

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

**SITE: Nigeria**

**Transcript of Hyeladzira James Mshelia  
Interviewer: Ronke Olawale**

**Location: Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States  
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**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.

**Hyeladzira James Mshelia** is a Programs Associate at Connected Development with technical and programmatic management skills in designing and implementing gender equality, environmental and climate - related projects, policy influencing, and WASH campaigns in Africa. In a country where corruption thrives and accountability and transparency are reprehensible, her role in CODE spurs transparency and accountability in governance while urging citizens to track and monitor government projects in their communities. In CODE, she has over time continuously led strategic campaigns that address issues affecting women and girls including gender-responsive budgeting, girl-child education campaigns, and campaigns to eliminate all forms of violence targeted toward women and girls. As an activist whose work affects women and recognizes gender equity issues, Hyeladzira was recently selected as a 2023 Twink Frey visiting Social Activist. Hyeladzira has a Bachelor's degree (B.Sc) in Environmental Biology which she has used to develop targeted programs/ interventions on environmental sustainability and climate action. Passionate about promoting the culture of environmental Sustainability in Nigeria and West Africa to achieve SDGs 13, 14, and 15, Hyeladzira is part of the Climate Reality Leadership Corps, a global network of activists and influencers who advocate for climate crisis and justice. She is a member of the World Economic Forum; a Global Shaper with the Abuja hub where she is the grants manager and co-chairs the "Abuja Dialogue Series" aimed at policy development from community/stakeholder engagement, mobilization, and dialogue. She was a delegate at the Nigerian International Secondary Schools Model United Nations (NISSMUN) Conference where as a representative of the United Nations representing Slovakia, she deliberated discussed and debated the country's adaptation to a recycling-friendly, zero-waste circular economy and how imperative it is for her to sign the Paris Agreement. Hyeladzira also has experience in developing and influencing communication interventions through data storytelling and strategic use of program-related information advocacy for both developing and influencing communication interventions through data storytelling and strategic use of program-related information for advocacy for non-profit and profit organizations. She has consulted for the likes of Plan International to design and develop USAID E-WASH toolkits for E-WASH media and CSO partners in five States respectively She has been featured on various international platforms where she spoke about discrimination, inequality, and sexual harassment (OXFAM Novib Wall of Voices), World News Today etc.

**Ronke Olawale: Hello, my name is Ronke Olawale. I'm a PhD student in social work and anthropology here at the University of Michigan, and I'm a part of the Global Feminisms Project. This project is part of our multi-site international project sponsored by the University of Michigan. Our goal in undertaking these oral histories is to create and preserve conversations with women whose activism and scholarship has contributed in critical ways to issues that are important to women. I thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project today. We are going to spend about an hour talking about several topics, and this interview is being recorded from Duderstadt Center here at the University of Michigan. We will start by talking about your life and how you became involved in the work that led up to the work that you're doing right now, your thoughts and insights about your work and the context of the women's movement, and the connections you see between your work and those of activists in other parts of the world. First, we're going to start with a question. I will ask you about how you're doing today. I would like you to introduce yourself and pronounce your name the way you would like it to be pronounced, and do a spell check so that we don't misspell your name. Just introduce yourself briefly so that I get to know you. Before I go to my questions, do you agree to participate in this interview today?**

Hyeladzira James Mshelia: Yes, I agree to participate.

**RO: Thank you so much for your consent.**

HJM: Thank you.

**RO: What's your name? Who are you? Can you just do a brief introduction of who you are?**

HJM: Good morning, Ronke. Thank you very much for the question. My name is Hyeladzira James Mshelia, and Hyeladzira is spelled H-Y-E-L-A-D-Z-I-R-A. I see you rolling your eyes. I know [chuckles] and Mshelia is spelled M-S-H-E-L-I-A. I could be addressed as Hyeladzira. That's fine. I'm a gender inclusion and environmental specialist. I have over time implemented and designed gender equality, environmental sustainability and policy-influencing campaigns in not just Nigeria, but across African countries in Africa.

**RO: Nice. Thank you so much. I look forward to this interview and all of the exciting work that you have done in Nigeria and in parts of African countries. First, I want background about your life. As you think about where you are today, I'd like to start by asking you about your personal history. Tell me something about your early years and what brought you to where you are now. What are the main commitments in your life? What does your career look like and what do you consider your most significant lifetime achievements professionally? These are a lot of questions, but I can prompt you at this stage.**

HJM: Okay. Great. Thank you very much, Ronke, once again. I would say that my journey is a dauntless and audacious journey. It's a journey or a story of courage, I would say. Just a little background as to how everything started. I'm from the Northern part of

Nigeria, Borno State precisely.<sup>1</sup> I started growing up in Borno. My dad was a police officer at that time, so he got transferred to the Eastern part of Nigeria, which was Delta State precisely.<sup>2</sup> We were forced to move with him. I think I was in primary four, I think. Yes, I was in primary four. Then I had to complete my primary school in Delta State and start my secondary education, and that was high school in Delta State. Interestingly, my sister and I were the only Northerners in our school at that time, so it was a little bit hard fitting in. There's this tag that comes with being a Northerner, I don't know, it's a Nigerian thing. They just feel like if you're from the North, you're not as smart or you're not as intelligent. They tend to call you Aboki,<sup>3</sup> which Aboki, by the way, means friend in Hausa, but then it's just a derogatory term that is being used to address Northerners.<sup>4</sup> I don't know why that has been happening, and that is constantly happening. It was really hard for my sister and I to fit in knowing that we were the only Northerners in the school. Eventually, over time everyone warmed up to us and it was a great experience. I was fortunate to go to a good school, so I never experienced bullying or harassment, or any of those things. But I would hear people talk about it, especially friends that would share personal stories. Like male friends would say things like, oh, they were abused by their nannies at a very early age and all of that, but I never experienced that. At that time, my dad again was transferred to Lagos State.<sup>5</sup> We're living in Lagos, but I was schooling in Asaba.<sup>6</sup> This for me is about diversity, about being able to live with people that are not from your tribe and be able to coexist. I lost my dad while I was in secondary school.

**RO: I'm sorry.**

HJM: Thank you. We were forced to move back to the North. And in the North, because there's so much religious bias, there's more-- you have to fit into the Northern culture. When we moved in was when the Boko Haram crisis had just started in Borno State.<sup>7</sup> Of course, when you have conflict like that, women and girls are often at the receiving end of such conflict. They are being the most vulnerable when it comes to their health, their safety, and their personal well-being. Women and girls are often at the disadvantaged stage of such insurgencies and conflicts. Trying to fit in back into the Northern system was a little bit hard for me again because I had become a little bit, I would say, more exposed. I had gotten acquainted with the Southern and Eastern culture. Again, it was a

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<sup>1</sup> Borno is a state located in northeastern Nigeria. ("Borno." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Borno>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>2</sup> Delta is a Nigerian state located in the south of the country. ("Delta." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Delta-state-Nigeria>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>3</sup> 'Aboki' means 'friend' in Hausa, but is used as an insult in southern Nigeria to refer to people from the north of the country. ("What is the The Meaning of The Word 'aboki'." Nairaland. <https://www.nairaland.com/7195384/what-meaning-word-aboki>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>4</sup> Hausa is a major language spoken in northern Nigeria. It is also spoken by the Hausa people in other neighboring countries. ("Hausa language." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hausa\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hausa_language). Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>5</sup> Lagos is a state in southwest Nigeria. ("Lagos." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Lagos-state-Nigeria>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>6</sup> Asaba is a city located in the state of Delta in Nigeria. It is the capital of the region. ("Asaba." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asaba>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>7</sup> Boko Haram is an extremist Islamic terrorist group in the Lake Chad region of Africa. Attacks led by Boko Haram since have killed thousands and displaced many more in northern Nigeria. (Brechenmacher, Saskia. "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram." <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/03/stabilizing-northeast-nigeria-after-boko-haram-pub-79042>. Accessed 7 May 2023.)

