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### **WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE IN NIGERIA**

by Dr Fatima L Adamu

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### Introduction

The development of the "difference" paradigm in feminism during the 1980s is generally considered a positive trend because it has ended the dominance of one category of feminism over others and led to the development of a feminist scholarship that recognises the importance of other factors such as race, age, religion, and history, apart from sex, in the analysis of the women's reality and struggle. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is a nation of ethnic, religious, and economic diversity. Consequently, the politics of difference in the women's struggle become more relevant. How do such politics affect the women's struggle in Nigeria? The struggle of Nigerian women regarding women's issues and the methods adopted have reflected such diversities. Over the years, different women's groups and movements have emerged over one women's issue or the other, but the experiences have not been fruitful. Struggle over women's issues in Nigeria has divided women more than united them. This is the case because the questions of what issue to struggle over and what methods to adopt in such a struggle have always been sources of contention between the different groups of women. Religious, ethnic, regional, and class identities have influenced the degree of support an issue would receive among Nigerian women. To examine these politics of difference in the women's struggle in Nigeria, we shall have a look at the issue of the Shariah, the current Constitutional Reform Conference, and the response of Nigerian women to such important events in Nigeria's political future.

### Background Information on Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous and diverse country in Africa with a population of over 100 million and a number of different ethnic groups ranging from 260 to 380. In terms of religious composition, the exact figures are contentious estimating 60-50% Muslims, 40-45% Christian and a few pockets of the population still practicing indigenous religions. The Nigeria government consists of a federal system with 36 states and Abuja as its federal capital. After independence from Britain in 1960 the military ruled the country for over 25 years. During this period of military rule Nigeria made several attempts to return to civilian

rule, and in 1999 succeeded. The prolonged military rule has often been blamed for increasing the ethnic and religious tensions in the country as the different identities in the country were not allowed free expression.

Before the increasing crude oil production in the late 1960s agriculture accounted for 60% of the country's GDP and 90% of the export earnings from 1960 to 1966 (Ajakaiye and Soyibo, 1999). The emergence of oil has affected the country tremendously. It has led to an increase in foreign exchange earnings and government revenue. This development has affected not only the investment, production, and consumption patterns of the country but also the government programmes and policies over the years (NEEDS Document, 2003). Social services such as education and health have been expanded and managed by the government. The oil revenues also encouraged high levels of consumption through the import of goods and services, and the establishment of industries that depended on imports for cheap capital goods, spare parts, and raw materials.

In light of this situation, the fall in the price of oil on the international market in the mid 1980s had a drastic impact on Nigeria. Consequently, the government embarked upon massive expenditure cuts on social services. This cut in government spending had far reaching negative consequences on employment, fuel prices, transportation, health, education, water, electricity, price control, and so on. Many industries were closed down and rising consumer prices ate deeply into the purchasing power of the Nigerians (Osaghae, 1995).

While the fall in oil prices can be considered the immediate cause of the Nigerian economic crisis, the underlying cause is the structural weakness of the economy. According to a government document, the economy is characterised by low agricultural production, trade distortion, an uncompetitive manufacturing sector, and a cumbersome regulatory framework.

Another cause is the poor management of the economy, where the earnings derived from the oil have been mismanaged or siphoned out of the country by public



officials and their foreign partners. For example, in 1990, Nigerians supposedly had \$33 billion stashed away in foreign bank accounts, a sum equal to the country's foreign debts (Elabor-Idemudia, 1994). The Nigerian economic problem was compounded by continued government borrowing and eventual debt accumulation.

This situation forced the government to introduce measures in order to restructure the economy. In 1982, a short-term economic stabilisation act was introduced as an austerity measure. This was followed in 1985 by a fifteen-month national economic emergency, and later the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and reform measures of 1986 and 1999-to date respectively. The SAP program included the devaluation of the Naira, a cut in government spending, privatisation, and the withdrawal of subsidies. These policies have affected the economy negatively. As a result of the above trends in the economy, the living standard of the Nigerians has deteriorated. According to the World Bank, the incidence of poverty has increased, with 60% of the Nigerian population being considered poor. Basic social indicators place Nigeria among the twenty poorest countries in the world. Infant mortality stands at 85 per 1000 live births. Half of all children aged two to five years show signs of persistent malnutrition. Only two-thirds of the relevant age group are enrolled in primary school, compared to 90% in the early 1980s.

