

Bio-Profile

Profile of Women's Research and Documentation Centre, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Abiola Odejide

Introduction

The Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), located in the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan, is an organic offspring of the activism of women's organisations in Nigeria during the colonial period for independence and for women's participation in national life. In a co-authored publication, Bolanle Awe, the founding chairperson of the Centre, and Nina Mba (1991) argue that the link between women's movements and women's studies was much looser in Nigeria than in the United States and Britain, and that Nigerian women's movements did not generate extensive research about women. It is noteworthy, however, that it was members of the women's activist group the National Council of Women's Societies, like Adetowun Ogunsheye and Awe, who initiated serious research into women's status in Nigeria. This began with Ogunsheye's publication on the role and status of women in Nigeria (1960), and Awe's study of the Iyalode in the traditional Yoruba political system (1977). By the time the United Nations Decade for Women was inaugurated, the seeds of women's activism had been sown in the politically active city of Ibadan and also at the University of Ibadan.

The concerted effort generated by conservative and liberal feminist organisations like the National Council of Women's Societies as well as by the socialist feminist group, Women in Nigeria (WIN), galvanised feminist scholarship in Nigeria, and made many case studies on the history, demography, ethnology, economic activities and legal status of women in Nigeria more widely accessible among researchers. Nigeria's first national women's conference was held in Ibadan in 1976, followed by the formation of the continental Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) in 1977. AAWORD's establishment made it clear that women had an important role to play in academia throughout Africa. It also drew attention to the relevance of women's studies to different political and intellectual developments on the continent. Consequently, it boosted the national field of women's and gender studies in very important ways.

The declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) was a catalyst for developing Nigerian interest in women's studies. To mark the UN Decade, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan organised a Women's Conference on rural women and agriculture. Presentations and conference proceedings focused on the need to establish a research bureau and data bank as a crucial strategy for drawing together existing work and encouraging further research on women's issues. The networks created during the national conference led to the establishment of WORDOC in 1986 as a pioneer effort at the systematic collection of materials on women's studies.

WORDOC was established in the context of challenges facing women in postcolonial Nigeria. But the centre also benefited immeasurably from a legacy of Nigerian women's activism during the colonial period. It has documented and celebrated the first-hand accounts of women activists in the struggle for Nigeria's independence, like the late Humoani Alaga, a prominent leader, as well as a pioneer in national politics, the late Janet Akinrinade. In administration, women like Akintunde Ighodalo, and the presidential aspirant, Sarah Jibril, have played invaluable supportive roles in helping to define the political focus of the centre.

WORDOC was incorporated into an existing institutional structure, the Institute of African Studies, whose multi-disciplinary orientation and flexibility accommodated the new research

focus on women and gender. However, WORDOC was administered as an autonomous unit, and this has allowed it to pursue distinct political and intellectual goals. It has operated like a civil society organisation, rather than as a typical academic unit, and can therefore adopt an activist stance in responding to national and international issues. These have included Nigeria's protracted transitions to civilian rule, structural adjustment programmes and Nigeria's external debts. Collaboration with professional women's groups like the International Federation of Women Lawyers, and with non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, women's cooperative groups and Christian and Muslim women's organisations, has considerably helped to raise awareness of these issues among women.

The autonomous administering of WORDOC has helped to ensure continuity in its objectives. While departments, institutes or centres located in universities often need to adjust to the changing political and administrative dictates of universities, WORDOC has consistently enjoyed a large measure of independence. One key way in which the centre has marked its autonomy has been through focusing on women's empowerment and maintaining links with grassroots women's groups. WORDOC's specific objectives in relation to this priority area are:

- to provide a focus on women's studies and to promote new methodologies for this purpose through coordination of research projects in Nigeria;
- to provide a basis for policy formulation by encouraging a women's studies network and by promoting understanding of the various roles and concerns of women in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large;
- to coordinate a documentation centre for use by scholars, researchers and other interested persons;
- to seek sources of funding for research work; and
- to provide a link with other women's research centres within and outside the country.

Structure

WORDOC has a Board of Trustees comprising eminent Nigerian women and men, and is managed by an Organising Committee which formulates policies. Members are drawn from different academic and research institutes and various disciplines in order to give the centre a multi-disciplinary focus. Outside the university, zonal coordinators who are members of the committee serve as contacts for WORDOC, and link it to a larger membership comprising men and women interested in women's studies or committed to gender transformation. Membership of the committee is by invitation, and is based on consideration of an individual's experience in research, activism or publications, as well as special competencies such as editorial, management and mobilisation skills. The emphasis on maintaining a multi-disciplinary focus has influenced, at different stages, the selection of individuals invited to serve as members. In the late eighties and early nineties, the centre was able to fund the salaries of a full-time administrative secretary and a librarian. Because of the decrease in the centre's external funding, however, staff members of WORDOC have been absorbed by the university.

