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## Is Formal Education Empowering?

We had earlier observed that the consensus among opinion moulders and discussants in non-formal education settings is that access to formal education and literacy training for girls and women will ensure more active involvement of women in politics (Shvedova 1998), although Longwe (2000) had challenged the claim. We also observed that there is no value-free education, because how a person learns, whether or not s/he is able to learn, who teaches what and to whom, matters. In the light of the identities of women that have emerged from this study, and their implications for the ability of women to exercise power with other women to end domination, gain political power and resist violence directed at their gender, the task here is to find out whether formal education, which should ordinarily be a guarantor of access to power resources, has empowered or disempowered those who have acquired it. This question is pertinent, given the low social status of literate Nigerian women, the omnipresence of religion within and outside classrooms and institutions of learning, different forms of informal teaching and learning within and outside teaching-learning contexts, and the structure of the formal school in Nigeria.

But first, we take the views of religious leaders on women's education.

### Religious Leaders on Women's Education

#### Islam

##### *Male Muslim Leader – Lokoja*

Male Muslim Leader (MML): The prophet said, speaking of knowledge is compulsory, it is a must on every man and every woman, therefore there is no differentiation, and there is no discrimination in the course of seeking knowledge as far as Islam is concerned. Fundamentally, a woman is a school. The prophet is saying, the first school of a child is the mother's

laps. Again, the prophet is saying: educate a man you educate an individual, educate a woman and you educate a nation. That adage is from the prophet.

***Female Muslim Leader – Lokoja***

FM: Most people tend to believe that Islam forbids women from acquiring Western education. It is believed that it is only Islamic education that women should acquire. I want to say, that is not true. Islam says if knowledge is in China, go out and get it. Qur'an says read and acquire knowledge. By virtue of women's gender, they are expected to be the first teacher of children. As mothers, we have the role of bringing up children in the way of Islam. We teach them to be models for others to emulate and be good representatives of our communities. As much as possible, we try to give them both Islamic and Western education, so the women can compete favourably with others. If you train a woman, you are training a nation; and so, it is important that the girl-child is given education. FOMWAN mounts enlightenment programmes on the religion that we believe in, and that is Islam. It organizes workshops and seminars.

OM: What images of women come to you when you see literate and illiterate women? Do literate women show more self-confidence?

FM: The difference is about Western education. You discover that some illiterate women are even more vocal. They are bold in pursuing their concerns. At times, they even tell you: 'Is it because I don't have Western education, I know what I am doing?' Upbringing is important here. If you were brought up in an environment where you are not allowed to talk, you're going to be timid.

OM: Schools add to women's timidity then, such that by the time literate women are out of school, they become more timid than their illiterate counterparts

FM: It is not true, it is not true. Education added to socialization, yes.

OM: Our illiterate sisters appear more vocal, clearer about what they would and would not take but literate women are being careful ...

FM: Women with Western education are taught protocol - manners of doing things. Unlike illiterate women who say it raw, you want to be polite and cultured in the way you present your case. That is why illiterate women are more vocal and forceful. Sometimes, it helps to be polite and at times, it helps to be bold and raw. When you do it politely and you are not getting there, you need to be more forceful. That is what I think we need, to get affirmative action implemented by the government. We have been taking it slow with them. We take it easy, we dialogue, to get them to implement 30 per cent affirmative action, and we are still not getting it. Suggestion is for more action. We should tell them what we want and

how it should be done and should not continue softly softly, such that they get there and they just give a position to one woman, and say to one another: 'That should be okay for the women.'

Female Muslim Leader (FML) Ibadan: Seek knowledge from cradle to grave. Be knowledgeable in all aspects of life. It is important to have education, whether you are a man or woman. Muslim women are given both the secular and Islamic education. FOMWAN organizes adult education classes for illiterate women. At any rate, it is when you know what is in the Qur'an that you know how to worship God. Women have always had rights in the Qur'an. Western education is not in conflict with rights of women under the Qur'an because the rights have always been there.

Olutoyin Mejiuni (OM): What differences have you observed in the reactions of literate and illiterate women to issues?

FML: With both Western and Islamic education, a woman is in a better position to weigh and balance issues. Ideally, however, the Qur'anic injunction is more authentic because it is from the Almighty Allah. Difference is more pronounced when an illiterate in the Western sense does not have Islamic education. You see, Islam teaches everything. Qur'an talks about astronomy, biology, the computer, and the reproductive stages. In FOMWAN, we teach the Qur'an, beginning from the very first chapter. What Muslims do now is the Islamization of knowledge. You relate whatever you are learning to what the Qur'an has said about the subject.

OM: Are you saying there is no conflict between what women preach these days as women's human rights and Islam?

FML: Islam has given all the rights. It is probably because only the Muslims know and others are unaware, that is why they demand for the rights. The rights have always been given, but they have probably not been implemented. The Almighty Allah has given you, so you do not need to ask from human beings again.

