s a case of one lady, Sa'adatu—she poisoned her husband too. Yeah, FIDA did the case and she was granted bail. Because she was married off at a very tender-

ER: Okay, this is an example

AY: of a forced marriage.

And there’s also a case—a very recent case—where a lady’s accused of stabbing her husband, I think on the thighs. It was the two fighting. However the husband was more injured. So she was detained in prison, FIDA went into the case, and they got her bailed too. Because she was, I think, 3 months pregnant and detained in prison, so FIDA got her bailed.

ER: Is she still married then?

AY: No [**ER: they got divorced.**] I can link you up with the chairperson of FIDA if you want.

ER: Okay. That would be great. ... We heard that the women’s lawyers organization in Kano [is very active]. So the Muslim Women Lawyer’s Association. Is that different? It focuses on Islamic law?

AY: Yes, mostly. For example, that my case the lady was taken into a sharia court,¹³ because maybe they thought she would be handled more strictly in sharia court--you know how our laws are. But strangely the judge also sympathized with her and gave her our bail. The father said that he’s the one to pay ‘diya’ - what we call blood money.¹⁴ He is the one to pay and he is the one to receive because they are both his children. So there’s no point of detaining her. The judge reasoned with him and set her free.

¹³ Sharia court is the court system tasked with upholding Islamic law. Cases in these courts are presided over by a judge (qadi), without a jury. The qadi evaluates evidence, establishes facts of the crime, and assesses verdict and punishment based on Islamic law. (“Sharia.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia#Courts>)

¹⁴ Diya, or blood money, is the alternative punishment to equal retaliation (a punishment analogous to the crime) in Islamic law where financial compensation is paid to the victim or family of the victim in cases of crimes of murder, physical harm, or property damage. (“Diya (Islam)”. Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diya_\(Islam\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diya_(Islam)))

ER: Are there other examples of Islamic law cases that are somewhat different than those?

AY: Yes, even the case of my friend I told you in an abusive marriage, we took it to the sharia court. Under the Islamic law, if a lady is not satisfied with her marriage, or is not happy in her home, in her marriage home, she can apply for divorce in the sharia court and the judge will grant it. She can only pay half of her dowry; yeah, she will give the husband half of the dowry and she's free.

There's nothing like staying in an abusive relationship. And a lot of women don't know about that.

ER: So is that one of the things that you're having workshops to inform women?

AY: Yeah, educate. Women need to be told, they need to be educated on certain rights. They don't know their rights. They are just locked in their homes without knowing anything about their rights and they have rights.

ER: Are some of these women—you say they are going to sharia court; do they have Islamic education?

AY: Most of them don't. Especially about their rights. They can have the basic Islamic education, but they don't know about their Islamic rights.

ER: Is there some way that—have you thought of some ways that could be improved?

AY: Yeah, maybe awareness for women. Creating awareness amongst women.

ER: But specifically how would you do that?

AY: Okay, you can maybe, there are so many women's associations. You can maybe meet the head, organize a conference, or a meeting for women and you can tell of their rights.

ER: Is part of the problem though that they don't feel they have the authority to pursue their rights? Or maybe they don't have the money?

AY: They're not even aware of the rights.

ER: Okay. So that's the first step.

AY: Yes. They are not even aware that such rights exist. So they need to be aware of their rights in order to pursue them. You understand? So knowledge is everything. They say knowledge is power. No woman will stay in an abusive relationship or stay with SGBV--sexual and gender based violence—if she knows of the rights she has. You have the right to personal dignity of human persons.

ER: what happens to the children then if they go ahead and get divorced? Say there are children from the marriage. Would that be a reason some might not want to-

AY: That is also another problem. The children ideally are supposed to be with their mom according to Islamic and according to common laws. But they usually do not leave them with the woman. The husbands usually collect the children from the women, which is very pathetic. It's one of the reasons why women stay in an abusive relationship. So if they know that they are entitled to their children, they will not stay. The judge will collect the children from the husband and give them to the wife, because that is what the law says.

ER: That's the Nigerian law.

AY: Yes, including the Islamic law. And he will pay maintenance for the children. He will be giving her maintenance fee, maybe every week or every month for maintenance of the children including school fees, feeding, and everything.