difficult task fitting in. Because of the religious bias at that time, admissions were given based on your last name. If you were a Christian, the chances of you getting to study what you want to study was really hard. At that time, I wanted to be a gynecologist. Not because I had interest in medicine, but you know how growing up we're made to understand that you can either be a doctor or a lawyer. Those were the courses that your parents would respect more, or you'll be more respected in the society if you're a doctor, or if you're called a barrister or whatever. I wanted to be a gynecologist, and I remember going to pick up my admission letter and I got environmental biology written on my admission letter. I began to cry, and I was like, "Oh, I didn't want to study this," and all of that" Interestingly, I always had interesting in climate change and environment right from a very early age, because I would attend Water United Nations conferences,<sup>8</sup> I would speak about climate, Paris Agreement,<sup>9</sup> Kyoto Protocol, and the likes of that at a very early age.<sup>10</sup> Gender was still not anything exactly I thought about venturing into, again because of the background, because you have to be a rebel to be vocal in the North. There's just this feeling that, as a woman, you're supposed to be submissive, you're supposed to just be quiet, you're supposed to take whatever comes to you. If you're being vocal, that means you're never going to find a man who's going to marry you. Men don't like competition, men don't like being equal with women. Those narratives were being sold over and over again. I knew that being in this space was not an option for me at that time, but I think I started to have a different thought and a different feel when the whole Boko Haram crisis, the insurgency in Northern Nigeria escalated. People were being killed, women and girls were displaced. In fact, my village has been completely burnt down, and people had to move into Maiduguri,<sup>11</sup> that's the capital, and they were residing in IDP camps.<sup>12</sup> When you go to those places, you see this pathetic situation that women and girls have to put up with. Sometimes the men were killed. So these women were widowed. Some of the girls were forced into child labor, child marriage, and they were exposed to conflict-related, gender-based violence. At that time, my friends and I were obviously touched by this, because it was happening under our nose. It wasn't something that we read on the newspaper or watched on TV. We began to contribute, put little funds together, trying to see that we get necessary help to those women and girls. We never intended to go to the camps and see them or have conversations with them. We just wanted to drop those things and leave. But of course, because of how sad the situation was, some of those women and girls insisted on seeing the people that were bringing those items to them. They wanted to have a conversation with us. It was hard at first hearing some of those things because I would

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<sup>8</sup> The United Nations Water Conferences bring together national governments to collaborate on solving problems related to drought and community access to safe drinking water internationally. ("United Nations Water Conference." Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Water\\_Conference#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Water_Conference#). Accessed 7 May 2023.)

<sup>9</sup> The Paris Agreement was created in 2015 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. Almost all countries (and the European Union) have signed onto this treaty, which requires members to work to reduce greenhouse emissions. ("The Paris Agreement." United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>10</sup> The Kyoto Protocol went into effect in 2005 and required signee countries to limit greenhouse emissions. It was replaced by the Paris Agreement. ("What is the Kyoto Protocol?" United Nations Climate Change. [https://unfccc.int/kyoto\\_protocol](https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>11</sup> Maiduguri is the capital of Borno state in northern Nigeria. ("Maiduguri." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Maiduguri>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>12</sup> Camps for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) are places where people displaced within their own country can stay and receive resources and support. ("Internally Displaced People." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees | Nigeria. <https://www.unhcr.org/ng/idps>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

break down crying. I would think that before you get to speak to women and girls, you would have some form of bravery, and I didn't. It was really sad hearing them narrate their experience, saying how they saw their spouse being killed, how they saw their children being killed, how their daughters are being forced or taken away. At that time was when, you know, about 276 Chibok girls were abducted in Northern Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> Well, thankfully now some were released, but I think we have about 196 that are still in captivity and the famous lady who was forced to convert to Islam and all of that. Some of those girls were released and they were brought back with HIV/AIDS, so many STDs. Some of them were pregnant at a very early age. You find out that girls at the age of 10, 11, were already carrying babies, so babies having babies, literally. Those were some of the conditions that those women and girls were in. It was a hard decision for me to make to start to speak for, to be vocal, to make sure that their stories got to the right authorities, because it felt like the media was just reporting everything else but what was happening in those places. It was a great challenge for me, and that's why, at the beginning, I described my journey as dauntless. I had to make up my mind to not be a coward anymore, so to speak, to just start being vocal and start speaking up for those women and girls. I began to fall back on resources that I'll find online, that other people would have had put together on how to advocate, how to be vocal, how to identify the strength in you because before you get into this line of job, you need to identify your strength and weaknesses and capitalize on your strength. Trying to find people I could speak to, people that had already begun this journey to talk to, but again, in Northern Nigeria, like I said, feminism is not something that was out there. Well, thankfully, now, people are taking turns and being more vocal, but back then, you would hardly find anyone who would go into that. So I began to read online. I began to speak to those women. I have an aunt who has an NGO that deals with women and reproductive health. I would go there to volunteer. If they're having campaigns in those local government areas, I would follow them, and see what was being done. Interestingly when I moved back to Abuja,<sup>14</sup> which is not central, I was opportune to join an organization called Connected Development, which is a non-governmental organization that empowers marginalized communities in Africa.<sup>15</sup> We empower them with things like information, data, and access to governments and most importantly, how to hold their government to account. We so much believe in transparency and accountability. I was able to join that organization, and I began to learn my voice. I began to carry out series of campaigns targeted towards women and girls.

**RO: Wow. That's a lot. Well, I'm going to take you back a little bit. Going to those camps, did the women, did they seem to you like they wanted to talk, and then were they getting any form of support? Then the other thing I want to clarify is that were they allowed to bring back their children? The ones that were released**

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<sup>13</sup> In April 2014, over 200 female students were abducted from their secondary school in Chibok by Boko Haram. As of 2021, over 100 girls were still unaccounted for. ("Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chibok\\_schoolgirls\\_kidnapping](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chibok_schoolgirls_kidnapping). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>14</sup> Abuja is the capital of Nigeria, and is located in central Nigeria. ("Abuja." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Abuja-national-capital-Nigeria>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>15</sup> Connected Development is an NGO in Nigeria that empowers people across Africa to hold their governments to account through creating campaign like "Follow the Money," developing technologies, and hosting community dialogues. ("About Us." Connected Development. [connecteddevelopment.org/about-us/](https://connecteddevelopment.org/about-us/). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

**by Boko Haram, for instance; did they come back with their babies or they left them behind?**

HJM: Falling back to your first question, of course they wanted to speak. They were so eager to just have someone listen to them. They just wanted to share, talk about their experience, not necessarily get help. Well, yes, getting monetary help and incentives were part of the things that they wanted, but most importantly, they just wanted to share and let people know that this is what is really happening. They would say things like, "Oh, let the government help us. This is what we're going through." "Our girls are married off at an early age." "My husband is being killed." They just wanted to share. I don't think that they got the necessary support from the government, I don't think so, or the organizations at that time, because if you go to Borno State now, you have 1,001 NGOs that are there. Non-governmental organizations are camping there. One would think they're taking advantage of the situation or whatever it is. We really don't know, but there was a hike in non-governmental organization in Borno State. The organizations that were trying to help this group of people, but I particularly don't think that the government really did anything aside camping those women and girls. You would think that psychosocial support is one of the most important things that should be given to those women and girls, especially the girls that were released from captivity. They should speak to somebody, most importantly an expert, about their journey, what they went through, and try and help them. Some of the girls were back in the camp with their parents, with the kids that they were having, and some were just not.

**RO: Oh, wow, so sad. You did say that the other girl, the very popular one was one of the few that refused to do what they wanted to her. She was asked to declare Islam and then she refused. She said she was not going to give up her Christian faith. Did she eventually do that because--**

HJM: Because she's still in captivity, the news is not quite clear, or I haven't followed up. So far so good; we know that she refused to convert. She was married off and I think she has a baby now if I'm not mistaken. That was when the whole initiative Bring Back Our Girls Movement began in Northern Nigeria.<sup>16</sup>

**RO: I just wonder if she's even still alive.**

HJM: That's what a lot of people say. They doubt.

**RO: It's really sad. It's sad what happened, and how things still are going on, but then I wanted to know a little bit about your thoughts and insights about how your work is in the context of the women's movement in Nigeria. Where is your work in the context of women's movement in Nigeria?**

HJM: Like I mentioned earlier, women movement in Nigeria or feminism in Nigeria is something that has just begun to gain, or begun to see daylight, I would say. Previously, a lot of women would not be vocal about things like that, but now a lot of people are talking about it. There are series of organizations that are lending their voices to help women get through, or address issues that affect women indirectly. I would say that my

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<sup>16</sup> The Bring Back Our Girls movement advocates for the rescue and return of the remaining Chibok girls abducted in 2014 by Boko Haram. ("#BringBackOurGirls Advocacy Movement." BringBackOurGirls. <https://bringbackourgirls.ng/about-us/>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

work cuts across addressing issues that affect women and girls, particularly around gender-responsive budgeting, girl child education campaign, and campaigns to eliminate all forms of violence targeted towards women and girls. There's a lot of collaboration and partnership with existing organizations that are already doing such work, or they're planning to carry out such advocacy targeted towards women and girls. I would say that there's a lot of collaboration and partnership with those organizations because I believe that one person cannot change the world. When you have more partnership, more people trying to attain a certain goal, or achieve a certain goal, then there's more impact.