Regarding women the FGN/UNICEF (2001) report shows a general disadvantage due to legal, cultural, and social barriers that limit their access to land, credit, technology, farming inputs, support services, and also their earning capacity. They spend long hours on low output, physically demanding activities, such as fetching water and fuel wood provision, in addition to their household responsibilities.

### **Perspective on African Feminisms**

In most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa women have been involved in women's movement activities in their own ways with little concern to the name or theory of such struggle. To the majority of women scholars and activists in Sub-Saharan Africa feminism has generally been a distant tool of intellectual discourse and political action. The few that know about feminism by international exchange or being part of the academia tend to dismiss it as something of little relevance to the reality of ordinary women residing in rural or urban Africa. However, Africa's integration into

the global system, particularly the pervasive impact of globalisation on African scholarship has changed the standpoint of many African women scholars. More and more women are engaged with global feminism, particularly in the area of scholarship<sup>1</sup> because gender oppression is as important as the oppression Africans face on the global level (see for example Miriam C Gyimah, 2003 and Ogundipe-Lesli, 1991, Amina Mama, 1992 and Adamu, 1999). This shift has resulted in the emergence of two fundamentally different approaches to feminism in Africa. The first one, although critical of mainstream feminism for excluding the race, history and class issue, tends to view feminism in a positive and constructive light, whereas the second dismisses feminism as a Western, imperialist concept.

Those favouring the first approach find it satisfactory to broaden the Western definition of feminism and to make it relevant to the struggle of Africa and African women by deconstructing the concept. Thus, such names as "Stiwanism", "Womanism", "Motherism" are used to describe the African women's struggle and movement. For example, Ogundipe-Leslie elaborates on the premise of African feminism that: (1) feminism needs not be in opposition to men, (2) women need not neglect their biological roles, (3) African women idealise motherhood and claim it to be a strength having a special manifestation in Africa, (4) the total configuration of the women's condition should be addressed rather than being obsessed with sexual issues, (5) certain aspects of women's reproductive rights take priority over others, (6) the women's condition in Africa needs to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of their society involving men and children, and (7) any women's ideology has to be developed in the context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the contemporary Africa.

Thus, supporters of this approach view the current globalisation in the world economy, polity and communication as something that presents challenges and opportunities for women activists and scholars of Africa and the West alike. This provides an opportunity for the re-emergence of internationalism within feminism and the women's movement. For instance, the globalisation of the world economy and polity has highlighted the need for global coalition and solidarity in the women's struggle on the local level, while the technological advances in communication have provided the opportunity to facilitate such a solidarity. The current trends in



globalisation do not only make this international alliance feasible, but also imperative. For example, the international institutions' current monopoly of the developing countries' economy calls for an agenda for co-operation in research and action across the board with academic feminists of all disciplines and feminist movements of Africa and the North. Discussing the possible political and academic feminist alliance along the issue of globalisation and the restructuring of the economy, Sparr (1994:188) suggests that, "this is one battle where activists and scholars of all schools of thought need to and could comfortably unify. Improving statistics is not a traditional struggle for most activists and policy advocates. Academics are not used to turning statistical issues into political causes. Yet, if we are to move forward in creating policies that empower women, this must be a major battle-ground."

Similarly, for an African Muslim woman forming global coalitions in scholarship and action with fellow Muslim women is as important as doing the same with black and white sisters within and outside the African continent. The contribution of Muslim feminists, many of whom come from the Arab world, namely their expertise in the Arabic language, the language of the primary Islamic literature, is extremely relevant to the non-Arab Muslim women's struggle. Thus, to the supporters of this approach the interaction between "difference" here, and global coalition and solidarity there is a relevant aspect to feminism. That is, for example, a quest for a version of feminism that is Islamic and African, but does not exclude international solidarity and coalition.

