Women and Power

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Women and Power

Education, Religion and Identity

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To all women and children, literate and illiterate, who have resisted
and are resisting oppression quietly and loudly, individually and collectively
and to all men who have supported them in the process

Content

List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ABA-CEELI	American Bar Association Central and European Law Initiative
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CODESRIA	Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DG	Director General
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLF	Female Leadership Forum
FNWS	Federation of Nigerian Women Societies
FOMWAN	Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria
HIV	Human Immuno Deficiency Syndrome
HND	Higher National Diploma
I-IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
JSS	Junior Secondary School
NAFDAC	National Directorate for Food and Drugs Administration and Control
NCE	National Certificate in Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NEPU	Northern Elements Progressive Union
PDP	People's Democratic Party
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
WARSHE	Women Against Rape, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Exploitation
WIN	Women in Nigeria

List of Tables

List of Boxes

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Preface

One day, in my early teens, I asked my mother how possible it was for a woman to have a baby regularly when her husband beat her regularly. Now, I cannot remember my mother's response, but I do remember that she looked at me quizzically, and tried to conceal her amusement at the question. She knew why I had asked that question. I had asked because I had observed the phenomenon in the interaction of a male neighbour, a government worker, who was clearly literate, with his wife. I do not remember whether his wife was also literate. Perhaps I found the phenomenon odd because my father did not hit my mother and, as a matter of fact, my parents had a child after I had asked that question. I do remember that they argued a lot, and my mother challenged my father often; and that included arguments about the decisions he had taken at work, which he discussed with her at lunchtime at home. My father would usually get angry and raise his voice; and whenever he raised his voice on any matter, my mother would remind him that she was not one of his subordinates at work, so he should not shout at her.

On one issue though, my father never raised his voice against my mother, and that was, other women. Whenever she accused him of philandering, she would be the one to raise her voice, and he would actually be pleading with her to lower her voice. My mother was, and still is strong-willed, very practical, and brooks no non-sense. Although she trained in secretarial practice at the Institute of Administration, Kongo, Zaria in Northern Nigeria in the late 1950s, she could not hold a job for a long time as she changed jobs each time her husband, a civil servant, moved to another station on transfer in the then Northern Nigeria. She was not employed by the Northern Nigerian Government because she was not an indigene, even though she was brought up in Kano and had her education in Kano and Zaria. She was brought up by two women, her maternal grandmother and her mother's older sister. Her maternal grandmother was a Muslim Nigerien who first married a Kano man. Something happened (my mother does not know whether it was death or divorce) and then she married a Christian Yoruba man from Apomu in the western part of Nigeria. The Yoruba man, who worked with the Railway Corporation in Kano, converted his wife to Christianity. Before the Christian Yoruba man died in 1954, his wife reverted to the Islamic religion. Fifteen years after his death, she performed the holy pilgrimage to Mecca when her children and grandchildren were able to pool funds for the purpose. My mother's maternal grandmother, who was unlettered in

the Western sense, took my mother away from her father, also a Yoruba man from Apomu, because she feared he might marry her off at a young age instead of sending her to school. My mother and my father, who is an Okun, specifically from Mopa in the then Kabba Province of the then Northern Nigeria, met in Kano.

I am the second child in a line of six children, the first of two female children. As children and as teenagers, we all did housework. There were no specific duties assigned to boys and girls. If there were restrictions as to the type of housework a child could do, it was by age. For instance, when we were in the range of ages fourteen and fifteen, we pounded yam, the staple food of the Okun, with pestle and mortar. Even when we had a household help, we all still had duties assigned to us within the household. Of course, within this set-up, some of us were quite lazy, laid back or just unwilling to perform some tasks.

After my mid-teens, my father regularly asked me to go shopping with him at the few supermarkets that were available in Ilorin, in Kwara State, at the time. I later discovered he wanted time alone with me. In his white Peugeot 404 salon car, he told me how wonderful it would be if I let the sky be the limit of my educational attainments, and well, then, think about men later. He would usually also promise to help me reach the sky. When some of us became young adults, my father would tell us, behind our mother's back, that our mother was a very intelligent and intuitive person, and that she was usually right about how to proceed on many issues; but it was just that, well, he had proved stubborn. I used to wonder why? Now, I believe it was a combination of patriarchy and his very nature. I do not know whether he would read this book; but the truth is that even in his mid-seventies, he is still stubborn in his relationship with his wife.