**RO: Okay. Thank you so much. What specifically are the main commitments in your life?**

HJM: Maybe could you rephrase, please? How do you mean?

**RO: What would you say is the main focus of your work?**

HJM: The main focus of my work is particularly targeted towards eradicating gender-based violence. I know that it's a hard task. It's something that cannot be eradicated because you have to use multi-stakeholder engagement, multi-dimensional approaches to try and eradicate or curb gender-based violence, but I'm seeing how you can have men and boys who are involved, or who are allies in ending gender-based violence. For me, I always say that we spend a lot of time talking to victims or survivors of gender-based violence. Nobody really talks about the potential perpetrators, people who have the capacity to abuse women or girls. Nobody spends time talking to them. I always say that you spend your effort and your resources as women to train your girl child, forgetting that your girl child is probably going to end up with a boy child who was poorly trained, and then at the end of the day, you realize that you've really done nothing. I'm also trying to address girl child education in Nigeria because as it is right now, I think we have over 20.5 million out-of-school children, which most of them are women and girls from Northern Nigeria. Trying to see that girls are going to school and not just going to school, they remain in school. Trying to see whether there's an increase in girl child education, retention, and enrollment in Northern Nigeria and to see that there's a free and compulsory 12-year education for every girl child in Nigeria. Well, in some communities that we visited, we realized that education was indeed free, but there were levies that were attached to it, so at the end of the day, you realize that it wasn't really free. They're asking them to pay for uniforms, some levies on their examinations, and all whatnot. At the end of the day, parents could not afford some of those things. We know that in Nigeria, women are harder hit than men by poverty due to the nonchalant emphasis that is been placed on girl child education, poor access to healthcare, and all whatnot.

**RO: Wow. I see how you can be an inspiration to these girls, especially because you are young, and then they can easily connect with you and with your story. Thank you for the work you do. What does your career generally look like? Do you see you going?**

HJM: I don't know, I think I'm a late bloomer. It takes me some time to figure out what I'm doing. Maybe because from the start, I never really-- You know how some people just have a map of their life? They can tell, "Oh, from here I'm moving from point A to

point B." I don't think I have that map, to be honest. I take the day as it comes. For me, the most important part, or the peak, or where I would love to get to is on the international stage, be able to advocate for women and girls fearlessly. Not just doing it in Nigeria, and leading or being on a stage or on a platform with other influential women and girls. Talk about the likes of Amina Mohammed,<sup>17</sup> talk about the likes of Ngozi, just prominent-- Malala.<sup>18</sup> People who have voiced out and people who have fearlessly done so over time. I see myself probably in the UN advocating for women and girls on a global front.

**RO: Then so far, thus far, I know-- maybe the journey is beginning or you're on the journey-- what would you say is the most significant lifetime achievement professionally?**

HJM: You can call me biased if you want, but I'll say being in the University of Michigan has been one of my greatest achievements. A young girl from Northern Nigeria who didn't think her career was going to take a turn and finding myself here with such an opportunity, being in a diverse community, being in one of the best schools, has been an eye-opener, has been challenging, has been a fantastic opportunity. I tell you, I never thought that I would be here, but being selected as this year's or 2023 Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist has been fantastic.<sup>19</sup> It has given me the opportunity to guest lecture, something I will ordinarily not do. My work is always in the grassroots, speaking to women and girls, speaking to men from the informal sector, boys in school, girls in school, but then being in an academic space has been enlightening and it's given me an idea to go back to school.

**RO: Thank you so much for sharing so far. I'm going to ask you, maybe some of this might be repeating things you've said before, but I know you are able to handle it. What drew you to the work that you have been doing, and how did you first come to be involved in this work area?**

HJM: The first thing that, or what drew me first to the work I'm currently doing is the current situation in Northern Nigeria. The insurgency, Boko Haram crisis. I tell you, Boko Haram has actually been one of the major setbacks in girls' education. When you look at the meaning of Boko Haram, it means education or western education is prohibited for every girl child, so they're literally saying girls should not go to school. I found that challenging; why would you ask girls not to go to school? Wouldn't you want to have more researchers? Don't you want to have more girls who are proffering new technology, new innovation? For me, it was the whole insurgency and the situation in Northern Nigeria. And then being part of it, seeing that family, friends, relatives were immediately affected was challenging for me to have started.

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<sup>17</sup> Amina Mohammed is the current Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. She is a British-Nigerian diplomat and previously held the position of the Nigerian Minister of Environment. ("Amina J. Mohammed. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina\\_J.\\_Mohammed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina_J._Mohammed). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>18</sup> Malala Yousafzai began her work as an activist for education for girls at age 11. She survived being shot by the Pakistani Taliban in 2012 in retaliation for her activism. ("Malala Yousafzai." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malala\\_Yousafzai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malala_Yousafzai). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>19</sup> The Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist program is run by the Center for the Education of Women+ at the University of Michigan. The grant is awarded to activists to fund a residency at the University of Michigan. ("Twink Frey Visiting Social Activist Program." CEW+. <https://www.cew.umich.edu/advocacy-initiatives/twink-frey-visiting-social-activist-program/>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

**RO: How has your involvement changed over time?**

HJM: Coming from someone who didn't have an experience, who would just go to IDP camps and speak to women and girls, and now someone who has over time cumulated a lot of experience, I would say that I'm nowhere where I'd like to be, but I'm definitely not where I was years ago.

**RO: Has your work changed in ways that have been shaped by experiences of your life, for instance?**

HJM: Absolutely. Absolutely, a lot of experience. Not just my experience, experiences of women and girls that I have been opportune to speak with, especially victims or survivors of gender-based violence, people who will share their story. Sometimes you hear some of those things and you can't even go to bed. You're up all night thinking, wondering, "How can I help? What can I do? Am I doing enough? Why isn't the government saying anything about it?" It's so frustrating. It's so frustrating. Yes, I would say experiences of other people has also shaped my work.

**RO: I'm also thinking about the fact that yes, maybe not from a very wealthy background, but in some ways, you were privileged, right?**

HJM: Yes.

**RO: You didn't have those horrible experiences that people from your own part of the country had or are having, but then when you are in the space with them, do you think about your privileges, and how does that thought impact your relationship and interaction with them?**

HJM: I'm so thankful that I haven't had the opportunity to experience any of those things because I wouldn't pray for anyone, even my worst enemy, to experience some of those things that those women are currently facing or have faced. However, because I am from where they are from and I've seen relatives who are directly impacted by some of these things, I can't help it, but then feel like it would have been me. Inasmuch as I'm thankful, I still have it at the back of my mind that it would have been me, and it's Nigeria, you can't predict what is going to happen. It can be me tomorrow. We don't pray for that to happen, but anything can happen. Tables can turn and you find yourself in such situations. I'm really thankful that I'm not in that situation, but if my friends and family are affected, then I think I'm also affected.

**RO: You're affected. You're able to put yourselves in their shoes and connect with them and be able to think what they are thinking and also consider how they can be supported.**

HJM: Absolutely.

**RO: Wonderful. Thank you. I think, conversely, have you experienced any personal changes as a result of your engagement in feminist academic work or activism? Maybe more of activism than-- Have you experienced personal changes as a result of your engagements?**

HJM: Sure, I have. I've seen growth, I've seen more confidence, I've seen more courage. Ordinarily, I probably wouldn't be able to grant this interview. I'll be so timid and put back in my shell thinking that everything is just beautiful from where you are. Then when you step in the grassroots, when you're advocating for women and girls and you see some of their real-life experiences, it just makes you have courage. You're forced to have courage, you're forced to have confidence. I would say that I've been able to develop personal strength. First of all, you have to identify what your strengths are. When you want to venture into this line of career, you need to know what your strengths are and you need to leverage on your strengths, ensure that you create change and bring about necessary impact.

**RO: And what kinds of sites, the sites of action or intervention have you primarily focused on and why? I know you talked about working at the grassroot, but even grassroots is a broad field.**

HJM: Yes, it is.