However, globalisation has a paradoxical impact on feminism. Although it has provided opportunities for internationalism within feminism, it has once more re-created or exacerbated their divisions. The divisions between the North and the South, white and black or colour, and rich and poor have become more pervasive and relevant in the life of many women. As a consequence of the globalisation the gap within these divisions is widening rather than bridging. For example, the uneven distribution of the new age communication and information, (academic and financial) research resources, publication and network opportunities could further widen the gap and alienate feminists across class and geopolitical divides. To summarise, women's solidarity either within the "difference" feminism, for example, between African women living in the North and the continent, or between Muslim women in Sub-Saharan Africa must be built upon the consideration of power structures both in the academia and in the

politics. For instance, the Western feminism's privilege in regard to scholarship is a result of its historical and political location within the global power politics, thus the scholarship on women is poised along the lines of the power structure. The design and manipulation, conscious or unconscious, of Western scholarship and politics to deploy the women's issue against other cultures and societies are obvious to many Third World women. Maintaining this trend will continue to alienate Third World women and men scholars against feminism.

The second approach to feminism in Africa is negative. Here feminism is viewed as Western in origin and content and as imperialistic in intent and therefore is not welcomed in Africa. According to Nelson (2001:71) "the state ... has divided modernisation into two distinct categories, technological and social. Anything in the first category is positive; anything in the second category is negative. The African state thereby connected feminism to social westernisation and hence declared feminism undesirable and dangerous." Among the Muslim scholars and elites the critique is similar. It is centred around the claim that feminism or the women's struggle is foreign to the Islam and a consequence of Western influence. Thus, the women's struggle issue is considered and presented as Western in origin and content. For example, in the introduction to Hassan Turabi's book, *El-Affendi* (Turabi, 1993:2), the author states that "women's liberation is an inevitable consequence of the relentless material and technological progress sweeping through the Muslim world. So the question is not whether to oppose or endorse women's liberation. It is, rather, do we want women's liberation within the framework of Islam or outside it."

Thus, feminism in Africa is often associated with imperialism and its instrument is the so-called educated African women elites: "It recuperates an imperialistic legacy." For instance, on the relationship between women's scholarship and imperialism in Africa, Nnaemeka (1992) contextualizes what she terms "women's studies business", business in terms of the collaboration between the indigenous and foreign elites to marginalise and exploit the majority. The indigenous elites provide the data and information about barbaric misogynous practices in Africa, while their collaborators embark upon a civilising mission to save the women. Thus the indigenous elites are provided with funds to fight such practices. In this process, the foreign experts are provided with even more data to process and modify



in order to uphold the ethnocentric belief that anything Western is good and civilised, and anything not Western is bad and barbaric. Hence, many of the women's issues raised and gaining international attention stem from the non-Western societies. A similar claim is made by Toure, Cellou, and Diallo (2003:2) who claim that African intellectual feminism is a sell-out to the West "focusing, in their condemnation of women's status, the various aspects that are shocking to the West but capable of generating funds. African intellectual feminism therefore becomes an intellectual profit-seeking feminism, which is not really concern about the improvement of women's condition in general."

#### "Nigerian Feminism" and the Politics of "Difference"

For the purpose of this discussion feminism is conceptualised as the awareness of the women's oppression in society within the family, economy, law, at work, etc. and as the struggle by women and men to change the situation towards a just and fair society. Thus names like Western, black, African, Third World feminism and womanism are all categories of feminism struggling for the positive transformation of the society within a historical and cultural setting.

"Is there a feminist movement in Nigeria?" This question revolves around certain central issues concerning women's struggles and movements in Nigeria. The first issue is what to name "Nigerian women's struggle". Who are Nigerian feminists and is women's activism in Nigeria a feminist movement? That is, do women's struggles in many parts of Nigeria to better the lives of women constitute feminist movements or struggle? These questions are important both academically and politically. As earlier mentioned women's struggle in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon, but labelling it feminism is. Since pre-colonial and colonial periods women in most parts of Nigeria have been involved in women's movements with little concern about its name. For example, the Yan'taru Movement of Nana Asma'u, the daughter of the Sokoto Caliphate's founder in Northern Nigeria, and the Aba Women's Resistant Movement in Southern Nigeria.