## **Christianity**

### ***Male Christian Leader – Ibadan***

Olutoyin Mejiuni (OM): Have you observed differences in the way highly literate and the not so literate women react to and handle issues?

Male Christian Leader (MCL): Anyone that has the spirit of God will be humble. There should be no differences in the way of doing things. If an educated person wants to live intellectually, definitely, the Bible says knowledge which is not Godly knowledge puffs up. Intellectual knowledge can make a person proud, but spiritual knowledge will make a person humble. A woman that is educated and does not mix spiritual knowledge with

intellectual knowledge will be proud. A person who is not educated but has spiritual knowledge will behave normally, and that is where character development comes in. We teach people about God's character. If you imbibe God's character, you will behave in godly ways. When you are godly, you cannot be proud. God is the universal landlord and he is not proud. Persons that imbibe the nature and character of God will behave normally. To humble herself will become natural. She will not look down on other women because they did not go to school. After all, many of our parents did not go to school and we do not look down on them because they are illiterates.

When you talk of knowledge, it is not until you go to the four walls of the school or university. There is knowledge that you acquire through experience and there is knowledge that you acquire by age. What you get in class is a fraction of what you need. When you go out, you begin to get the real practical, applicable knowledge. What you get in school is theoretical knowledge, it is when you begin to go to work, that you would have real knowledge. No education is complete without the knowledge of God.

#### ***Female Christian Leader - Ibadan***

Olutoyin Mejiuni (OM): What differences have you observed between literate and illiterate/semi-literate women?

Female Christian Leader (FCL): Women should celebrate themselves. The reason you're a lecturer in the university for example is because you had opportunities. Your parents were there to tell you to sit down and do your homework. You are who you are because you were privileged. You should therefore make every woman around you feel important. Look at the way some female bosses behave. Some male bosses are better than female bosses.

#### **How Formal, Non-formal and Informal Education (and Learning) Construct Women's Identities**

The position of religious leaders on the provision of formal education for women can be summarized as follows: First, that women (like men and children) should be given opportunities to acquire formal education, but that the knowledge of God's words and God's words as written in the sacred texts should be their main guiding principle, and second, that women who have acquired formal education should be humble.

Given the position of religious leaders on all the issues that have been raised in this study, it is possible to interpret what the religious leaders said in respect of women's acquisition of formal education in two ways. The first interpretation could be that women (men and children) should look more to their religion and

religious leaders than elsewhere for the acquisition of knowledge. The position that women should be humble in spite of their acquisition of formal education could be interpreted to mean, as the female Muslim and Christian leaders in Ibadan said, that women should be submissive to their husbands (and persons in positions of authority, including religious leaders) in spite of their academic achievements.

It is not surprising that the religious leaders are so strident in their position that women should be humble in spite of their education. When we asked women to talk about the benefits of formal education, it was clear that many of the religious leaders could not be comfortable with some of the benefits that women had gained or hope to gain from education. The main benefit of education that women in formal work identified was connecting with other people. They said they were better persons as a result of education because they were able to relate to, interact with, and live with people from different backgrounds, religious persuasions, culture, race and tribes, and they were more understanding of the ways of other people. Next to connection to others, they identified autonomy as a benefit of education. They spoke of how education had enhanced their self-confidence, empowered them, and made them independent. Some said it had increased their knowledge and reasoning capacity, and yet others said it had opened up opportunities and given them prestige. One woman said it had helped her in bringing up children.

Female students believe that formal education will help them to improve their competence for their desired careers and also make them breadwinners; and help them to earn the respect of others and resist dominance and abuse by men. Some others said it would enhance their thinking capacity and knowledge, so they would be able to impart knowledge to others and deal with their responsibilities in the private and public spheres of life. Hear a few of them: 'I don't want to be a full-time house wife whose duty is to raise children and cook. I don't want to be maltreated by any man'; 'Higher education is important to me than early marriage. If I am opportuned to have my PhD, I will be a lady of substance, a breadwinner for the family, an independent woman'; 'It will help me gain higher and deeper knowledge to face my responsibilities in the society, my family and the Church...'; 'Education is the best asset a woman can have that cannot be stolen away, even by her husband, and it will help her fend for herself and the family in future'.

At this point, we recall Berggren and Berggren's (1975) view about education. They said: 'education was, and still is, a badge of superior status; literacy and schooling served and still serves the powerful classes; it is a symbol and justification of privilege and a safeguard for authority and self-interest' (p. 6). Ordinarily, humility is a desirable character trait. However, in the context of patriarchy, and given the fact that many religious leaders have taken the position that women have to be submissive to men, when religious leaders urge women to be humble

when they have acquired Western education, one cannot but interpret this as an attempt to rein in educated women. That is to say, the call that women should be humble is an attempt to rein them in, so they do not begin to wear the badge of superior social status and so they do not begin to feel powerful like men, and by extension, challenge men's authority and superior position in all spheres of life.

We recall that we had earlier observed that the practice of religion is one of the processes of socialization, and religions are cultural systems, they are therefore powerful educational agents. Religious beliefs and practices are taught and learned through the processes of informal and non-formal education, and whether or not they appear in the curricula of formal educational provisions, they are almost always present as hidden curriculum.