ER: For some reason I was thinking for Islamic law it was up to a certain age.

AY: For a lady: until she gets married. And for a gentleman—for a boy—until he reached the age of puberty.

ER: And then he goes and lives with his father.

AY: And whenever the woman is not available they can give it to her [the wife's] mother. When her mother is not available, her sister. When her sister is not available—unless she doesn't have all those people they will give it to the husband's mother—not to his wife, and not to him, but to his mother. But a lot of people don't know about this.

ER: Have you been doing things on television or radio?

AY: It can be very good. Awareness--it's part of our awareness.

ER: What have you been doing—what have these groups been doing-- on these media?

AY: So you know Kano is a very big city, and there are more important cases, so maybe if some groups can take up this, and create awareness for women and all this, it would be a very good idea.

ER: So the people that you're working with—do they have a common background with you?

AY: Yes they do actually. I work for an NGO—[ER: What's the name?] Partners West Africa Nigeria.¹⁵ So they decide to open a public defender's office in Kano because they did the court observation and they realized that most indigents—the vulnerable groups in Kano—don't have access to justice, don't have access, to legal representation in courts.

ER: What's the name of the NGO again? [Partners West Africa Nigeria] And where is it based?

AY: Abuja,¹⁶ yeah, it's based in Abuja, Nigeria. So they opened a public defense office in Kano.

ER: And when was that?

AY: In 2017.

ER: So fairly recent.

AY: Very recent. And so far we have 600 plus cases. We have dispensed of, like, 250. We have 10 lawyers, both senior and junior counsels.

ER: And they are all women lawyers?

AY: No, but our organization is a woman-- deliberate woman-led organization. So the administrator is a woman, most of the lawyers there are women. We have 3 or 4 men.

¹⁵ Partners West Africa Nigeria, also known as the Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, is a non-governmental organization in Nigeria with the goal of improving security governance and accountability for institutions in Nigeria. They approach this goal through research and community education, collaborative advocacy to promote citizen participation, and integrating enforcement of different government policies. ("About Us." Partners West Africa Nigeria. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://www.partnersnigeria.org/about-us/>)

¹⁶ 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>)

ER: Because sometimes the cases will involve men and women. That's good; that makes sense. Did you know some of the lawyers that are working now in that organization from your schooling?

AY: Yeah, I knew; some of them are doing private practice, some are from the Ministry of Justice doing prosecution and some are even working, lecturing, in schools.

ER: How did you find out about this Partners West Africa?

AY: They did a 6-month court observation here in Kano, and I took part in the court observation process. They observed the courts and they observed cases of the courts in Kano State. So from that, one of the suggestions or recommendations were that most people, especially the indigent people, don't have access to justice. So that's why they decided to open a public defender's office in Kano, where they provide free legal services to indigent—only indigent—persons. And it's totally free.

ER: That's so great! How did they—how did you begin working for them? Did you have to apply?

AY: I applied, they interviewed me, and then they recruited me.

ER: That's really interesting. I didn't know about that organization. What do you think will happen with the organization in the future? Do you think it will continue or?

AY: I hope it will, because they are doing a very very good work in Kano. Our landmark case was that of Baby Kadija, I don't know if you heard about the case. **[ER: No, please tell us about this case.]** It's our first case in the public defender's office. A girl—a six months old girl—was raped here in Kano. Her name is Kadija? So we took out of the fundamental aspect of the case. After we did a fundamental human rights application for her—her right to life, right to dignity of human person. Yeah, and we succeeded.

ER: So was it the father? Who was it?

AY: The father's friend.

ER: And what happened to him?

AY: The mother took the girl to her friend's house to keep for her because she wanted to go somewhere. When she came back she collected the girl, the girl is unconscious, she was bleeding, so she took her to hospital and rape was established.

ER: And the child is okay now?

AY: She is not actually.

ER: What happened?

AY: She still needs medical assistance. The child cannot excrete; she can't pass stool unless they put her in hot water. She underwent so many surgeries, but she is still suffering. She cried whenever she wants to pass stool. It's all over the news.

ER: Okay, I'll look for it. I'm sure it was reported.

AY: But that was our first case. And we succeeded in the civil part. However, on the criminal part of it: you know we can't prosecute since we are not police, not lawyers from the Ministry of Justice. They lost in the higher court. And the perpetrators were set free.