However, since Nigerian women's activism has become driven by international donors it has increasingly been labelled feminism. Most proactive in this labelling are the highly educated urban elites of both genders, who are small in number but vocal. For the majority of men and women the backbone of their struggle is survival, survival to make a living out of poverty and a high level of

unemployment and underemployment. To some women feminism is an acceptable label, to others it is not. However, for the majority of the men elite the best way to de-legitimise the women's struggle and scholarship is to label it feminism. Thus, to Nigerian women scholars and activists such as Amina Mama, Ayesha Imam and Obioma Nnaemeka and their organisations such as the BOABA for Women's Human Rights and the Women in Nigeria (WIN) feminism is an acceptable label. Others, such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Baliksu Yusuf, Bolanle Awe, Ogundipe-Leslie, Saudatu Mahdi, and Joy Ezeilo, have preferred different labels, the same is true for movements as the National Council of Women's Societies, the Women Aid Collective, and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria.

Similarly, the male elite's response to the women's struggle has usually been negative. In fact, for an agenda/movement or person being labelled feminist means being deemed to fail. It is due to this negativity towards feminism and the struggle for women's rights in Nigeria that only few women scholars claim to be feminists. According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) "Stiwanism" is advocated "instead of feminism, to bypass ... the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa". Thus, the invention of original names and the denunciation of feminism becomes a means for women scholars and activists to legitimise the women's struggle in Nigeria and a strategy to shape a Nigeria centred women's struggle. Through their research and other academic engagements the women have been able to develop relevant concepts<sup>2</sup> for gender analysis and to introduce and sustain debates on the rights of women on the level of public discourses<sup>3</sup>.

Related to this is the relationship between feminist scholarship and activism. As mentioned earlier, the women's struggle in Nigeria is mostly championed by the educated women elite, whose majority are in the academia and involved in the advocacy of gender issues through the participation in government affairs and/or the formation of women's NGOs. Feminist scholars like Bolanle Awe, Ogundipe-Leslie, and Joy Ezeilo have been involved in the government thereby adding their voice to the politics on the national level, while many others have served in various political capacities on state and local government levels. Balkisu Yusuf, Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama, Saudatu Mahdi, and many more scholars who have not been at the helm of government affairs have demonstrated their activism through the



establishment of women's organisations and women's issues advocacy. In fact, one can hardly find a serious Nigerian woman scholar who confines her energy and expertise to the conventional university bound scholarship. Thus, for Nigerian women scholars in general there is a strong connection between research and activism, one influencing the other and vice versa.

The above picture combined with the limited resources for scholarship and the hostile institutional environment have weakened the ability of many Nigerian women scholars to make their voices heard in a world where knowledge is constantly being reprocessed and repackaged. Despite this lopsidedness in the production of feminist scholarship, there is no doubt that Nigerian women scholars have drawn from the Western feminist scholarship and the Western feminists have benefited from women's political and intellectual struggles that have helped to bridge the gap between theory and practice in feminism.

Despite the engagement of women scholars and activists in women's right issues and gender advocacy, the ability of these women to have an impact on the Nigerian patriarchal political space and to connect to the ordinary Nigeria women has been little. Many factors account for this. Foremost are the patriarchal nature of our political system, the low level of political awareness among the generality of the women, and the competing identities and interests between the women. No issue has illustrated this problem better in recent times than the current National Political Conference and the Muslim women's response to the expansion of the Shariah in Northern Nigeria.

### **Whose National Political Reform Conference?**

For over 25 out of the 45 years of Nigerian independence Nigerians have had to settle for military dictatorship, which has had an impact on the Nigerian political landscape. This situation has led to activism from different groups and sections of the country campaigning for a political reform that would address many of the nation's political ills. Due to ongoing media support and the continued cry over marginalisation from sections of the country the current civilian administration has inaugurated the National Political Reform Conference on the 21<sup>st</sup> February 2005 with the following objectives:

- 1 Discuss and reach a consensus on all aspects of governance arrangements for reinforcing the unity, cohesion, stability, security, progress, develop-

ment, and performance of the Nigerian federation.

- 2 Redesign the most appropriate and relevant institutional mechanisms for managing Nigeria's diversity and difference.
- 3 Consider anything necessary to assist the growth of the constitutionally established legitimate structures of government and help them become more dynamic, more accountable, and more capable of delivering service to the populace.
- 4 Uplift, enhance and strengthen, nurture, and cultivate the best, most enduring, most ideal, and lasting values that are central to national growth, development, and progress.