To the question of who teaches what, and how; teachers (through the disempowering and empowering lessons that they teach students), fellow students (mostly through negative lessons) and religious leaders (through their negative and confusing messages), teach women whom it is valuable to be, and this is achieved through a system of rewards and punishment. This way, the processes of schooling and participation in religious activities construct and reconstruct women's identities. What one is saying in essence is that women and men who have formal school training, and who are themselves products of many influences (including norms and values that are held sacrosanct in different religions), many of which convey, reflect and perpetuate unequal relations of power, believe themselves to be capable of bestowing knowledge on those they consider to know nothing (Freire 1993; Bassey 1999). In addition, the hierarchical structure of relationships in formal schools ensures that particular subject matters are taught in particular ways, and some are not taught at all. In addition, students are unable to challenge the views and beliefs that lecturers pass across in class because of the fear in our environment that they may be deemed rude, for challenging an older person, or someone in a position of authority.

A number of men too, who consider that women are senseless and or know close to nothing, teach women implicitly and explicitly to know their place. They cite: 'careful observation of, and interaction with married women over time', their age, the fact that they are married; religion and the media as sources of knowledge. Women who have explicitly accepted that they are subordinate to men (mainly among female students, women in informal work and female apprentices) cite 'the way things are' and how God made things as sources of knowledge, and they communicate this to other women – friends, neighbours and their children.

Concerning access to education, that is whether or not women are able to learn, we note that literate women in formal work and in higher learning have had access to education (and many educative influences) in formal school settings, in religious settings, in their homes, and through day-to-day experiences. Semi-literate women and their apprentices, given unequal relations of power in society,

have had: minimal access to education in formal schools, and access to non-formal and informal education in non-formal settings; in religious settings and during some other day-to-day interactions. There is another source from which all women in this study, whether literate or semi-literate, could probably access education, both as learners and teachers. These are the informal and non-formal, structured and semi-structured women's organizations, networks, friendships and associations that are either secular or religious that constitute the women's movement (Obilade and Mejiuni 2006).

In this study, only one literate woman and a few female students gave clear indications that they are members of NGOs, one of the non-formal and informal sources of knowledge for women. Too many women are members of religious groups and, for obvious economic reasons, they are members of cooperative credit unions. At least two semi-literate women indicated that their husbands do not like them participating in activities of groups. One key reason for the low involvement of women in activities of groups other than religious groups is because too many men dread the educative influences of women's groups, social clubs, etc., on women; so, they discourage their spouses from becoming members of these groups (Obilade and Mejiuni 2006). Husbands and boyfriends, prefer that their spouses belong to religious groups, as they are sure these will ensure their spouses' continuing flexibility and subordination to them. What women are being taught is to be 'cultured', that is, to imbibe and behave according to the norms and values that benefit most men, and some women.

Let us look at the experiences of literate women that have been cited in this study. But first, we have to note that literate women have experienced sexism, discrimination and violence, not only in the formal school system or while in school, but also in other spheres of life such as family, given the experiences of Tiwa and Segun and, in public places, as represented by Rebecca's experience. We will find details of some of those experiences in Box 4.3. So, for women who have gone through formal education up to the tertiary level, the experiences of sexism in school represent a part of the whole range of experiences of sexism that they are likely to encounter in their lifetime.

We take Adedigba's experience in primary school. She observed that boys' names were listed before girls' names in the class register in her primary school – an experience which left Adedigba feeling inferior to men, at least three decades before she recalled her experience. This was coupled with the fact that Adedigba and other girls went to cook and perform domestic chores for their teachers when they were supposed to be in school. This is clearly one form of the abuse of power that Bakare-Yusuf (2003b) pointed out in the teacher-student relationship, in Nigeria. The teachers' source of power is seniority (age and position of authority), but they make the girls and not the boys do domestic work because of the assumption that girls and women ought to do domestic work, an assumption that has its roots in the patriarchal structure of our society,

and which has been made worse by colonialism and the new religions. Unfortunately, the practice of listing boys' names before girls' still subsists till date, at least in primary schools in Ibadan, one of the two locations of this research. After I had gone through some of the questionnaires that I had retrieved from respondents, and that includes Adedigba's questionnaire, I had a discussion with a friend who runs a nursery/primary school, about some of the responses that I got from the field, and she confirmed Adedigba's observation. My then eight-year-old daughter, who had listened in on our conversation got excited and exasperated and she said: 'Yes mummy, it is true, they call the boys' names before our own even though girls are more than boys in my class.'