The fact that the Organising Committee comprises individuals from both within and outside the university has had dual effects. Because some committee members are not academics, the committee does not enjoy official recognition from the university administration, placing it at a disadvantage. Often this means that plans and actions need to be routed through an institute which does not have gender and women's studies as its primary focus. The advantage of having a wide range of committee members spread across sectors within and beyond the university is that it makes the centre receptive to different agendas and

constituencies.

Financial and Institutional Support

Most of WORDOC's funding has been secured from members of the Board of Trustees, coordinating members, friends and donor agencies. The latter support specific projects, for example, the German Foundation for World Solidarity, (Unverteilen) has provided financial support for staff and resources, and has enabled the centre to employ a full-time librarian, administrative secretary and messenger, as well as purchase local books. The British Council has offered support for research by donating books, funding outreach programmes, and providing members with financial support in the form of study grants, through the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria. The Ford Foundation has sponsored research, networking and the publication of a newsletter, while the Canadian International Development Agency supported a linkage programme between two Canadian universities, and WORDOC and Obafemi Awolowo University in 1988.

Ibadan University authorities provided a building for the library and a counselling centre, but the major infrastructure of the centre is a beautiful architectural work donated by the Nigerian philanthropist, Sir Mobolaji Bank-Anthony in honour of his wife. The Lady Bank-Anthony Hall serves as a conference centre for WORDOC and its hiring generates additional income.

Activities

WORDOC has been involved in research, education, the gathering and dissemination of information and social policy formulation.

Research: Research and consultancy work have embraced different areas: funding from the Ford Foundation has supported work on agriculture and the economy; situation analysis of the girl-child has been supported by UNICEF; and the World Bank has funded work on labour and the economy. The research that WORDOC undertakes is firmly determined by topical needs identified within different sectors of Nigerian society, and not solely by individuals' interests. Members raise research topics through proposals or as outcomes of monthly seminars, and these are subjected to careful scrutiny in terms of their viability and relevance. WORDOC also responds to invitations from funding agencies to bid for research funds in different focus areas, such as governance, democracy and women's economic or political empowerment. In all cases, WORDOC encourages intervention as well as the use of women-friendly media for the dissemination of the research findings.

Education: In addition to conducting research, WORDOC has organised a number of seminars, workshops, conferences and public lectures on specific themes. These include women and the media, the impact of colonialism on women, and the effects of the debt and food crises on women. Since the centre has, from its inception, deliberately sought the cooperation of women at the grassroots level, it organises numerous public fora, including lectures and workshops for non-governmental organisations such as the Country Women's Association of Nigeria (COWAN). Many lectures address the local specificities of women's lives, with some being delivered in the local language (Yoruba) so that non-literate women can attend.

As part of its emphasis on activism and advocacy, WORDOC has organised public dialogues between civil society groups and elected and appointed members of government. For example, in 1991, the centre co-hosted a seminar on women and access to credit, together with the Federal Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, and the banking industry. In the following year, it collaborated with the Country Women's Association in organising a forum on popular participation. With the advent of civilian rule in May 1999,

WORDOC organised an open forum for newly-elected local and state government functionaries and for prominent figures in civil society on the topic "Civil Rights and the Empowerment of Nigerian Women: the Lessons of Experience". One year later, another open forum was held on the subject "What Do Women Want? An Open Forum to Share Women's Expectations of Decision-Makers". This involved political office-holders, senior administrators in critical ministries and parastatals like Works, Housing, Education, Health and Finance. All these fora emphasised the need for effective platforms for women's organisations to participate in and monitor elective and governance processes.

The centre's monthly seminars provide a forum for researchers within and outside the university to present their gender-related work to an appreciative audience. The seminars also encourage conversation and debate that has both political and intellectual implications. Moreover, they allow researchers to develop concepts and theories that are geared towards practical concerns for gender transformation and women's rights in the country.

WORDOC has combined involvement in popular education and outreach work with academic education. Here it has played a pioneering role in promoting the inclusion of gender analysis in a range of disciplines in Nigeria's universities. Fields like literature, sociology, history, agriculture and economics have tended to be especially receptive to transformation, with an increasing amount of work in these fields incorporating attention to gender dynamics. The centre recently initiated a proposal to run certificate courses on gender issues as well as a Masters programme in African studies with a gender emphasis. Both courses will target policy-makers, and will serve as prime examples of the centre's commitment to intellectual work on gender. It should be noted that the proposal was developed on the basis of WORDOC's attentiveness to needs expressed by civil society groups and some parastatals. The income-generating potential of these courses to the host institution will be an important factor in determining the proposal's approval by the university's senate curriculum committee. In many ways, this illustrates the extent to which an organisation like WORDOC, in the current context, can be perceived not only as a progressive venture committed to social transformation, but also as a potentially lucrative initiative within a growing industry.