Thus the issues under consideration at the conference include, but are not limited to, (1) the challenge of constitutionalism and constitutional reform; (2) the nation's preferred political path; (3) the challenge of building a new, accountable, responsive, and focused leadership and of how to build, operate, and sustain real political parties; (4) issues of nationality, identity, freedoms and liberties, social justice, rights and obligations; (5) electoral reforms, (6) relations between the different sections of the government; performance of government, how to ensure truly democratic governance for all and how to strengthen the social contract between the custodians of state power and the governed themselves.

Despite the importance of the conference in righting the wrongs of our political system, the government and the political and traditional elite do not see it fit to right the wrong of women's exclusion and gender discrimination, in fact if anything, the conference has showcased the extent of gender discrimination in our political system. For example, out of the 400 participants only 30 are women representing 7% of the delegates. All 37 states in the federation were to nominate 6 participants and only 4 states saw it fit to nominate one woman each. The situation was worsened because other interest groups that were involved in the nomination such as political parties, labour unions, business and professional associations have not been liberal enough to nominate women in their fold.

With this evident discrimination and marginalisation, women have formed a coalition of Nigerian women's



groups led by a former University Vice Chancellor, Prof. Jadesola Akende. The coalition has adopted three activities; (1) the mobilisation of women to demonstrate against such discrimination during the inauguration, (2) taking the issue to the Abuja High Court, and (3) calling upon women in the respective states to demonstrate and file suits at court on the local level. On the national level, the coalition demanded that the High Court:

- Declare the appointment of 30 women out of 400 discriminatory, illegal, and unconstitutional as it violates the applicants' fundamental rights to freedom from discrimination guaranteed by Section 42 of the Constitution and Article three of the Africa Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Cap 10 laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990.
- Order and direct the respondent to reconstitute the conference with the appointment of, at least, 200 women.
- Order a perpetual injunction restraining the respondent from further subjecting women to discriminatory treatment in the execution of any law or in the implementation of executive or administrative action in Nigeria.

Despite the lobbying, demonstrations, and legal actions taken across the country, the status quo has not changed. Considering the women's failure to bring any change in the status quo of the conference membership, led by Joy Ezeilo the women delegates at the confab prepared a position paper for presentation, lobbying, and adoption at the confab. One of the issues propagated by the women delegates is the issue of citizenship. The question of citizenship has raised the tension that resulted in violent conflict between the so-called indigenes and settlers, an issue that is yet to be resolved. As noted by Ezeilo, women are affected worst, particularly women married outside their state of origin. "When women marry into another state, they are marginalized in those states and also in their own state of origin meaning that they are neither here nor there. Such a situation does not augur well for enhancing female participation. Whereas the Constitution portends to guarantee a citizen's right to freedom from discrimination in section 42, some of its provisions are clearly discriminatory. Women, whether married or not, do not have equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality. Section 26(2) (a) grants citizen-

ship by registration to any woman married to a citizen of Nigeria but no such privilege is extended to any man married to a citizen of Nigeria ... In the worst case scenario it renders women stateless as they are rarely considered for political position unless they are married and also come from the same states as their husband. The above position worsens the case of a foreign woman married to a Nigerian who may never be appointed into any noteworthy political office". According to Ezeilo at least 60% of the Nigerians are born or reside outside their state of origin.

Other issues laid on the table for adoption are good governance, social justice, equity, human rights, health and education. The women delegates' coalition intends to push for changing chapter two of the Nigerian constitution that deals with human rights and socio-economic rights to the effect that the currently not enforceable rights are changed into enforceable rights. With this, the rights of women to social amenities such as education and health would be guaranteed. We strongly believe that it is unacceptable for women and children to die in our hospitals because they lack the resources to afford the instruments and medication needed for surgery.

The challenge the Nigerian women activists face is to manage the translation of this marginalisation and injustice into political action. This is not going to be an easy task because of the women's diverse identities and their low level of literacy and political awareness.