ER: How is that possible? They didn't have evidence?

AY: They didn't establish sufficient evidence.

ER: And he was denying—he has to live with himself.

AY: Yeah, so, and part of a public defense, we have set free detainees in prison that have been detained for ten years, eight years, without trial.

ER: Criminal cases you cannot do.

AY: We cannot prosecute; we can only defend.

ER: Still, it's something. Those ones who were in prison without trial.

AY: For six years, you'll meet somebody in prison, detained for six years, for eight years, without starting his trial. Without taking into a proper competent court. So we applied for their fundamental rights, because according to the constitution he's not supposed to be detained for that time without trial. And they are usually set free. We take them back to their families, and they are always happy--very happy.

ER: That's terrible.

AY: Yes, it is.

ER: Could you say a little bit more about some of the other members of the organization? You said that the director is a woman?

AY: Yes, the executive director is Mrs. Kemi Okenyodo¹⁷—a woman. They work to improve citizens' participation. They do a lot of work at the head office in Abuja—access to justice, sexual and gender-based violence and so many things.

ER: So there's an office—the main office is in Abuja and then they have a branch office in Kano. Where else do they have branches in Nigeria?

AY: That's the only two offices, but they work across the country. I just came back from Jigawa.¹⁸

ER: Okay, that's right! That's why we couldn't meet last week—

AY: Yeah, we reviewed the administration of criminal justice law of Jigawa State?

ER: Wow. And that was through the organization? So exactly what did you find? What were your findings in Jigawa??

AY: It's so nice; they recently domesticated the Administration of Criminal Justice Act¹⁹ and we helped them in training the justice actors on the law—the police, the ministry of justice lawyers, the court registrars and the judges. So after training them we realized that there are a lot of loopholes in the law, so we went back last week and reviewed the law with the justice actors to suit the needs of the state.

ER: So could you give me an example of one loophole?

¹⁷ Kemi Okenyodo is the founder and Executive Director of Partners West Africa Nigeria. She has law degrees from University of Lagos and Nigeria Law School Abuja, and has done significant work with NGO management and litigation practice. ("Kemi Okenyodo." Partners Nigeria. Accessed June 26, 2020.

<https://www.partnersnigeria.org/team/kemi-okenyodo/>)

¹⁸ Jigawa State is located in the northwest of Nigeria, bordering Kano State. ("Jigawa State." Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jigawa_State)

¹⁹ The Administration of Criminal Justice Act, put forth in 2015, combines the Criminal Procedure and the Criminal Procedure Code to the effect of preserving the existing criminal justice system and adding provisions with the goal of improving its efficiency. The purpose of the act is stated as protecting the community from crime while protecting the rights of all individuals in Nigeria. (Akinseye-George, Yemi. "An Overview of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015." SAN. Accessed June 26, 2020.

https://nji.gov.ng/images/Workshop_Papers/2016/Refresher_Magistrates/s02.pdf)

AY: The law doesn't have a table of contents.

ER: So you wouldn't know how to..

AY: There are a lot of vital corrections, punctuations, the language...

ER: So this is the document. I was wondering about Jigawa..

Do you perceive there is any kind of relationship between your work as a lawyer or barrister and any kind of scholarship? Do you publish or do people in the organization you work with, do they publish, or work with academic scholars?

AY: They actually have trained us in so many aspects. After engaging our services-- they have trained us in mediation. We're currently certified mediators. They also trained us in client interview and counseling. You need to know how to even interview.

ER: So who exactly trained you? Somebody in law school?

AY: No, the organization sponsored it. They have—they're partnering with so many organizations like the Partners Global.²⁰

ER: Partners Global—what's that?

AY: Washington DC—it's an organization.

ER: Partners Global gave you instruction or helped—gave you some training in interviewing.

AY: Yes—client interviews, mediations.

ER: So what's something they learned from client interviews—like I'm interviewing you now! You can evaluate me.