**RO: What specific sites and why the focus?**

HJM: Before we begin any of our campaigns, we usually carry out the research, a baseline research to find out what the issues are. Women are underrepresented when you speak about political participation, especially in a place like Nigeria, where about 50% of the population are women and girls, yet we have a very poor percentage of women in government. If you talk about the just concluded 2023 elections in Nigeria, we had one candidate who was running for the post of the presidency, but then unfortunately she gave that up for a male candidate. That would've been a gleam of hope or light, but then unfortunately all our hopes were dashed because she had to give up that position. Women are underrepresented in governance. When you talk about access to healthcare, women do not have access to healthcare. We've run campaigns where we've seen women give birth on the roadside because, in their respective communities, they do not have a functional primary healthcare facility. They don't have enough healthcare personnels on ground. They don't even have electricity around care, so some of them have to trek or walk to neighboring communities. We've had instances of women who had passed, because they bled on their way, they couldn't make it. Particularly a woman who gave birth in I think it was Southern Nigeria, she gave birth on the roadside. Women do not have access to healthcare. There's gender bias in education, where you have a lot of out-of-school children as a result of early child marriage, child labor. If you even go to some of those schools, you realize that they do not have gender-responsive infrastructure. Those infrastructure are not convenient or they're not comfortable for the girl child. In the school that we went to, we noticed that the male student and the female student share the same bathroom. If those girls are on their periods, they have to miss days of school. We're talking about every month you're missing what, five, six, seven days of school. Sometimes they don't even have potable drinking water. They can't even clean up, so dilapidated--

**RO: Privacy.**

HJM: Oh my gosh, and privacy. Some of the schools don't even have adequate fencing, so if there's anything, community members or people from neighboring communities come into those schools, have access to those girls and they leave, they can't even report. In

some communities, we noticed that some parents, we are not allowing their children go to school because there's this cultural, traditional, and religious bias that hinder girls from going to school. Some people just believe that if you invest in a girl child or invest in the family, she's eventually going to get married into, so it's a waste of resources. Some girls in Southern part of Nigeria are being married off because their parents want to receive bride price. It's a way to bring incentives or funding into the family, so they marry off their children for how much? \$100. Girls who are starting off, who have potentials in life, are being married off. These are areas that I focus on, and most importantly for me, is gender-based violence, stimulating a nationwide movement that's aimed at ending all forms of violence targeted towards women and girls. We do that by engaging men and boys in informal sector, boys in secondary schools, in primary school, teaching them the basis of consent, setting up clubs that would help boys to be educated and be educated about their toxic masculinity, teaching them things about patriarchy, unhealthy relationship with women and girls. These are some areas that I focus on.

**RO: I think that's new, and I believe that that way, you'll have a big ground to break in that area. Now we're going to still continue on reflections on your work. What was your experience, for instance, as a woman working with the organizations and in your organization and even as you step out of your organization to do some of the work that you do. I believe that you meet other people, you meet men, but what have been your experiences?**

HJM: Tough. [laughs] Really tough being a young woman. Probably if I was an older woman, it would be easier because in Africa we have this respect culture. The older you are, the more people will tend to listen to you. If you have more gray hair, people will listen to you and think you're more experienced. Unfortunately, I don't have that. I'm young, and I'm starting off, so it's really hard to get people to listen to you, especially men. There was a particular place that we went to in a motor park trying to speak to the road users, talking about drivers, road users in general, teaching them about gender-based violence and how it's not okay for you to abuse your wife. Statistics have shown that there's a high risk of gender-based violence in motor parks, where women are trying to board vehicles, especially women with disability, they're being touched inappropriately. Sometimes these men are speaking to them, and they don't even know that she can't hear, but then they touch her inappropriately, they drug her, and all of that. We're having this training on this fateful day under the sun, speaking to the men, and then one man or one driver from nowhere just comes out and says, "You can be here from morning until night, but you see the issue of rape, I will rape my wife if I want to." Tell me, where on earth are you going to start from? We've had conversations where religious leaders, the likes of pastors, imams will tell you things like, "If my wife doesn't want to have sex with me, I need to take it by force because it's my right."

**RO: "I'm married to her." "I married her," or maybe, "I bought her."**

HJM: Oh, my gosh, yes, "She's my property." These are things that you would hear. Again, getting them to hear you as a girl, takes a lot of effort. You need to ensure that trust is being earned. You need to sometimes go to those communities, live with them. Let them know that, "You know what, I'm for you, I'm not against you. I'm not here to fight you. We're here to try and bring in an intervention that would favor you. Sometimes, it's a lot of work. Sometimes we're training the women and girls, and the men will storm into the training centers and say, "Oh, you're corrupting my wife."

"You're brainwashing my wife." "You're brainwashing my kids." It's really hard. Sometimes you have to invite them or have a different set of training for them to let them know that, no, we're not telling them anything out of the ordinary. We're just letting you know that if your wife is able to have less domestic tasks at home, then she will be able to go out and try and make ends meet and try to provide for the family. Imagine if you have two parents who are bringing income, you have more income. This means you should try and help your wife at home. You can do the basics. Nobody is saying you should go and cook, but if you cook, that's good, but then you can help take care of the children, pick up children from school. Ensure that she has lesser tasks at home just so that she's able to go out and make ends meet. Imagine if she has to go out, go to the office, or go for petty trading, still come back, cater for the family, cook, it's exhausting. A lot of times, these women are going through it. Their mental health is on a different level.

**RO: Wow. I think, I'm kind of concerned; the women themselves, how do they take this conversation, this campaign against how they've always had it? Do they see you as coming to disrupt the status quo, maybe disrupt their life, or like it's not your business? Do they have that kind of attitude or are they open to accepting this, and thinking a lot about how these things that you are talking about can actually improve their lives?**

HJM: It depends on the place. Nigeria is very vast, and Africa as well. It depends on the place. Some women are receptive, they are willing. Some just don't know how to go about it. Some of them are telling us, "Help us, but don't make it obvious that you are helping." Some are just saying, "It's not your business. You're coming here to spoil a beautiful family. We don't need that help." When women like that speak, you can tell that it's coming from a place of probably trauma. They've been used to it. They don't know any better. Sometimes we usually don't even force our opinions or our interventions on them. We just try to make sure that they see reasons. For the ones who are very receptive, we go all out trying to help them.

**RO: I know you talked about this too. How big is the issue of prejudice and discrimination even among your colleagues?**

HJM: Oh my gosh, it's crazy. I have been lucky to work in a very inclusive and diverse space, where we actually have more women in my organization. The chief executive officer is very intentional about recruiting more women because he is a HeForShe champion.<sup>20</sup> Then sometimes, even amongst colleagues, you hear things like, "Oh, she can't handle it because she's a woman. Don't send her to this community because she's a woman. She's too weak." Then sometimes you have to approach it with wisdom. You don't fight it. I think the greatest challenge is not even the workplace, it's the family you're coming from. Someone was telling me, a family member, that, "I heard that Hyeladzira is now one of those feminists. Let's hope she gets married." This is a conversation that a family member thought was okay to say. Again, like I said, everybody will see the change you're trying to bring. Not everybody will accept it. Heck,

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<sup>20</sup> HeForShe is a gender equity campaign run by UN Women. The project encourages men and people of other genders to support women in their gender advocacy work. ("HeForShe." HeForShe. <https://www.heforshe.org/en>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

even Jesus Christ tried to bring an intervention and not everybody was welcoming. You have to do your bit and hope that people will really see that it's worth it.

**RO: What's the significance of feminism to you?**

HJM: Over time, the narrative of feminism has been changed to fit different kinds of terminologies. Some people say feminism is trying to take back our rights. I get that. For me, feminism is not just equality, it's about equity, it's about fairness. I don't want to be told no, because I'm a woman. I want to be told no because I have probably tried, and they've seen that I cannot, I don't have the capacity. It's all about fairness, giving women and men equal opportunity, and then they should be judged based on their capacity and not because of their gender. I see feminism as that.

**RO: Okay. How do you define it? Do you have your own basic definition of feminism?**

HJM: Yes. Feminism for me is equity. I would say equity. I'm skeptical about using the word equality because whether I like it or not, I'm from Africa, and a place where all of this is shrouded by religious concepts.

**RO: Biases?**

HJM: Biases. It's difficult for you to say a man and a woman are equal. Again, I'm not in any way saying that, because we have our unique strength. I don't want to be a man. [laughs] I want to be a woman. However, we have our own individual strength that should complement one another. Again, there's now a movement about toxic feminism, where women are trying so hard to be so toxic and take up the entire space. No, I'm just about--

**RO: Let's talk more about it. Did you say toxic feminism?**

HJM: Yes.