### **The Muslim Women's Response to the Expansion of Shariah in Northern Nigeria**

In 1999, less than a year after the return of the country from military rule to democracy, a governor from the northern part of the country announced the expansion of the scope of the Shariah legal system to now also cover criminal law. The Shariah has existed in the North since the pre-colonial period, but during the colonial period its practice was restricted to civil cases, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, the Shariah has kept this status until 1999. Many reasons in favour of and against an expansion in scope were put forward by both opponents and supporters of the Shariah, which is not our concern here. What is of interest to us is how the expansion of the scope of the Shariah has had an impact on the Muslim women's struggle in Nigeria. Despite the history of campaign for the expansion of the scope of the Shariah among Muslims in Nigeria, nobody expected



the elites to have the political will to actually implement it. Thus, the sudden declaration of an expanded scope of the Shariah caught the Muslim women unaware and unprepared and therefore their response was uncoordinated. An important effect has been that the response further increases the division between the Islamist and secularist Muslim women in Nigeria, with the Islamist women<sup>4</sup> supporting and protecting anything put forward in the Shariah and the secularist women attacking and condemning anything proposed in the name of the Shariah. The women Islamists have turned blind to the male bias in the adopted Shariah document. Similarly, the Muslim women secularists have been equally blind to the rights and protection the Shariah has provided women with.

This positioning has a negative impact on the ability of Muslim women academics and activists to respond strategically to the Shariah issue. First, it has prevented an objective examination of the legal document put in place as Shariah. For example, within one year, between 1999 and 2000 about five laws were passed without any input from women. Similar problems occurred in the monitoring of the Shariah implementation. Except for the celebrated cases of Safiya, Amima, and Bariya little is known about how the expanded scope of the Shariah is affecting, positively or negatively, the ordinary Muslim women. Has the women's access to justice and Shariah courts improved? That is, have the court officials become less corrupt? Do the Shariah courts protect the women's rights guaranteed in the Shariah, now that they have a full mandate or not? Most importantly, Muslim women have not been able to collaborate and develop a strategy to deal with any gender bias that may arise in the course of the Shariah implementation. Some believe that the expansion of the scope of the Shariah, if used strategically, is an opportunity to fight certain cultural misogynous practices and to promote the women's rights guaranteed under the Shariah.

Furthermore, this extreme polarisation has also prevented the broad emergence of moderation and reflection on the issue. Many Muslim women have been under pressure to identify with one of the camps. For instance, in a forum I was asked whether I am a feminist or Islamist. When I argued that I am both, my response did not satisfy the audience. Another audience also raised the issue and pressed for a yes or no as answer. My response led to a debate not only during the lecture, but also later in my *Women in Society Class*. The response generated quite some confusion because my academic efforts and activism on women's issues are perceived more on the side of femi-

nism than Islamism, yet I was the president of a Muslim women's association at that time and I am very active within the Islamic movement. The debate centred on the contradiction and validity of being Islamist and at the same time being critical of the perceived Islamic position regarding women. The message one usually derives from this kind of debate, which is very common in many Muslim societies, is that one can not be Islamist and feminist at the same time. If one is Islamist then feminism is a taboo, because feminism is Western and denounces the Islamic stance on women. Similarly, if one is feminist then one can not be Islamist because the Islam is oppressive against women and stands against the women's rights. The perpetuation of this antagonistic relationship helps to further the marginalisation of Muslim women and keep them from playing a role in the transformation of the religion and the society.

Furthermore, the reality of the majority of the women in a Muslim society is not divided between secularism and religion. It is the religion that governs their lives and shapes their experiences as Muslim women. In her study of the role of the Islam and Western education on women in Sokoto, Knipp (1987) quotes three Muslim women, representing the three categories of non-Western-educated women, young women, and professional women, to capture the relevance of Islam in the women's lives. Says a non-Western educated woman: "Islam is a great influence on what I say and do, what my relation is supposed to be with my husband, my family and my children" (ibid. 407). Another states, "most things that you do in life are guided by the religion: whatever you do you do for God's sake ... Islam is my religion ... it guides one as to how he's going to lead his/her life" (ibid. 139-140). A young university student is quoted with, "... and every single thing, how to enter a toilet, how to stay with others, how to acquire knowledge, everything is in the Qur'an ... personally, to me, Qur'an is everything" (ibid. 277). Says a professional woman: "Islam is a way of life, not a part of life; whatever I do, I hope it conforms with the religion, so more or less all my behaviour, all my acts, I'm praying they conform with the religion. It is more or less my own way of life" (ibid. 406). These quotes illustrate how the women's experiences are not separated and divided between sex and religion as the Islamist-feminist divide wants to make it. This would be an artificial division and separation.