I got on the PhD (Adult Education) programme a year after I began work at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), in Ile-Ife in 1987. I knew my parents were happy. However, occasionally, when I went to visit with them in Ilorin, Central Nigeria, my mother would come home feeling unhappy about a comment a woman had passed about when I would stop acquiring degrees and get married. On such occasions, my father would get angry and tell my mother to keep such talk out of our home, and instead learn to tell those women to mind their business. He would again tell me pointedly that he wanted me to go as far as I pleased educationally, and get married when I wanted to. Men paid attention to me, for whatever reasons, but one was particularly dismayed at my penchant for sitting in the library for hours every day, when he had made it clear that he wanted to marry me, and wanted to see me often. One afternoon, he gave me a piece of his mind on the phone. He chided me for not thinking of my future when my age-mates were already married, and had children. Apparently, my countenance changed as I listened to the 'harangue'. My office-mate, who was my teacher, and had become a close friend, entreated me to stay calm. That was the last time I had a conversation with the fellow.

Up until that time, I believed that being humane was the most important principle that one should hold on to. Gender discrimination was not an issue for me, and the concept did not mean much to me. Our parents did not bring us up in accordance with prevailing sex-role socialization, and they did not make us girls feel that we were inferior to the four boys. Having taken the subject 'Government' at 'A' Levels, from 1978 to 1980, I loved to take part in the analysis of political developments in Nigeria, and I was highly conscious of issues of bad governance, corruption, and how this interfaced with the politics of identity. I blamed the North/South politics of identity for my mother's inability to keep her jobs, and I did not have the framework to explain some of my father's stubbornness in his relationship with my mother, even though he knew her assets and strengths. With the benefit of hindsight, apparently, my father knew we were going to come under societal pressure; that was why he took off time to talk to me about reaching for the sky, first, before thinking about men and marriage. Even then, persons who held the view that women could only become persons when they married attempted to undo the specific kind of nurturing or socialization that my parents gave us.

As a young university lecturer, I took interest in the political dimensions of adult education, and felt at home with them. After my encounter with that suitor, I became slightly conscious of my position as a woman. About that time, a former lecturer of mine in my first year at the University of Ife returned to Ife with a PhD, and I took interest in some feminist literature that I found in his study. One of them was *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, edited by Jo Freeman. That literature and a few others set me thinking. Finally, I got married, had a baby, and there were issues. I began to see my marriage and the marriages of other women through a new lens. I heard whispers about violence against highly educated women and remembered the couple who had babies as frequently as the man hit the wife. I began to put complaints of sexual harassment that were whispered by students in perspective. Finally, I came to the realization that commitment to all human persons will not eliminate discrimination against certain segments of society, especially women, given the prevailing attitudes, beliefs and institutionalized practices. I discovered feminism. In 1998, I finally moved from critical self-reflection, contemplation and one-on-one dialogue about women's rights and the women's question to full political activism in favour of women. And so, in addition to focusing on the political dimensions of adult education, I took interest in exploring the concerns of women in the teaching-learning interaction and context; and have since approached my teaching, research and community development/activist work from the emancipatory perspective.

My background, my experiences, the experiences of women that I am privy to, a paper I wrote in the mid-1990s, and a research I undertook in the year 2000, set the stage for me to undertake the research reported on in this book. Sometime in 1997, a colleague who was active in the Academic Staff Union of his university in Nigeria asked me to present a paper on Democracy and the Working Woman at a seminar.

He requested that I prepare the paper because I was active in the Obafemi Awolowo University Branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities, in my own right, and also by marriage. The key issue that I raised in the paper entitled, 'Democracy, Popular Participation and Sustainable Development: The Challenge for Working Women' (unpublished) was that 'confessed' democrats, intellectuals, journalists, and observers of electoral politics in Nigeria paid little attention to the impact of gender inequalities and patriarchy, especially in the domestic sphere, on (competitive) democracy, elections being one of the features of democracy. In the paper, I tried to show that patriarchy worked to disadvantage women in the areas of fair distribution of rights and resources in the workplace, in the domestic sphere, and in the entire socio-political and cultural environment in Nigeria. I made the point that women who were disadvantaged in all spheres of life could not participate in the democratic process as equals with men; and if they participated, they could not do so successfully. I called for the democratization of the workplace, the domestic sphere and the entire socio-political and cultural environment in Nigeria. To achieve this, I thought there was an urgent need for an independent, broad-based women's organization that would undertake so many tasks, among which would be to force all issues in gender relations to the open arena, politicize them, and undertake the conscientization of women together with the sensitization of men.