AY: It really helped because we interview clients that have gone through a lot of trauma. Some will not even speak. Some keep crying. You have to calm them down, provide them with tissue, allow them to cry out, you know, have the patience of listening. You need to have the patience of listening. And then the skill of eye contact. You need to have eye contact

²⁰ PartnersGlobal is an organization that uses a global network to connect local change makers to each other and larger organizations to improve conflict resolution, protect human rights, and empower communities to enact sustainable change. ("About." PartnersGlobal. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://www.partnersglobal.org/about/our-vision-and-mission/>)

with your client to establish whether he's telling you the truth or not. And also to indicate that you are with him. You know. Exchange feelings. So, many things.

ER: That's true—all those things are true for doing a good interview. So are you thinking about ever going back to the university and maybe teaching a course? I don't know if you're allowed to do that.

AY: Yes, yes. Maybe, because in this part of the country you can practice your law while teaching. If I can get the opportunity, I will.

ER: It would be good to encourage more women to get involved in law in various ways. How do you evaluate the feminist movement, or women's movement in northern Nigeria, let's say northern Nigeria first.

AY: It's really not easy.

ER: Can you explain

AY: With our cultures, traditions, a lot of things, they will be like: "She's a woman, She's a woman. She doesn't have a voice, she can't be listened to"

ER Is this in village, or in Kano?

AY: Even in the cities, that's always been the notion of the men. Because you're a woman, you don't have a voice.

ER: Is there anything—is there any way, say, portions of the Koran—that sort of counter that attitude? It supports it?

AY: No, it's not supportive. It's just the cultures and traditions.

ER: So it's not necessarily the religion...

AY: No, it's not.

ER: It's Hausa, Fulani, society's social values²¹

²¹ Hausa and Fulani are two of six major ethnic groups in Nigeria, both concentrated in the northern part of the country. The two ethnic groups are often considered to be one group due to close relationships between the two tribes. Both groups primarily practice Islam. ("Culture of Nigeria." Wikipedia. Accessed May 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Nigeria#Yoruba_Culture)

AY: The traditions and cultures which we need to do away with...

ER: You're saying do away with, but would it be more possible to think of others?

AY: Yeah, creating awareness.

ER: Do you work with men at all to create awareness?

AY: Yes we do.

ER: Could you say something about that?

AY: Because we always have this problem; there's one village we went to and it was a case between a man and his wife. We called the man, but he said he would not talk with a woman. So we had to call our male lawyers to talk with him.

ER: Were they able to...

AY: They were. The mediation was successful at the end.

ER: Did he ever meet with the women lawyers?

AY: I don't think so! (laughs). He protested that he would not talk with a woman. He needs to talk with a man.

ER: Do you think there's ways to work in the schools? Primary and secondary schools?

AY: Yeah we create awareness in secondary schools. There's one we did in ??[something inaudible] on Know your Rights, especially rape. We create awareness to them that you need to take care of yourselves, this is what you should do, this is what you should not do, and whenever a rape case occurred you should not wash the evidence, you should not keep quiet because keeping quiet will not solve the problem. He'll do it to another lady tomorrow. You need to speak up, you need to report to the police and so on.

ER: When you do this secondary school education

AY: It was really interesting. The girls were happy--it's a girls' school.

ER: OK it was a girls' school. That's what I was gonna ask. Do you ever do it at boys' schools?

AY: No we haven't actually.

ER: Do you think that might be worth doing? Or they would just make fun of it.

AY: It's worth doing but as I said, our organization is deliberately women-- so they prefer engaging in women activities than with male counterpart.

ER: Is rape a big problem?

AY: It is here in Kano. It is in Kano. A lot of our cases are rape cases—rape of minors.

ER: You know, even in the US it's a problem, and one of the things that men will say is that she was really asking me.

AY: And it's degrading.

ER: Is that one of the things that they say here? That the girl was acting like she wanted--

AY: Not really, actually, because they always rape the minors that don't even know how to act. Like the 6-months-old baby.

ER: That's very unusual.

AY: Some of them do it for spiritual...

ER: Please, I don't know, we don't--

AY: They'll say that they're --how do I put it?—maybe someone would tell them that if they rape a minor [**ER: a virgin**] they will get money or luck or something. So most of them do that for spiritual purposes.

ER: I hadn't heard that. Are there other women's organizations—you said that there's the Muslim women lawyers organization—is that throughout Nigeria?