Women said their male counterparts tried to get them to believe that women's success in education does not matter, for it will end in the kitchen. Look at Teniola and Rolake's responses. Kehinde, Ajoke and Debo, reported their experiences of different types of intimidation by male students and lecturers in the classroom. Medupin, Chigozie, Temitope, Aramide, Tundun and Olaore reported discrimination relating to political and classroom leadership, and marginalization in carrying out academic assignments. Atolagbe and Esther's experiences bring out their male counterparts as being unable to cope with women's academic success (Horner 1971). Allied to this is Theresa's experience of men setting boundaries for women's achievement in school. Aanwo, Folarin and Ngozi's experiences appear quite painful because men who assume that women are objects of desire believe that women's academic achievements are suspect. The details of the experiences that these women shared are in Box 4. 3. The preceding were women's experiences in schools, as stated by women.

During interviews with two male lecturers, one each in Ibadan (Dr A) and Lokoja (Mr B), both gave indications that they had heard young women complain about sexual harassment. When Mrs. J, also a lecturer at the Kogi State Polytechnic was asked the same question, that is, female students' experience of sexual harassment, she said she was not aware of any such complaints except, according to her, about five years before the interview, when a dubious girl alleged she was about to be raped somewhere off campus. She displayed a lot of irritation, as she gave her response.

In an interview with Mr S, a lecturer at the Kogi State Polytechnic in Lokoja, he enthused about being a father to all students, and told us how he tries to be objective in his interactions with them. He said although he is a Muslim, he does not allow his personal values or religion to influence his teaching. He also said he draws examples from both the Bible and the Qua'ran while teaching in class. When he was asked whether the examples that he gives in class favour the experiences of men alone or those of women alone, or both, he said they favour both. He told us about how, while teaching the structure of formal organizations which is hierarchical, he would usually use the class as a good example. According to him:

I say that class is an organization at that point in time, and I see myself at the top of that hierarchy. Next to me, we have the class representative. Okay. Down the line we have the men before the women. Now religion has come to play. Because in Islam, Islam has it that a woman should be subordinate to man. Here, I say if you have to go by Islamic injunction, the ladies, you come after men. That is what I do sometimes but again, you see when I want to tell students to learn to tolerate .....I cite Jesus.....

He then added that he encourages students by telling all of them that irrespective of sex, they all have the capacity to acquire knowledge. Notwithstanding his other example about Jesus and how he encourages all to acquire knowledge, Mr S's example of hierarchy to his class is a good example of how the hidden curriculum works.

In our observation of Mrs. H's English class at the Kogi State Polytechnic in Lokoja, we found out that no woman participated in the simulated argument that was held, because she taught Argumentative Essays (and other types of essays). There were nineteen male and seventeen female students in the class. Throughout the class that lasted one hour, the female students did not voluntarily reply to the lecturer's questions. In the interview that we held with Mrs. H after the class, we asked her about the obvious silence of the female students in her class. She said it was typical of them not to talk in class, and that perhaps they were reacting to our presence in the class. We sat at the back seats and were not introduced to the class until after the lecture, so we asked Mrs H why it was the women who were responding to our presence and not the men?

### **Learning and Not-learning (Resisting and Rejecting) Empowering and Disempowering Lessons in Formal Education**

What women know is that society considers them inferior to men and, what many men and some women would have women learn from their experiences is to be flexible – to be who society expects them to be. If learning is conceptualized as change in behaviour resulting from experiences, it is not so clear that most women have indeed learned to be who society expects them to be. While many have taken messages that disable and disempower them to heart, and have been thinking and behaving according to their precepts, some have resisted and rejected disabling messages and teachings.

Clearly, the experiences of women, as cited by women, the testimonies of the teachers, the silence of the female students in the English class and the implicit and explicit lessons that women were supposed to draw from their experiences, and that can, or may have resulted in negative or positive learning for the women are obvious. The formal school then, mirrors the larger society, as it denies women access to leadership at particular levels; as unequal relations of power get exhibited in teacher-student relationship and what is taught, and as

women are told that success is foreign to women (who are sexual objects), and if they are successful, they will end up in the kitchen anyway.

We ought not to forget also that the literate women in this study also, in the main, participate in religious activities. This is more so for the young women who are still in school, and who, in comparison with literate women in formal work, spoke a lot about being submissive to men. Given the educational attainments of literate women, and their implicit and explicit belief that women be subject to men, one may be tempted to conclude that formal education has not empowered the women, given the barrage of influences which attempt to construct, and in some cases, have constructed their identity to one that is subordinate to men – an identity, which some of the women have internalized.

This is even more so when we recall the responses of literate women and men, and semi-literate women to questions around women's civic-political participation, the roles of women in the private and public spheres of life, women's identities, and women's experience of violence. There was no real difference in the responses of the two groups of women to questions around women's civic-political participation. In their responses to the roles of women in the private and public spheres, and women's identities, more semi-literate women than literate women made the point about being breadwinners or co-breadwinners, as a way of challenging male superiority. We also recall that while some of the literate women in formal work defined themselves through their husbands and children, semi-literate women had found psychological freedom in rejecting the notions of husbands and accepting the notion of '*Baba omo*', that is, father of children. It appears that literate women want to be seen to be cultured and they also want to show that their academic successes have not gone into their heads. So, to avoid the scathing criticism that is explicit in being referred to as a member of '*Egbe Ki L'oko O Se*', that is, a Yoruba expression that can translate either to: the 'ignore-your-husband group' or 'what-does-a-husband-have-to-offer group' (Obilade and Mejiuni 2006), they eulogise their relationships with their husbands and their love for their homes.