Publications: WORDOC grew largely out of a recognition of the need to foreground local agendas in the written sources on women and gender that were available in Nigeria. This awareness led it to place great importance on publications, all of which are sold at the centre's library. The substantial body of written work published by WORDOC includes: *Women in the Media in Nigeria* (Odejide, 1996), *Women and Economic Reforms in Nigeria* (Isiugo-Abanihe et al., 2000), *Women and Access to Credit* (Layiwola, 1991), *Women in Business and Agribusiness* (Mabogunje, 1991), *Women in Agriculture in Nigeria* (Adekanye, 1988), and a collection of stories *The Potter and other Stories* (Odejide, 1994).

Networking: WORDOC focused on networking from its inception, and established a link with the well-known network of third-world women scholars, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). One central aim of this link was to promote cultural exchange and training in communications, advocacy and internal relations, through relationships with women who confront issues similar to those facing Nigerian women. WORDOC has also consistently networked at the national and local levels. It is an active member of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria, and its members frequently interact with other national and international organisations on research and outreach projects.

Information Dissemination: The library and documentation arm of WORDOC took off in 1989 following a seminar entitled "The Impact of Colonialism on Nigerian Women", which raised awareness of the need to disseminate information about groups with a long history of political subordination. Because the information centre provides many scarce intellectual

resources gathered from all over the country, at present it constitutes the major attraction of WORDOC for researchers within and outside the university. The WORDOC collection comprises over 6 000 books; numerous seminar and conference papers; journals, magazines and newsletters, including over 200 different journals; newspaper cuttings and articles focusing on women in Nigeria and all over the world; photographs of Nigerian women prominent in various fields of endeavour; bibliographies; audio and audio-visual material; and dissertations and theses of students and researchers who have used the library. One major drawback of the centre's information dissemination is the lack of ICT facilities that would make information accessible to a wider international audience. Scarce financial resources make it mandatory for the centre to explore the possibility of collaborating with organisations that have facilities but not resources.

Concluding Comments

WORDOC has played a crucial role in encouraging Nigeria's universities and research centres to develop attention to women's and gender studies, to identify areas of priority in gender research, to develop networks among researchers, and to provide empirical information as well as intellectual and political guidelines both for researchers and for the policy-makers who decide the fate of women in relation to their rights. Since the centre provides a pool of willing researchers who can provide crucial academic and professional support, many non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations regard WORDOC as a valuable ally in their advocacy work.

But the centre's experience as one of the earliest women's studies centres in sub-Saharan Africa also illustrates the challenges faced by many other similar organisations. Although they have the vision and intellectual resources to play crucial transformational roles, they are often severely hindered by structural and financial constraints. Consequently, one of WORDOC's major long-term aims, the establishment of a dynamic and sustainable women's studies programme in the university, is still to be realised, and its major challenge continues to be the sustainability of its projects and the effective dissemination of its research findings.

References

Adekanye, T. 1988. *African Notes: Women in Agriculture A Special Publication of Women's Research and Documentation Centre*. Ibadan: WORDOC

Awe, B. 1977. "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System", in Schlegel, A. ed. *Sexual Stratification : A Cross cultural View*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Awe, B. and Mba, N. 1991. "Women's Research and Documentation Centre (Nigeria)" *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16, 4 (Summer): 859-864

Isugo-Abanihe, I. and Graba, K. 1997. *Women and Economic Reforms in Nigeria*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Isiugo-Abanihe, I., Udegbe, B., Olaoba, F. and Oyelude, A. 1999. eds. Bolanle Awe: *Portrait of an Academic and an Activist*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Isiugo-Abanihe, I. and Udegbe, B. 1999. "WORDOC and Leadership in Women's Issues: An Appraisal", in Isiugo- Abanihe, I., Udegbe, B., Olaoba, F. and Oyelude, A. eds. *Bolanle Awe: Portrait of an Academic and an Activist*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Layiwola, D. 1991. *African Notes: Women and Access to Credit*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Mabogunje, A. 1991. *Women in Business and Agribusiness in Nigeria*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Odejide, B. ed. 1994. *The Potter and Other Stories*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Odejide, B. 1996. *Women and the Media in Nigeria*. Ibadan: WORDOC.

Ogunsheye, A. 1960. "The Role and Status of Women in Nigeria", *Presence Africaine*, 4: 33-49.

Abiola Odejide is a Professor of Communication and Language Arts and Coordinator of the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She is Chair of the Curriculum Sub-Committee of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria and her research interests are women and the media and women in higher education.