**RO: Can you tell us about that? That might be new to a lot of us.**

HJM: Thankfully for social media, you get to see so many things from different parts of the world. I think there was a time, was it last year or two years ago? A lot of people will say things like, "I'm not a feminist. I just don't want to be associated with feminism." When you hear why, they'll tell you thing like, "Oh, women are now trying to exclude men entirely from the conversation." We talk about things like toxic masculinity, where men are excluding women. Now there is, maybe because the status quo is changing, maybe because women are now being vocal, there's no balance anymore. I believe feminism should be about balance. I know that over time, women have been discriminated, even marginalized, so it's okay for us to want to take the seat or something, but then there should be an equal opportunity. Remember that we're talking about equal opportunity. We're not saying that now that women are taking over, there should be-- more women, good for us. Because if you empower one woman, you empower the entire nation. If you educate one girl, you educate the entire nation, right. Then there should still be an equal opportunity. Men shouldn't feel like they're now on the

**RO: Left out.**

HJM: Exactly. Because see, if you speak to a lot of boys who are setting off their lives, they will tell you things that they can't even talk about it. They're being told to just keep quiet. When we go to school to speak to boys, I think the highlight for me is always the male students being so excited saying things like, "Auntie, I'm so happy that you're bringing this intervention for us because a lot of times there are clubs only designated for the female students and we're always looking like, 'When is it going to be our turn?'" When we're having interventions and we tell the females to excuse us, they're so excited. Oh, for the first time, there's an intervention that targets only men and boys. They start to tell you things that you didn't even think a male child goes through. For me, feminism is about creating that balance in the system. There should be a balance. If we're saying we have about 50% of women in the world, then there should be a balance.

**RO: Okay, so 50% women, 50% men. We are not saying women should take over, right?**

HJM: Yes. Women can't take over in some aspects because over time, like I said, we've been marginalized, but we shouldn't take over in a toxic way. We shouldn't take over in a way that the male child is now being excluded entirely. There should be some form of balance.

**RO: So that we don't begin to perpetrate the same things we are fighting.**

HJM: Fighting against. Exactly.

**RO: Thank you. Now it's clearer. Would you consider yourself a feminist, therefore?**

HJM: Yes, I will consider myself a feminist. I will consider myself a feminist. Way back I would've said no, I would've shied away from it. Now I think that it's about time. I would consider myself a feminist because I believe that I'm fighting for a true and good cause, so yes.

**RO: All right. Thank you. Then again, we're moving to a different level of experience with the organization. Can you tell me about your experience and the strategies you use when you're working, or when you're working with your organization, your experience and the strategies that you use when within the organization and maybe without, when you go out to do your work on even working with other organizations because you collaborate with other organizations?**

HJM: For instance, if you have a campaign, one of the first things that we do is try to go on an advocacy visit. Trying to familiarize ourselves with our stakeholders because a lot of times, you cannot just impose your opinion or your intervention on these people. You have to identify the key and influential stakeholders in a particular community or even within the government. There's a particular way that the government perceives our organization because we're all about transparency and accountability, which I mean the sector or the government isn't so transparent or accountable; they always see us as coming for them. You have to have a familiarization visit with them understanding what

has been working, what isn't working, and what needs to work in those communities. Then we begin to map out our interventions to identify other stakeholders. For instance, media, we work a lot with media. We have identified the strength of media to amplify and disseminate our work. Oftentimes we go on radio, we use a lot of traditional radio to try and get the message down to the people in the community because some of them don't understand English. We have to use different languages. Exactly. Dialects, yes, to try and reach hard and far to reach communities. Then we begin our campaign; we use different approaches, and we always try to reinvent the wheel as we're campaigning. Initially, when we're mapping out our strategies, we have a different perception. Then when we get on the field we realize that it's really different. What happens if those people don't accept your intervention? What happens if they're not willing? You have to change your dynamics. You have to change and we strategize, go back to the thinking board, involve team members. Partnership and collaboration has always been something that has worked for us over time. We partner with organizations just so we don't replicate or we're not doing the same thing over and over again without any results. We try to leverage on each other's strengths to implement or carry out our various and different campaigns.

**RO: What are the major issues that you focus on?**

HJM: We focus on addressing gender bias in education. Gender bias in education. We're trying to see that women participate in government, we're trying to see that more women are being elected. We're trying to see that more women are being represented in various level of governance, be it local, state, or whatever. We're also trying to see that women have access to healthcare facilities. We're also trying to see boys and men joining the fight against gender-based violence. interventions that we usually focus on in my organization. We're trying to see that policies are being institutionalized at various level of governance, be it national or subnational level of governance. Passing or we're advocating for policy. For instance as a result of some of the campaigns that we've run, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act<sup>21</sup> was passed in Northern part of Nigeria in Kano State.<sup>22</sup> It's an act that speaks to victims and survivors of gender-based violence, saying that men and women can be raped. If you're being raped, what are some of the things that we need to do? Even though some states have passed some of those acts, they're hardly being implemented. We advocate for the implementation of those policies.

**RO: Thinking about northern Nigeria, what are those specific and hardcore cultural biases, cultural practices that you work to address, and how are you doing it?**

HJM: I would say traditional, religious, and cultural bias have been the most difficult. It's all about behavioral change, which is the most difficult part of the work that I do. Imagine speaking to somebody who has-- who is probably 40 years or 50 years-- who has lived all their life in a misogynistic environment. It's so hard to try and change those

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<sup>21</sup> The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act was passed by the Nigerian government in 2015. The bill works to provide protections against gender-based violence and violent human rights abuses. ("Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015." Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence\\_Against\\_Persons\\_\(Prohibition\)\\_Act\\_2015](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence_Against_Persons_(Prohibition)_Act_2015). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>22</sup> Kano State is located in northern Nigeria and is the most populated state in the country. ("Kano State." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kano\\_State](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kano_State). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

conceptions. What we do is we try to make sure that trust is being earned by both parties. We try to show them or let them know how different it will be if they take a different-- We're not in any way saying, "Don't practice your religion," or, "Don't practice your culture"; however, see from a different lens. We do a lot of mentorship where we, for instance, for dealing with boys, we take them to organizations that are being led by men who are doing well. We let them know that, "Okay, you know what? If you do not abuse a woman, if you don't harass a woman, you can probably be like Obama, for instance. You can be like some prominent person who is doing very good work that they're doing." We give them access to women in political positions, especially for those who want to participate in politics. Let them speak to them about their challenges, how they were able to overcome some of those challenges. We do a lot of mentorship. We do a lot of talking, letting them know, or letting them identify what they have in them. Because some of them feel so worthless, especially victims and survivors of gender-based violence; they feel like they have nothing else to offer. Then you find that there's a high rate of suicide. Some of them want to take their lives. They rather not stay in that situation. We do a lot of therapy, psychosocial support, and all whatnot trying to change those norms, which is very hard. Sometimes it takes years. We're currently still running those campaigns. It's something that might take forever to achieve, but I tell you, baby steps just makes the entire process seamless. Every day you go, you speak to these people, you give them real-life situations. You take them out of their situation to see what life can be if they're living in a different context or vicinity and yes, that helps them to have a different mindset.

**RO: I'm here busy thinking about the whole culture of early marriage, child labor, girl child education, and just thinking, how are those specifically being addressed? Who do you work with? Because going to the people alone, and then because you do a lot of policy stuff, but then do you have people that you've connected with that are in policy-making decision positions and can collaborate with implementing some of these policies, and how is that going?**

HJM: We've been opportune to meet with legislators, people in government, the media most importantly, collaborating with organizations who have, overtime, tried to carry out those campaigns just so we don't replicate efforts. In the community, the most important stakeholder for us would be, maybe the youth leader, religious leaders, traditional leaders, because there's high rates of community members listening to those group of people. Influential people like the market women-- we try to seek their buy-in and ensure that they understand what we're doing. It's easier when we get those people on our side. Having, for instance, a pastor or an imam of a mosque on our side. We encourage them to use their platforms to disseminate some of the things that they've learned, to try and encourage the members, to provide safe spaces for women and girls in those places, so it's easier for us to address some of those early marriages, child labor through key and influential stakeholders such as religious leaders, traditional leaders, legislators, women in government trying to provide mentorship for other people, and the likes, and media. I will always emphasize on media. There's so much power in media.

**RO: I do understand how a lot of issues can be politicized, and we know that these things are primarily enshrined in religious doctrines. How are the religious leaders, especially because it's northern Nigeria and it's more like Islamic, how**

**are they responding to some of these things? Because they are going to tell you that, "Oh, it's our-"**

HJM: Culture.