This is not to say, of course, that some women do not enjoy good relationships with their spouses, or imply that women have not found fulfilment in marriage. In addition, although it would appear that more semi-literate women than literate women had experienced violence or knew someone who had experienced violence, literate women who had experienced violence did not react to their experience in a way that was significantly different from the way semi-literate women had reacted to their experience. We also recall that literate men gave more of the advice that was considered empowering on violence against women than did literate women, and although literate women gave more advice that was considered empowering than semi-literate women did, both literate and semi-literate women gave almost equal percentages of advice that was considered to hold the least possibility of empowering women. Interestingly, more women

gave this type of advice (or advanced the easy arguments/comfortable positions) than men.

We also need to reckon with the fact that literate women in formal work showed discomfort with a wide variety of conditions and issues in tertiary education when, given their experiences of tertiary education, they were asked to indicate the changes they would like effected in tertiary education. The environment of teaching-learning was most mentioned as being unsatisfactory. Some of their responses can be found in Box 7.1. During one of our observations at the Kogi State Polytechnic, we noted that the large class where Mrs A's lecture was held was dirty, and could be better lit. The hall where Mr S's lecture was held was located on top of a hill. It was big, spacious and airy and the fans were working. However, the roads and footpaths that led to the hall were littered with faeces – an obvious indication that students have problems with toilet facilities. Apart from the teaching-learning environment which got the most flak and appeared to have overshadowed other concerns, the courses taught, and the ways the courses were taught were mentioned as areas where change is required. Only one respondent thought method of assessment needs to be changed. Morality, economic inequalities, and the attitudes of lecturers, especially in respect of abuse of power also got some mention. Sarah indicated that she wants a special law enacted to discourage lecturers from covetousness as they do not spare even housewives, and Hauwa would like to change the attitude of lecturers toward female students.<sup>1</sup>

**Box 7.1: Changes that Women in Formal Work Would Like Effected in Tertiary Education**

'I will like to effect changes in the kind of hostels that students live. Students' hostels were not usually conducive. I lived in a room of 6 legal occupants with each of us having one squatter. We were 12 in a room meant for 6' – Banke

'The environment of teaching should be less stressful and more comfortable. The education system is generally too stressful; fill the same forms each year etc' – Adeola

'There should be flexibility in the choices of courses taught and the mode of teaching. The environment should be made friendlier to intellectual property acquisition. I was a victim of rigid rules in my institution of higher learning. The designated lecture rooms were very inconvenient' – Inunkan

'Lecturers should be given more incentives to do their job, and if they do not, they should be penalized. Some of my lecturers at the university did not come for lectures but gave us topics to read just before exams and set questions on the untaught parts' – Adetutu

'Courses taught. There should be more practicals than theory' – Shade

'Changes in the courses taught; courses to be more practical, the environment should be more conducive for learning. Learning style should be modernized to meet trends of society. Teaching of morals is also very essential in order to make the individual a better person in the society. This is my view from my experience in the larger society after leaving the higher institution of learning' – Itunu

'Reduce the number of students that receive lecture per period. Lecture halls are always jam packed. Provide adequate chairs that will be convenient for all students. Learning cannot take place where too many students receive lectures together. A lot of them especially those at the back and outside (standing) won't gain anything'

– Idiat

'Change mode of dressing, effect changes in teaching/learning environment, change method of assessment. I want the individual to be educated in the real sense of the word' – Noimot

'Make education cheaper, let lecturers earn higher and the environment to be conducive for teaching. Because the institutions of higher learning must go through a change, a positive one' – Ihimoni

'Stop lecturers exploiting students financially. Male and female students exchanging visits in their hostels and entering rooms must stop' – Esther

'I would like to make lecturers teach better and also inculcate moral discipline. Most university students complain of lecturers' inability to be patient with them, they are rushed and lecturers hardly care for their moral lives' – Omolade

'I will stop lecturers from producing handouts. It is a way of exploiting the students and it does not make student attend class as they should do' – Kunbi

'Environment of learning and attitude of lecturers toward female students. There should be a conducive environment for learning. Provision of education should be free. Lecturers should stop harassing female students' – Hauwa

It is interesting, however, that apart from the two clear references to sexual harassment as an area where change is required, the women did not speak to the put down, their marginalization in politics/leadership and academic assignments, the humiliating remarks, and the intimidation that they experienced as female students, as areas in which change is required. The questions that came to mind then were: Can this be because the women assumed that those are issues that cannot be changed? Could it be that the women thought these are problems that women have to deal with at a personal level rather than collectively and institutionally? Or, are these literate women in formal work assuming (implicitly), like the young women in tertiary institutions and the semi-literate women did, that such is 'the way things are'?