In addition, the presentation of Islam and feminism as steering in opposite directions denies the Muslim wo-



men the chance to reconcile their two identities of Islam and womanhood. The idea of co-operation between Islamism and feminism is considered absurd because of their alleged antagonism and difference. This raises questions: Does it mean that the two identities of Muslim women, the Islam and womanhood, are not reconcilable and as such the Muslim women have to remain and continue to be subjected to this artificial conflict and division? If Islam and feminism are not reconcilable would that not imply that feminism is inimical to the Islam, or the Islam is inimical to the women's struggle against their oppression and injustices? Who should define what should constitute one's version of feminism and strategy?

Thus, the Muslim women feminists in Nigeria face challenges on two fronts. First the challenge to preserve the Muslim women's Islamic identity against the dominant feminism, and second to fight off the male bias inherent in the preservation of such identity. Acting in pursuance with both challenges simultaneously is necessary for the Muslim women to contribute to the advancement of their religion and society as Muslims, and to struggle against their oppression in the society and the establishment Islam as women.

## Conclusion

The women's struggle in Nigeria is riddled with the politics of difference in identity that undermines the development of a coherent and strategic feminist movement. Although our feminism is to be historically and culturally grounded both in concern and strategy, within our differences we should not lose sight of internationalism. Despite the diversity in women's experience and identity, sex can be a unifying factor. A factor that will enable us to develop feminist politics and action that is both national and international. This is necessary because of the globalisation formulating global problems and issues that will require global action and analysis. Thus, the condition for the achievement of internationalism is inclusive feminism, the feminism of negotiation and accommodation (Nnaemeka, 1992). The construction of such a feminism is an uphill struggle for feminists across orientations and boundaries. There is no easy way to mount this challenge. However, a way forward would be the feminist scholarship and politics moving beyond the simplistic approach of rejecting/accepting, denouncing/exploring ideas, institutions, and practices on the basis of origin rather than based on their merit – merit in terms of usefulness to the global struggle and relevance to the local struggle. This is

the task before the Nigerian and non-Nigerian women feminists, or indeed other labels they may have chosen for themselves.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, my visit to the United Kingdom (UK) in 1995 changed my standpoint on feminism. During the visit I was shocked to find some libraries in the UK having more material about my society than we have in Nigerian universities. More importantly, I was saddened with some literature and research material on my society featuring interpretations done out of context. It was then that I realised the naivety in distancing oneself from the discourse on feminism. If you do not speak for yourself others will speak for you. I was reminded of the saying of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that knowledge (wisdom) is a lost property of a believer; he/she takes it wherever it is found. I was also reminded of a saying in my language, *Magana Jari ce*, that is, information is an asset or capital. An asset that can be processed, improved, packaged, and sold as knowledge in books, the media, and journals. Thus, the dismissal of feminism as Western amounts to the complacency not to challenge the Western dominance and control over knowledge and information on women's issues, and constitutes our failure to produce knowledge about ourselves, for ourselves and more importantly to play a role in the construction of feminist scholarship and struggle.

<sup>2</sup> An example is our Network for Women Studies in Nigeria (NWSN), which holds regular workshops on the development of concepts, methodology, and theory in women and gender studies in Nigeria. So far, three volumes have been published.

<sup>3</sup> For example, on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2005 we organised a national conference on the "Promotion of Women's Rights through Shariah in Northern Nigeria"



drawing participants from women's groups and leadership, Islamic groups and leaders, politicians and legislators as well as government representatives of the Shariah implementing states. The main aim of the conference was to anchor the Muslim women's rights agenda in the public discourse among Muslims, where such discourse still is often treated with disdain, particularly by the society's gatekeepers.

<sup>4</sup> By "Islamist women" we refer to those women who believe that women's liberation can only be attained within the Islam and ignore the male bias inherent in the current Islamic movement in Nigeria.