**RO: "-our Quran, our religious culture allows us to marry five wives, and throw them out anytime we are not happy and marry another one."<sup>23</sup> Even the whole idea of VVF, vasicovagina, and-**

HJM: Fistula.<sup>24</sup>

**RO: Fistula, and when they get babies impregnated and during child labor, they begin to leak after childbirth. All of the things that go into labor. Then, once these girls are leaking and they can't have sex with them again, they kick them, right, and they pick different girls, and they cover it up with what their religious doctrines provide. As even enshrined, like they would tell you in their religious laws and even-- What do you call it? the Quran. How are they responding to? Do you think they are making progress? They are working with people generally to try and see how things can really change. Are they disposed towards seeing changes? I think that's the big question.**

HJM: It is hard, because-- look, I wouldn't lie to you. I don't think they're making much progress, to be honest. I don't think so. Because, for instance, the penal code in northern Nigeria, in the penal code, it's okay for a man to inflict harm on his wife as long as he's trying to correct his wife. You can use a sharp object to harm your wife, you can rape your wife, as long as you're trying to correct her. Again, in all of the laws and policies that we have in Nigeria, rape between a man and a woman has not been clearly spelled out. As a woman you can't go to the court and say, "Oh, my husband raped me." They will laugh it off. They will say, "This is an issue between your husband and your wife, settle it--"

**RO: In your family.**

HJM: Exactly. Sometimes you realize that the police doesn't even have the capacity to respond to some of those cases. Anyway, back to the religious leaders: it's hard because during the training you hear things like, "Why was she wearing what she was wearing?" There's the culture of victim blaming. I don't know if we're going to get any headway with that, because you're trying to tell them, "It's not about what the woman is wearing, it's not about where she was, it's about you as a person." "If you cannot control yourself, then that means you going to go around sleeping with everybody." They say things like, "Oh, it's okay for her to be raped," or, "It's okay for her to be touched as long as she was dressed inappropriately. A man cannot control himself, unlike a woman can." Making excuses, same thing as like a man is polygamous in nature, things like that. When we're

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<sup>23</sup> The Quran is Islam's religious text. ("Qur'an." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran>. Accessed 8 May 2023.)

<sup>24</sup> Vasicovagina Fistula is a medical condition that can occur after a person gives birth (among other causes), which results in loss of bladder control. (Rajaian, Shanmugasundaram. Murugavaithianathan, Pragatheeswarane. "Vesicovaginal fistula: Review and recent trends." ResearchGate. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336154038\\_Vesicovaginal\\_fistula\\_Review\\_and\\_recent\\_trends](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336154038_Vesicovaginal_fistula_Review_and_recent_trends). Accessed 8 May 2023.)

having trainings with them, there are times that we're having training with religious leaders and some of them walked out.

**RO: They are perpetrators.**

HJM: Of course.

**RO: How then, do they, do they still--? It looks there's still needs to be a lot of work.**

HJM: Oh my gosh. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done.

**RO: Challenging.**

HJM: Exactly. Challenging work, especially around the behavioral change, getting them to have a different conception about some of these things. I would say that we need to intensify our effort. We need to keep sensitizing them, creating awareness, letting them see the bigger picture, giving them lifetime examples and situations. Like the interview we're doing, talking about this, somebody else can hear it, is a form of sensitization or creating awareness. These are efforts that we need to keep intensifying and, hopefully, over time.

**RO: Yes. [chuckles] It will take a entire lifetime but then I think the other question I'm thinking about is that, have you seen changes from regime to regime, for instance? Because, again, we're going to have a different set of leadership in Nigeria in a couple of months. Do you see things changing or moving in a more positive direction than they have been?**

HJM: I honestly don't think there's going to be much change, knowing how the election played out. How a lot of Nigerians are displeased with the results of the 2023 elections, which felt as if the Independent National Electoral Commission, which is INEC, imposed a candidate on Nigerians.<sup>25</sup> I don't think there's going to be so much change. However, it's the same party. It's APC, so I personally don't think that's going to be any change when it comes to this presidential election.<sup>26</sup> However, I'm hopeful for the gubernatorial election that is going to happen next week.<sup>27</sup> Hopefully, we're going to have a change. We're going to have younger people because I believe that-- I mean, a younger person who understands the needs of the youth, because, clearly, for now, women and girls

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<sup>25</sup> The Independent National Electoral Commission oversees Nigeria's elections. In 1998, the Commission was established leading up to Nigeria's conversion to a democracy. ("Independent National Electoral Commission." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent\\_National\\_Electoral\\_Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_National_Electoral_Commission). Accessed 10 May 2023.)

<sup>26</sup> The All Progressives Congress (APC) is a political party in Nigeria. It was formed in 2013 when three parties joined together to form APC. ("All Progressives Congress." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All\\_Progressives\\_Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Progressives_Congress). Accessed 10 May 2023.)

<sup>27</sup> "Gubernatorial" refers to governor positions or elections. ("gubernatorial." The Britannica Dictionary. <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/gubernatorial>. Accessed 10 May 2023.)

have been taken out of the race. I think there's one woman in Adamawa,<sup>28</sup> Binani,<sup>29</sup> she's only female and gubernatorial candidate and we're, hopeful, that she--

**RO: In the entire country?**

HJM: In the entire country, yes. We're hoping that she would win that gubernatorial seat. However, I still don't think that anything's going to change, because our candidates or their candidates was imposed on Nigerians, so I don't think so.

**RO: That's the presidential.**

HJM: The presidential.

**RO: Again, just looking at the election coming up, and the candidacy, and all of the people that have shown interest, how much have women supported women that want to go into politics, for instance? How much? Because women are maybe half the population or even more. How much have women supported women that are interested in political powers in Nigeria?**

HJM: It's a two-way thing. The good thing is more women are vocal now, the social media. You see that a lot of women that are twee ting or are saying things like, "Oh, we want this woman to win," pushing the woman agenda. The bad side is because of the way Nigeria or Africa is, because of the patriarchy--

**RO: Their culture.**

HJM: A culture, women are even not being supportive, that's the honest truth. I remember when I watched the only female candidate for the presidency election hand over to the current president-elect, a lot of women were insulting her saying demeaning comments. I don't think anybody really supported her. The way the media also pushes this narrative, were not really amplifying the work that these women are doing. It is always about the male candidates. Of course, when you look at the political structure in Nigeria, you see that there's this godfatherism. You need to be wealthy, you need to have some form of assets or money, and a lot of women really don't. Some women are struggling. They don't have as much money, they don't have-- What is it called? They don't even have an exposure to maybe arms, or all those godfatherism, or whatever. We do have less organizations supporting them. Well, I know that the organizations that try to have conversations with women that were going in for different positions, and all of that, but I don't think women have been supportive enough.

**RO: Okay. I know you're talking a lot about what your organization is saying, but what are some of your future expectations?**

HJM: I'm hopeful that or we are hopeful that in the nearest future people living in the most remote part of the world, and by "most remote," I'm talking about people in the grassroots of the grassroots are able to hold their governments to account. Are able to

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<sup>28</sup> Adamawa is a Nigerian state located in the northeast of the country. ("Adamawa State." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adamawa\\_State](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adamawa_State). Accessed 10 May 2023.)

<sup>29</sup> Aishatu Binani is a Nigerian politician who has been a part of the All Progressives Congress since 2018. Since 2019 she has been a senator representing Adamawa Central. ("Aishatu Dahiru Ahmed." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aishatu\\_Dahiru\\_Ahmed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aishatu_Dahiru_Ahmed). Accessed 10 May 2023.)

say, "Okay. You know what? It is my mandate as a citizen of this country and I demand that the government provides primary healthcare facilities, wash facilities, basic education," and the likes of that. It's just seeing people even in the most remote part of the world being able to hold their governments to account. That is the future expectation for us.

**RO: Nice. In that light, how would you think about the relationship between scholarship and activism? For instance, there's scholarship, there's activism. What's that connect between both in general?**

HJM: When you say scholarship or scholars?

**RO: Yes. Talking about scholars, scholarship, education. Maybe those feminist scholars, for instance. Feminist researchers versus activists who are primarily out there. What's the relationship? Do you see a connection or are they two separate pathway for feminism?**

HJM: I would say there's a huge connection, because coming from the grassroots and being in this space, I see myself living two different worlds, however, living best of both worlds. If that makes any sense? I have been on the field and I've had the opportunity to be in the academic space, interact with women who are carrying out different research around other women. Scholars who are feminists. There's a huge connect. There's no disconnect in that. We need one another. We need the women in the academic space with their research and all of those things, and we need women in the grassroots. There's definitely a huge connect. There's no disparity in that line.

**RO: In your work, how do you see that play out?**

HJM: Being here has encouraged me to want to go back to school. Like I said earlier, I would love to go back to school. There's so much knowledge out there that you need and just interacting with students here has made me realize that being in the four worlds of the academic space, there's so much that you need to gain from this. Not just being on the field. You need to balance it out, perhaps carrying out more research, finding out more solutions that need to be out there. For me, I would say there's definitely a connect.