AY: Yeah it's throughout Nigeria, even FIDA is throughout Nigeria.

ER: So do you meet in different parts of the country and discuss issues? How does that work?

AY: The leaders of the organizations usually meet, but the members usually meet at the local secretary.

ER: So you haven't really been meeting with any of the—Are there other women's programs or maybe not legal issues, but maybe health issues, or poverty-related issues, that you're somehow involved with other women's organizations?

AY: Not really.

ER: So your focus is on the law.

AY: Yes, on law.

ER: Connections to international forms of activism and scholarship globally? So you mentioned that one of the organizations—the PartnersGlobal—

AY: Yes, it's a global non-governmental Organization. They have offices worldwide—Partners Colombia, Partners Serbia, Partners Nigeria, Partners from so many states—you can Google it.

ER: Do you know how that connection started?

AY: I can't really say--

ER: PartnersGlobal—do you know when that started?

AY: Partners West Africa started in Kano—they opened the public defenders office in Kano.

ER: And PartnersGlobal? Is it recent?

AY: No.

ER: That one's been for a while?

AY: Yeah, their representatives trained us on mediation. And client interviews.

ER: Are there any other organizations that are linked with the organizations that you are most--

AY: Yeah we have stakeholders, we work with FIDA, we work with the Hisbah²² here in Kano.

ER: Okay, what's FIDA.

AY: FIDA is the organization of the Federation of Women Lawyers.

ER: Okay that one you told me.

AY: And we work with Hisbah here in Kano.

ER: Okay and Hisbah is just for Kano?

AY: Yeah, it's for Kano.

ER: It's for Kano, it's local police.

AY: And they report all sorts of cases to them locally. They are—they meet the grassroot people directly. So we also work with NBA, Nigerian Bar Association,²³ the Ministry of Justice, and the Legal Aid Council.²⁴

ER: What's the Legal Aid Council?

²² The word Hisbah, also the name of organizations in Nigeria, refers to an individual or collective duty tasked with maintaining norms of Islamic law by intervening to “enjoin good and forbid wrong.” (“Hisbah.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hisbah>). It is seen as the obligation of a state to make sure that citizens are following sharia. In Nigeria, Yusuf notes that there are Hisbah offices in most local governments, including Kano

(<https://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/www.odid.ox.ac.uk/files/Sharia%20-%20POLICY%20BRIEF%20TWO%20Final%20Version.pdf>)

²³ The Nigerian Bar Association is a non-profit professional association of all qualified lawyers in Nigeria admitted to the bar and licensed to practice law (“Nigerian Bar Association.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_Bar_Association)

²⁴ The Legal Aid Council is an organization in Nigeria that provides access to legal advice and representation to impoverished people in the countries, with the ultimate goal of protecting the rights of all people in Nigeria. (“Profile.” Legal Aid Council of Nigeria. Accessed June 26, 2020. http://www.legalaidcouncil.gov.ng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=111&Itemid=1960&lang=en)

AY: It's a federal government agency which provides legal aid. Because our organization is an NGO. So that is from the government. They however don't have the—enough manpower, capacity.

ER: FIDA is a state or it's a-?

AY: No, it's federal.

ER: Okay, that one's federal. Hisbah is Kano State.

AY: Yes.

ER: and the Nigerian--

AY: Nigerian Bar Association is also nation-wide, with a Kano branch here.

ER: It's very extensive. Could you give me some examples of a case that you learned from Hisbah?

AY: Yeah, they refer so many cases to us, because they don't really have the capacity to defend it, and the courts don't have lawyers, so they refer cases to us. And we also refer to them.

ER: So what's a case that they referred to you? Or a couple cases, examples?

AY: They mostly refer cases of—ah! remember—they referred to us the case of that student, of inheritance. That was referred to us by Hisbah. She went and complained in Hisbah. Because they have offices almost in each local government. So they meet the grassroots directly. Easy access. There's also the case of a lady whose husband forced her to abort her pregnancy. Hisbah referred it to us and we took it up.

ER: So what happened with that case?

AY: We called the husband and invited him to our office and we told him that abortion is a criminal offence, especially that it's against the wife's wishes. So we are taking them to court, if he's not withdrawing his statement. So he withdrew. And they are now living happily.