Given the preceding observations, it is not surprising that the social status of Nigerian women who have gone through tertiary education is still low, when compared with that of men. This is because religion and socialization/informal learning within and outside classrooms and the school system interface with the hierarchical structure of relationships in formal education, especially tertiary education, to perpetuate unequal relations of power between men and women, construct (or further construct) the identities of women to one that is subordinate to men, thereby limiting the transformative potentials of formal education.

However, it also appears that the fact that women have had the experience of tertiary education, and the fact of the barrage of potentially disempowering experiences that the women have had in the institutions, have led them to attempting to resist and resisting oppression, especially in terms of questioning taken-for-granted positions, through reflection, which is an important component of Praxis (Freire 1993). Aanwo in Ibadan and Hauwa in Lokoja used education to deconstruct male superiority. Aanwo said:

I believe that if a woman and a man can be judged equally academically, then they should be treated equally in other spheres of life too and a woman could be the head and guide in a community.

We should remember that Aanwo thought a woman's role at home is that of 'partner to the husband, mother to the children, co-breadwinner to the family'. Hauwa said:

In the public sphere, women are always given the second position. It should not be so, since we attend the same school, pay the same fee and do a lot of things together. We ought to be given roles just like our male counterparts.

We also note the way Esther and Rolake handled men who could not cope with women's success. Esther, in spite of all the harassment, said she would smile, and she excelled always, except in the final year. Her smile is definitely a knowing smile, a smile that belies her determination and mocks her harassers. Rolake simply said, 'I never gave up'. The reactions of Esther and Rolake are forms of resistance, one in which they refuse to accept that they should be less successful than men. Another example of critical questioning and resistance is the one cited by Dr A of the University of Ibadan who told us that he once invited two of his male students who would usually put in extra work and assignments in his course to attend his postgraduate class. He said the next day in class, he called the two to talk to their course-mates about what they had learned from the postgraduate class, and they did. He said some of the young women in the class challenged him immediately, and asked why he had invited two men and no woman. He said he had to admit to the class that it was an oversight, and that it was the men who were on his mind then. He said he also had to let the class know that there was a woman who would also usually put extra efforts like the

two men that he had invited to the postgraduate class, but she was not on his radar then. He then added that he thought the impact of the feminist movement was beginning to be felt, among female students. He said in about two or three departments in his Faculty, of the ten students who had Second Class Honours Upper Division, seven were women.

These resistances, that is, the critical questioning and the determination to further succeed, no doubt gave the women psychological freedom and, as such, they are confident individuals (Hooks 1984). This somewhat confirms Foucault's (1980) hypothesis that resistance to power is found right at the point where power relations are exercised (p. 142).

In the section where respondents were asked to comment freely on all the issues raised in the questionnaire that they had responded to, Aanwo said:

Culture and religion are too deeply embedded in the African/Nigerian women for formal education to make much impact yet. The way women think 20 years ago on issues like marriage, dating, childrearing and even work has changed but a little, despite formal education. One would be surprised to note the little change that has occurred when educated women of these days are tasked on these issues.

In spite of Aanwo's cynicism, but more because of: the strengths and assets, and, dreams of the individual woman; the resistances that women have put up against oppression; and, the efforts of some women and a few men both within and outside tertiary institutions, there is hope that formal education and religion will serve women better.

### **The Challenges of Religion**

We recollect that 68 per cent of highly literate women in formal work and 69.6 per cent of female students made obvious references to religion in the responses they gave in their questionnaires. Some of them (along with their semi-literate sisters), stated that religion has helped them to realize their assets/potential; their belief in the Almighty gives them peace and contentment, and is behind their willingness to lend a helping hand to others. The other benefits of religion that they identified were that it: guides their relationship with others; teaches dedication to duty, obedience, respect and faithfulness; teaches how to dress well; shapes character; keeps problems at bay, and is responsible for all achievements. Religion is therefore an important part of the lives of these women. The extent to which they have taken the teachings of their religions/religious leaders to heart is indicative of whether they think religion is the giver of meaning, and or rules. We do not want to devalue or diminish what religion (read spirituality) means to these women. To do so will be to ignore the importance of a holistic approach to the development of the human person (English 2005). However, our concern is that religion should enable, and not disable her adherents, especially female adherents.

The position of religious leaders on the issues raised in this research is therefore challenging. Many of the religious leaders identified culture as the problem. Culture was the whipping boy. The Christian and Muslim leaders appear unaware that their religions have become cultures (ways of life) in Nigeria of today. They also fail to realize that although certain aspects of their religions are empowering, the patriarchal values that are explicit and implicit in the religions fit and fuse with some of our indigenous culture to disempower women. These are: beliefs about women's nature; the belief that women cannot be overall leaders in the religions (and by implication and extension, the entire public sphere); the belief that women have to be submissive to men; and that, women are caregivers and not breadwinners.