**RO: Then, now we are going to talk about the intersection of your work with the women's movement in Nigeria and globally. What is your analysis, evaluation, and expectations of the development of feminism in Nigeria?**

HJM: I'm happy with how feminism is going in Nigeria. I'm happy that there are more women who are vocal now, who are taking the stand, who are leading those conversations. It is so enlightening. It's so amazing to see that happening. The Nigeria of before is definitely not the Nigeria of now when it comes to being active for women. I am hopeful that we're going to keep having more women-led organizations. More civil society organizations that are focused on women and girls. Have more women in government who are able to champion those cause. I always say things like, "Nothing for us, without us." You can't exclude women from decision making processes and expect that our issues will be factored or tailored. You don't even know what a woman is going through, if the woman is not there to tell you the solutions that she needs, so we need to

see more women. I'm hopeful for Nigeria. It's a conversation that we've seen, over time, taking a huge turn. I'm hopeful.

**RO: Then your relationship with other women's organizations in Nigeria?**

HJM: I am also excited about all of the collaborations and partnerships that I've been able to have with other women in various organizations, and these women are willing to let you leverage on the expertise, leverage on their wealth of experience, wealth of knowledge, resources to carry out some of the work that we're doing. I have seen a huge collaboration and partnership with other women who are doing the same kinds of work that I'm doing.

**RO: With other activists?**

HJM: Oh my gosh, yes. With other activists, yes. The good thing is, you don't have to travel sometimes. That's the importance of social media. Social media helps you connect with other people from different parts of the world who are carrying out this work. Yes.

**RO: Do you have a national campaigns on issues or global campaigns that you lend your voice to and--?**

HJM: Yes. Both national and global campaigns. I forgot to mention that, one of the things I'm working on here is toolkit for gender advocates. It's a self guide manual that would help intending gender advocates or gender advocates who have begun their career to be able to advocate for policies to be institutionalized at various levels of governance. Because for me starting off those kinds of resources helped me to be vocal and to find my foot. In a resource like that, we have collaborations with different global feminists, where they're lending their voices, they're encouraging other gender advocates. They're reviewing the document, they're making input and feedback. It's a document that is tailored towards the context of Africa, but they're not restrictive. It's open to other gender advocates or other feminists that are from different parts of the world. I see myself collaborating on different issues, especially through the toolkit that I'm currently developing in the University of Michigan.

**RO: I think this leads us to this next question in terms of how your work is related to women's movement generally.**

HJM: It's about proffering solutions. It's about engaging more women and girls. Through the toolkit, like I mentioned, for gender advocates who are thinking of starting their career in this line of action, it will help them to be vocal, it will help them to have a resource that they can fall back on, that they can use to build their strength, their capacities, their skills, to be able to advocate for women and girls. It's a resource that I believe that every gender advocate or anybody in the feminist movement should have access to, to be able to advocate for men and girls as early as possible, because one person can't, obviously, change the world. We need more people who are in this.

**RO: All right. Already it's about building connections, and so do you have existing connections with other activists, scholars, and organizations in other countries of the world?**

HJM: Oh my gosh, yes. I do, particularly, in Africa. I must say that I'm part of the Global Shaper Community,<sup>30</sup> which is an initiative of the World Economic Forum.<sup>31</sup> It's a community of diverse, talented, and young individuals who leverage on their expertise to carry out campaigns that would impact their immediate communities. That community, I think there's about 500 hubs from across the world, I've been opportune to partner with other people who are carrying out the same work, not just around gender, around environment as well, from across the world. Particularly my experience here in the University of Michigan has widened my connection and networks with other activities from across different parts of the world, so not just Africa. Now we're talking about in the US here, we're talking about in Canada. We're talking about in India, we're talking about in China, different people. This opportunity has really widened my network.

**RO: How did these connections come about?**

HJM: Besides being part of the World Economic Forum, this current opportunity of being the 2023 Twink Frey Social Activist was a fantastic opportunity to widen my network.

**RO: How did it happen?**

HJM: An application, actually. I got an application. Actually my boss, the CEO, sent me because he's fond of sending young people in the organization opportunities, "Apply, push yourself. Do all of that." He sent me a link to it and I was like, "Oh my gosh, another! I just finished an application, I'm so tired." Then I was like, "Okay. You know what? It's for gender equality and this is what I'm doing, why not?" I applied, submitted my application and I guess I got lucky.

**RO: What have this meant to you?**

HJM: Oh my gosh. It has been eye opening. It has been, I'll say challenging because coming here I didn't know what to expect. This is my first time in the US. It was a beautiful experience that I am so privileged, and opportune, and thankful for.

**RO: You've had these conversations in several spaces on campus.**

HJM: Yes.

**RO: I believe you've engaged with students and staff, and then besides the University of Michigan, with other institutions and organizations that you are connected with globally. How do you make sense of the differences and similarities in the kind of issues that are raised by these other organizations or by other people?**

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<sup>30</sup> The Global Shaper Community is a program of the World Economic Forum that runs hubs internationally to empower young voices in crafting the future. ("Global Shapers Community." Global Shapers. <https://www.globalshapers.org/>. Accessed 10 May 2023.)

<sup>31</sup> The World Economic Forum was established in 1971 to support public-private relationships internationally. The organization fosters dialogue between leaders of corporations, governments, and NGOs. ("Our Mission." World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum>. Accessed 10 May 2023.)

HJM: I would say that gender disparity knows no boundaries. Irrespective of your race, your class, where you're coming from, whatever it is that you do, these things are happening. Gender disparity cuts across all of the sectors and they're happening. Being privileged, I've interacted with students, and some lecturers or professors. I realize that people are actually going through it as well, especially from their individual countries, because there's so much diversity in this university. When I'm speaking about gender-based violence, I'm talking about poor access to healthcare. It doesn't sound strange to them, because they have also heard about people who have had the experience or, personally, they've also had the experience. I would say there's a similarity. Most of the issues are similar and that is why I know that it'll take collective and global effort to tackle an issue that is similar to different people.

**RO: Yes. So far, have you learned some things from their own approaches for dealing with the issues that they deal with?**

HJM: Absolutely, I have. I've learned how they've been able to navigate some of those things. Just so I don't go back to Nigeria and repeat effort. I've realized how to leverage on resources, how to leverage on expertise. The interesting thing is they've been so helpful and willing to engage. They say things like, "Oh, Hyeladzira, how do I lend my voice to help tackle some of the issues we having in Africa?" I've been able to learn so many things that I've been able to work here and things that are not working as well. For instance, I had a conversation with a professor here that was letting me know that his son wrote to his legislator. It's something that we try to do in Nigeria where we encourage citizens to write to their legislators to request for information. I tell you, they don't even respond. By the time they're campaigning, that is when you have access to your legislators. Once they get elected, they change their cell phone, their office assistants become high and mighty. They don't even want to speak to you. Then he told me that his son had to write to a legislator talking about public smoking and all of that, and they responded immediately. For me, I could see-- and not just reaching out to legislators before they're being elected, how to hold them to account even after. We need to do a lot of monitoring. We need to do a lot of follow-up. Yes, I've been able to find out practical steps and practical solutions to some of the things that we're facing, and being able to take notes. I'm, hopeful, that if I go back, I'll be able to implement some of those things.

**RO: Yes. I think the other thing that comes to mind is that I saw a list of salaries and allowances that politicians get in Nigeria, including what they are given for their communities. Do you have them go back to implement any programs and projects to support their communities, their constituencies that voted them into office, because money is paid for those purposes?**

HJM: Of course.

**RO: Do they do it?**

HJM: Oftentimes, no. I'll tell you that for free. Oftentimes they don't, and it's a whole back and forth. It's a whole back-and-forth. What we usually do is, there's a document called Tender, where the federal government would publish list of contracts and project that should be carried out in communities. We go through those tenders and we identify project that are in line with our thematic areas. That is wash, primary healthcare and

basic education. We go to those communities to ask those people, "It is being said that there should be a functional primary healthcare facility in this community; is there?" Lots of times, no. What we do is we get the contact of the contractor, we pay them visits. We use the likes of freedom of information to get information from them. We involve the media. We do a lot of townhall meetings where we have like an informed debate between the citizens and the government. We have key and influential stakeholders in the room, letting them know that it's a mandate of, "I'm not going to provide a functional primary healthcare facility for you. I wouldn't do that, but it's the mandate of the government to be able to do that for you." We try to ensure that they hold them to account. A lot of times we involve the citizens in the tracking and monitoring of those projects to see that they're being implemented to the last. Sometimes we notice that the use of standard items to complete those buildings and then we ensure that citizens are involved. Involvement of citizen has been something that has really, really, really helped us. A lot of times they just make pledges that they don't fulfill, but we involve citizens to take ownership, and be able to ensure that those pledges are being fulfilled.

**RO: Wow. Yes. We're going to move to another level. It still goes back to the fact that people are not yet there in terms of holding their-**

HJM: Governments to account.