The impact of this paper on me was profound. It was actually after I worked on this paper that I became politically active on the side of women. In the year 2000, the same colleague who had invited me to present the paper on democracy and the working woman, invited me to take part in a research entitled, 'Politics of Ethnicity, Nationality and Identity: Restructuring of State-Society Relations'. I was the only woman on the project, and I worked on the chapter entitled, 'Engendering Political Power: Women and the Struggle for Empowerment'. The key issue for my chapter was that Nigerian women had participated alongside men in many struggles, and they must have expected that they would reap enhanced social, economic, cultural, legal and political status as a result. In terms of aggregates, however, the quality of life of Nigerian women was low when compared with that of men. The key question for the research was: why had the status of Nigerian women not improved markedly, with the aggregate of struggles they had participated in, when their status was compared with that of men? This was a qualitative research study that used the case study research design. The framework for the study was an eclecticism of the strengths of essentialist, social constructionist, and deconstructionist notions of female identity. Data were obtained from primary sources (documents from the legislative and executive arms of government and interviews held with some key actors in, and a few observers of, the struggles in which Nigerian women had been involved) and secondary sources, mainly books. I focused on four cases of identity politics in Nigeria's recent history. I adopted the descriptive, interpretive/explanatory, and evaluative case study models, and also cross-case analyses. I examined the demands

that women made as part of groups of men and women, or as women. I considered whose interests those demands would serve, and I considered whether they would serve women's strategic gender interests. I examined the contexts in which those demands were made, and studied the language of the demands. I interrogated the point at which women got into the struggles to actualize the demands made, the strategies employed in those struggles, and the immediate result of the struggles. From my analysis, I reached the conclusion that as long as women did not make gender-specific claims within other struggles (ethnic/racial, religious, economic, etc), and as long as they did not pursue their strategic gender interests actively, their social status would not improve markedly, and their quality of life would continue to be low.

Immediately after I turned in the report of that research in the first quarter of 2001, my reflections on the research reverted on the relevance of the entire research, and the implications of the results for my work as an adult education teacher and researcher. The connection to my activist work was clear to me immediately. In the last quarter of 2003, I got an invitation from colleagues in Canada, some of whom had read the report of my 2001 research, to contribute the entry, 'Identity', to the *International Encyclopedia of Adult Education*. That invitation helped me to focus my attention completely on the connections between adult education and questions of identity and identity politics. About this time, the link that I had tried to establish between the issues I had raised in the seminar paper on democracy and working women, and education, and women's identity politics, started taking shape. I knew I had to undertake a research that would help me to understand and gain new insights into the relationship between the identities of women and our low social status, and what formal and informal education had to do with it. I therefore initiated the research project, entitled 'The Dialectics of "Magic Consciousness", the "Hidden Curriculum" and Formal Education in the Construction of the Identity of Nigerian Women'. I carried out the project under the 2003 Advanced Research Fellowship Programme of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). The research, which began in the second half of 2004, was concluded in July 2005.

From the premise that all educational provisions are value-laden, and from the post-structuralist feminist pedagogy framework, the study challenged the position, often taken for granted, that women's acquisition of formal education is the key to their socio-cultural and political empowerment. The argument presented in the research and in this book is that although colonialism met unequal relations of power between women and men in many Nigerian communities, its legacies, in formal education, remain, and the processes that it created have fused with the omnipresent Christian and Islamic religious ethos within and outside classrooms and schools (as the hidden curriculum, socialization, or informal learning) to construct women's identity, an identity that is essentially disempowering.

The approach that was adopted for the study was a phenomenological reading of the lived experiences of women. Through open-ended questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and observations, data were retrieved from female and male religious leaders and lecturers; literate women and men in the formal sector of the economy; illiterate/semi-literate women in the informal economy; and female and male students in two locations in Nigeria. The locations are Ibadan in the south-western part of the country, and Lokoja in the middle belt (central) Nigeria.

One of the conclusions reached was that the identities of women (that is, the character of women), or more precisely, the identities that women favour, and or that many men and religious leaders would rather see women favour, represent a major factor in determining whether women have political power and whether women experience violence; and the actions that they are able to take when they have experienced violence. This is irrespective of the educational attainment of women. I also reached the conclusion that men would rather see women favour identities that disempower and disable them because they have a need to preserve power that dominates.

I know that my upbringing and experiences, the experiences of other women, especially the experiences and identities of the mothers before me, the observations I made and the conclusions I reached in my earlier works, resonate with the experiences of women and the reactions of men towards women in this book. I am sure that women and men who read this book can relate to these experiences and analyses, and the voices of resistance and possibilities contained herein will echo even in hearts and places where they would ordinarily not be tolerated.