However, in spite of the negative and confusing messages and signals from religious leaders, we acknowledge that they do convey positive messages too. The view that women need to take activist stance in respect of participation in civic-political matters and that they should watch out for the divide-and-rule tactics of men is a challenge to women to review their position/frameworks and strategies. Examples of the challenges can be found in the position of the female Muslim leader in Lokoja who thought that if a 'softly softly' approach to ensuring women's active involvement in politics is not working, a more activist stance may be necessary. The same goes for the male Christian leader in Lokoja who was very emphatic that Nigerian women today are no longer taking up activist stance as women in the past, like Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti did.<sup>2</sup>

Some religious leaders made the point that women ought to show love to men, their children and one another, and that men should love their wives. Female Muslim and Christian leaders in Lokoja and Ibadan, the female traditional religious leader in Ibadan, and the male Muslim leaders in Lokoja made the point about the need to improve the economic condition of women and the generality of the Nigerian people strongly. Some of the female religious leaders linked economic depression with the problem of violence against women.

Clearly also, most of the religious leaders considered that women (who have accepted their roles as caregivers and sole nurturers of children) should train children to be God-fearing so that they can affect the nation positively. And, the almost unanimous opposition of the religious leaders to violence against women is a window of opportunity for stemming the tide of violence against women. Finally, in spite of the confusing signals from the female Christian leader in Ibadan, she urges women to have confidence in themselves.

### **Hopes and Possibilities**

Female students who were participants in a focus group discussion spoke about their strengths and assets, and some of the successes that they have achieved as members of groups as follows:

'I love to use my hands to make things. Because I love hats, I learned how to make hats, now I make hats and sell them, and I'm happy to see people wear them'.

'I love to sing and praise God, and there was no serious choir in my fellowship. So I mentioned it to my pastor who gave me the go-ahead to organize the choir. Also at home, I get people together to praise and worship'.

'I like to teach people. When it is time for exams, I gather my colleagues together and teach them'.

'I love choreography. When I was in secondary school and some visitors came to the school, I organized a performance. I also choreograph in the church, and I teach and guide people who want to choreograph'.

'I like advising people, especially girls. If their guys are maltreating them, that is, beating and cheating on them. There was a case where a guy promised to marry a girl and he later refused. The lady came to me and was crying. She didn't know what to do, maybe to go and beg the guy. I told her to be herself that she carries all the qualities and so there is no reason she should go and beg the guy. I also told her the guy will be the one to come and beg, for she has to make herself very expensive'.

'In my church, I noticed that the keyboardists were all men, so I took the challenge and I learned to play the piano. So now in my church, they miss my presence when I am not there to play the keyboard'.

'I like to pass on the talents that I have. In the class during lectures, I listen and I understand, so my classmates come to me after class so that I can put them through. Even before examination, people that are calling themselves 'head'<sup>5</sup> come to me to put them through. I look at my performance, it is better than theirs. As one is leaving, another will come, so I see myself as a teacher, the head'.

The same group of female students spoke of their dreams for themselves and for Nigerian women as follows:

'I want to be a leader in all ramifications – spiritually, financially, economically, even academically. Not only that, even in the country, I want to be leading men and dictating to them on what to do. I want Nigerian women to be courageous and to know that they are equals with men'.

'I want Nigerian women to involve themselves in politics and public administration. I want to become President of this country'.

'I want Nigerian women to be leaders. Since the time of independence, men have been ruling us during military rule and democracy. There are many things which they can't even do. They don't rule us well, but if women are given the chance, we will see many changes, and that is my dream. I am aiming to be a leader and I want every Nigerian woman to eradicate fear and thoughts such as: "I cannot do this one o since men are to be the head"'.

'I want Nigerian women to be equal to men. I want gender inequality and women's feeling of inferiority to stop, and women should see themselves as superior to men. I would like to be an adviser in all ramifications to both men and women'.

'Look at our country now, in all the businesses, the rich people are men. I want to be a business woman that is known all over the world. There should be more women, well known, in business. Women have the intelligence, they are creative, they do the thinking that make all the ideas that men use, and they will be using it as if they are the ones that own the ideas. I want to be very knowledgeable, and be the richest woman in this country'.

'I want Nigerian women to be spiritual in the sense that if you look at the spiritual aspect of it, women who are spiritual will be able to impact the fear of God. If you have the fear of God, you can tell people that God hates all the armed robbery, corruption, mismanagement and evil things. As a woman, I want to be a leader, for I want to bring women out of ignorance and diseases. I want women to know their rights because men are subjecting them to rigorous works, labouring, and they don't know their rights'.

From the foregoing, we can infer that those female students are not hopeless women. They know they have assets that they had appropriately channelled in the past, and they have dreams, they envision a better future for themselves and other Nigerian women, even though at times the dreams appear like dreams about dominating men who have hitherto been dominating women.

In the rest of the paragraphs in this chapter, we look at some of the efforts and the attitudes of female and male lecturers, and their potentials for empowering women, especially women in higher education.