**RO: -governments, their representatives, to hold them accountable for the pledges that they made to them, or even some of these projects you spoke about that they're supposed to implement in those communities. Despite getting the money, they don't get the work done, and then nobody really knows where the monies go to. Then, I want us to go to another topic, which is different from the people now. Intersectionality. How has the women's movement addressed other markers of inequality and oppression besides gender?**

HJM: When you're doing this work, sometimes it cuts across so many things. It's a multifaceted dimension approach sometimes. You're trying to bring an intervention for a particular cause and then, at the end of the day, you're trying to address. I feel like, yes, the feminist movements or women movement has been able to address other issues of governance of electoral processes, just other issues that are not necessarily affecting women and girls, but yes, in holistic approach, I think it has been able to address some of those things.

**RO: Okay. Has funding been helpful in getting some of these tasks done?**

HJM: Oh, absolutely, funding. International funding has been so helpful. Because I would say that if the government were doing what they needed to do, we wouldn't be talking about getting funding. Yes, funding has been a huge part of it. It has been able to help get some of those tasks done.

**RO: Yes. I see how some of these projects can be helpful in achieving other issues. When you empower the woman. Whatever is, yes, economic empowerment, then when her life begins to transform, she can send her child to school.**

HJM: Of course.

**RO: So we see girl child education improving and then that also resulting in women's broader participation in politics.**

HJM: Right. Of course.

**RO: Then that, eventually, dovetails into societal progress, because everyone is involved.**

HJM: It's a ripple effect. By the time you carry out a particular intervention, you see it having different branches, which at the end of the day will not just benefit those women and girls, but also men and boys in the society. Like you mentioned, you encourage or you empower a woman, she's able to make ends meet, she's able to send her girl child in school. A lot of times those women, because they're widows, they're left with the burden of sending their children to school. By the time she's able to send her child to school, the child is involved in school, her child stays in school, the child is going to grow up become somebody. There's a ripple effect, you realize that one thing leads to another and it keeps leading to something else, which is very positive.

**RO: That's growth.**

HJM: Absolutely. That's growth.

**RO: Let's go to more recent event in all of our lives: COVID-19. How has COVID changed your work?**

HJM: Right. I would say positive and negative, I'd say that. Negative in the sense that, ordinarily, we have a lot of out-of-school children, but with COVID-19, we had more out-of-school children, especially women and girls. They missed about two years of school. The government provided school learning platforms for students, but, unfortunately, students who were in rural communities do not even have access to the internet. They automatically, missed those years of school. With COVID-19, COVID-19 brought about a high rate of gender-based violence. There was a lot of intimate partner violence during COVID-19, one of the highest recorded ever. Men were raping their wives. I don't know what was happening. Is it the pandemic? Why was that happening, but you had a high rates of case, of rape cases, during COVID-19. Yes, it did bring women and girls backwards. Then, positively, because we realized that we could carry out our work without necessarily being there. The virtual aspects, because during COVID, I think a lot of organizations, a lot of individuals realized that they could actually work from home. They could leverage on technology to carry out their work in hard and far-to-reach areas. We were able to leverage on that to reach women and girls who were in far-to-reach communities.

**RO: Okay. Nice. How has this impacted the work that women have been doing to address women's issues generally in Nigeria?**

HJM: Right. I think it has made a lot of women in organizations to reinvent the wheel, if that makes any sense? To use a different approach and to probably sit up as well. Because now when you have more out-of-school children, when you have more cases of gender-based violence, you have to intensify your effort. I would say that COVID-19 has really made several and various organizations to use different, diverse approaches to be

able to ensure that women and girls are safe and not being discriminated or not being marginalized.

**RO: Yes. I know, yes. Thank you. At least let's talk about two full years of COVID. Do you remember specifically, maybe one or two things that happened between organizations and the way that this impacted the women and girls' generation in Nigeria?**

HJM: There was a lot of collaboration, virtual collaboration, which meant that more women were reached. You had cases where organizations were having online mentorship sessions, webinars, online conferences for women and girls, especially women and girls who do not have access to traditional educational opportunities ordinarily. Some of those technologies were used to help them further broaden their skills that they would need to achieve their career growth, their individual and respective areas of life. Yes, there was a lot of collaborations from various organizations for women and girls.

**RO: All right. Nice. Thank you. I know you started to talk about your project. If you can just tell us, even as we move towards the end of the interview, tell us more because we listened a little bit to it at the reception. Everyone was fascinated. We really want to understand how we can be involved and how this could be beneficial to a global audience that you intend for it to be. If you can tell us more about that project, how it's evolving.**

HJM: Okay. Great. Just a back story. Last year, we started a gender movement in my organization. It's called GAMA, Gender Advocate Movement in Africa, where most of the advocates that I've worked with over time were brought together. In different campaigns that I've implemented in different states and in different African countries, we have different gender advocates that we've worked with. We decided to bring them together in a consolidated framework for them to be able to collaborate, consolidate, educate, and engage on issues affecting them. Things like sharing experience, sharing knowledge. There's something about collective efforts. By the time you work together, you have more impact, right? With that movement, the purpose or the goal for that movement is to be able to have women and girls, survivors and victims of gender-based violence on a virtual platform. I call it the lab. The lab where you have people providing psychosocial support, you have agencies responsible for reporting those cases, you have victims and survivors of gender-based violence, where they can be able to assess one another. If, for instance, I'm a woman who has been abused or is going through it, I can be able to, there's a number for me to reach a therapist or someone who can provide psychosocial support for me. As part of the resources that I'm hoping will be embedded on that platform is what I'm currently working on. It's called the Gender Advocate Toolkit. I'm going to find a fancy name for it much later, but for now, now is called the Gender Advocacy Toolkit. Now, I keep making reference to how I started, how those resources or toolkits that I found online, were able to help me understand the nativity of gender advocacy. Again, at that time, I couldn't find an easy-to-understand resource.

It was technical. Especially for someone who is just starting off their career in gender advocacy, you need something that is easy to understand because gender advocacy is a feminist movement. That's the beginning of it. You need something that is easy for you to understand, relatable in your own context. Nothing too technical. This Toolkit is

everything I couldn't find online at that time. A self-guide manual for gender advocates to be able to advocate for the sustainable development goal. Fine, we talked about gender equality and women empowerment, right? It's going to be relatable to their context. We're going to have bits about self-care because I noticed that as an activist, sometimes I just want somebody to ask me, "How are you doing? How are you holding up? Who do you speak to?" Because when you hear some of those things, it just messes with you emotionally, mentally, psychologically. You are left with the trauma even more than the person who has gone through it, because you're trying to make sense. You speak to young girls who are two or three, and they've been raped. You start to think, "I'm going to have a child one day," or, "I want to have a child one day; am I even sure I want to have a child? Do I want to bring a child in this world?" It messes with you. There's a component of self-care in the Gender Advocacy Toolkit that talks to advocates about taking care of themselves. That's not being selfish.

**RO: How to seek help.**

HJM: How to seek help; that's not being selfish. You have been trying to save the entire world. It's okay to take a break.

**RO: I understand that you also need help, right?**

HJM: Gosh, yes. Also, I think, for me, it's the human-angle stories in those toolkit. Sharing of stories, letting people know how I began my journey, how other feminists have also begun their journey, letting them know that they are not alone in it, seeing some component that talks about the current international and national policies that addresses gender disparities in Africa. The Toolkit that talks about the context in Africa for now—it's a live document that I hope would evolve, that would, over time, address global challenges. Then, the thing is, again, gender disparity issues cuts across globally. It's not just happening in Africa, it's happening everywhere. Again, the Toolkit would be easy to understand for, especially people who have disabilities. We're talking about the visually impaired, we're talking about people who are deaf; it can be translated in audio format. Eventually, it will be translated into different dialects so people can use it in grassroots to be able to advocate for things like that. We're trying to just bring up advocates as early as possible. They don't need to be in the four walls of the school. They don't need to study women's studies or whatever. They can just pick up those manuals and understand that self-advocacy on its own is a thing, because there's a lot of bullying and there's a lot of maltreatment from different people. These are things that will help people, too.

**RO: Wonderful. Is it going to be a one-time product, or are you setting it up in such a way that it's maybe auto updates or you update it by yourself from time to time?**

HJM: Yes, it's not a one-time product. It will be updated. It's a live document. As things change, it will be updated over time.

**RO: All right. Nice. I look forward to seeing some, not final product, but the product in place, since it's evolving and even as it continues to grow. I want to thank you so much, Zira, for granting this interview, coming to the University of Michigan. It's been an awesome time having you around. We've engaged at**

**different levels, and we look forward to hearing more about the amazing work that you do in your life, in your work, and globally. Congratulations.**

HJM: Thank you so much.

**RO: We wish you safe journey as you travel back to your home country.**

HJM: Thank you so much. Thank you. Yes. Bye.