ER: Really? So she didn't get the abortion.

AY: No, she didn't.

ER: That's really interesting. That she was able to fight back. Because—my association with Hisbah, when it first started in Kano was about tuk-tuks,²⁵ and they didn't want women and men in the same tuk-tuk. That's what I think of when I think of Hisbah. But it seems their work is more...

AY: Elaborate.

ER: Do you have any other examples because they are really interesting.

AY: There are so many.

ER: Can you think of one?

AY: Most of our cases are matrimonial cases. Most of the cases referred to us by Hisbah are usually matrimonial cases.

There's also a case that was referred to us by Hisbah: the husband and wife are divorced, and the child is with the husband. So the wife—the husband's wife maltreated the child. I think it's a 3-year-old child. She maltreated him, beat him up, lashes all over his body from caning. So we took up the case, took the wife and the husband to court, and they were detained in prison for so many days.

ER: And was the child released to the mother?

AY: He was released to the mother and the husband was forced to pay maintenance to the mother.

ER: I think that's fairly common, actually, because the second wife resents the child.

AY: And she maltreated him in the presence of the husband. That's why they joined him.

ER: It's very complicated—people. So, this connection with Hisbah, for example, could you say something? What has it meant for you as a woman doing feminist activism law in Kano?

AY: The Hisbah has women too.

²⁵ A tuk-tuk is another name for an auto rickshaw, a motorized three wheeled vehicle used for urban transportation in Nigeria. ("Auto rickshaw." Wikipedia. Accessed June 26, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto_rickshaw)

ER: I didn't know that!

AY: They have women--a lot of women, and they also advocate on women's rights.

ER: Okay. Hisbah?!

AY: Yeah, they do. Maybe you have a misconception of what they really do.

ER: I think so. The way--sometimes it gets reported in the press. It makes it sound like it's more authoritarian.

AY: No, it's not.

ER: So they have women..

AY: Yeah, they have women there. So, we liaise with them. Whenever they can't handle a case they forward it to us.

ER: That's really interesting. You see, I'm learning a lot by doing these interviews. Maybe it's not true, but I'm just wondering: if you're thinking about feminism in a global sense, different feminists from different parts of the world have different views about what's important and what's important for women's rights. Could you say something about that? How you see the position of Nigerian feminists, for example, compared with feminists in Europe or the US or someplace.

AY: We all have peculiar problems. Each country has a different problem, each woman in every country has a different problem. And each varies. So maybe your rights may be different from other country's rights. Ours might be rights to education, you know, rights to legal access to justice for women, and so on.

ER: What about equal pay—does that come up as an issue or that's not really--

AY: Yes, but you know with cultural and religion differences that one cannot be...

ER: That one is different.

AY: Yeah. But the basic rights --at least rights to health—access to health care, access to education, access—we're really left behind. We're really left behind. Access to health care,

access to education and access to justice. We need that before delving into other issues. These are more important than equal—yeah.

ER: Equal pay. I see your point. I think it's really wonderful work that you're doing. I'm really impressed, because honestly I didn't know much about—I don't—my own work is about various things but not law.

AY: Yes.

ER: Is there anything that you wanted to ask me or have any comments about this project?

AY: What do you do here in Nigeria about access to those things for women? Is it all about educating them or what do you intend to advocate?

ER: The program itself—this global feminist program—is going to be online. And this interview will be available to anyone in Nigeria who can access the website, so it's a way of showing—we have interviews with women from China, we have interviews with women from Brazil, all over the world. And so people can watch it—women in particular can watch it and see what the different [AY: yes, that's very good] issues are for women in different parts of the globe. It's not going to—it's not an activist program in the sense that we'll be changing women's—but again it's about education.

AY: Yeah. And knowledge is power.

ER: And at the University of Michigan they will be using them in teaching classes. As a way of expan—because in the US, people can be very narrow in their perspective. They tend to see—it's a big country, so they tend to see: well, look at this, this, this—but if they see it in its global context it puts some of their issues in-- and gives them some perspective. [yeah, great] And I'm hoping Nigerian students will be able to do the same thing. [I hope so] See interviews from China, from Brazil, from many different countries.

AY: from the States.

ER: Thank you very much. We're really grateful for your taking the time to meet with us.