Mrs J of the Kogi State Polytechnic in Lokoja, who will not encourage any student (male or female) in her department, a science-based department, to participate in students' union politics because they hardly have the time to do so, said she would rather that women excel first in a chosen career, before they marry. She draws from her own experience as an undergraduate who gave birth to, and reared children while still in the university. She said she drums this into the ears of her female students and her female children, and that two of her female children promised they would follow her counsel. One had already broken the promise.

Mrs H, also of the Kogi State Polytechnic in Lokoja believes that inequalities in the socialization of children are unjustifiable, and so she actively discourages sex-role socialization at home, and she has been labelled 'Thatcher' by her children. She indicated that although her view is incompatible with her religion, Islam, she still has peace with her creator. She believes that women should extend what they do at home - being mothers to children - outside. That is, being mothers in society. During our observation of her teaching, we found out that she practices her belief. In class, at least twice, she gave sharp rebukes when she thought the

students needed it, but she was friendly. During the course of her lecture, a young woman who arrived late sneaked into a chair, and the men in the class, jokingly notified Mrs. H. that the girl, whose name they mentioned, had arrived. She ignored them.

During the interview, we asked her whether she ever took any interest in a student, and whether she has ever done a turn-around in the life of any student and she said yes. She told us that a good example was the young woman that came into the class, whom the men were trying to draw her attention to. She said after the young woman's first semester in school, she performed so woefully, she took active interest in her. She ensured that she attended classes, took interest in what she did out of class, gave her extra work and according to her, she was performing far better than when she came in and most people in school now saw the young woman as her adopted child. It appears that is what persons who demand that women do things differently from men want. Good enough, Mrs H's Head of Department had described her as diligent behind her back, when we were trying to book an appointment to watch her class and interview her. What this means then is that Mrs H imbues hard work and effective performance of her duty with care and nurturing. She also believes that women should participate actively in politics, because Aishat (the Prophet's wife) was a politician.

Mr B, the lecturer who said he led a few other lecturers to raise the matter of a case of sexual harassment at a departmental meeting, said he did not believe in sex-role socialization, because his own childhood was devoid of that. He said he grew up with his uncle in Lagos (the commercial capital of Nigeria) and had to do all household chores, which he now found beneficial. We pointed out that perhaps he just had to do those chores because of his position then. He answered in the affirmative, but added that it was now a part of him, and, he found it positive. He told us that his wife is an accountant, and she plays equal roles in the decision-making process in their home. He said that he had three daughters whom he loved, and he could not see why anyone would discriminate against them. He added that he was of the view that if women were given the chance to rule Nigeria, they would rule the country better than men, and cited the example of Deborah in the Bible, who was a housewife, a prophetess and a judge.

Professor W, whom we had met earlier, is a gender activist. She was a member of Women in Nigeria (WIN). In this work, one of her students (Folarin) had indicated that the professor had changed her own perspective of women's roles in public. Apart from Folarin's testimony, in informal conversations with some Faculty members at the University of Ibadan, they gave indications that Professor W carried out an overhaul of one of the departments in the university. In the interview that we held with the professor, she had indicated that when she assumed headship of her department, a science department, she decided to take immediate steps to rectify the gender imbalance in the chart depicting the

presumed stages in human evolution. The chart, conspicuously displayed in the corridor of the department for several years, showed only male figures, indicating the evolution of the masculine gender (only male figures are traditionally represented in texts on human evolution). She said she promptly asked that one of the departmental graphic artists drew female figures beside the male ones, since both women and men are human and both evolved together! The artist, in his ingenuity, which was very much appreciated by Prof. W, depicted one of the female figures as pregnant. Till date, the exhibition hall of the department carries the diagram of the evolution of man and woman.<sup>4</sup>

The implications of Prof. W's action are numerous. An important one, among several, is that of making women visible in the academy, particularly in a department that deals with the source of all creation. Her action will no doubt contribute to the process of deconstructing the invisibility of women in the evolutionary process (Harding 2004) and the academia. The point about pregnancy is also extremely important, for persons in the academia have in the past shown some reticence about discussing pregnancy, a natural process, in the public sphere – the universities (Fashina 2000).

In conclusion, the barrage of discriminatory practices, abuse and violence against women notwithstanding, there is hope that education will become empowering for women. There is hope because: women have assets and strengths that they are aware of; they have been putting up resistance against oppression; and, there are female and male lecturers, and female (and one male) religious leaders who are challenging relations of power, and who are urging women to exercise their individual agency, and power, with other women to end domination.

### Notes

1. See T. Fashina (2001) for some other instances of humiliation of women and lack of respect for the rights of women in tertiary institutions.
2. See N.E Mba (1982) for detailed analyses of women's political activities in Southern Nigeria between 1900 and 1965. This includes details of the political activities of Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti.
3. This is an apparent reference to men's claim to sole leadership in the public and private spheres.
4. One suspects that Sandra Harding, the feminist theorist, will feel satisfied with the point that Prof. W makes in depicting the evolution of men and women. Harding (2004) had raised issues about the social processes that made reasonable the belief that women made no contributions to human evolution.

