

Female in Nigeria: Profile

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Introduction

In June 2015, the Abuja-based Warmate Bookclub, inspired by Chimamanda Adichie's feminist pamphlet, *We Should All Be Feminists*, started the hashtag #BeingFemaleinNigeria (Edoro, 2015). This not only focused on everyday sexism but also addressed norms, cultural beliefs and practices as well as government policies that have led to the oppression of women in all spheres of national life. According to Twitter Analytics (2015), within the first 19 minutes, 730 twitter users had tweeted at #BeingFemaleinNigeria 1,500 times. The tweets were predominantly from Nigerian women and a sprinkling of Nigerian men. This drew the attention of international media and before the end of the week-long "tweetivism", several international news outlets had featured the story. By the first of July 2015, the hashtag had 54,000 tweets.

About a week after this unprecedented activism on social media for women's rights, Lola Omolola¹ set up a Facebook-based group, Female in Nigeria (FIN), and invited the women in her circles (particularly those who had participated in the activism on Twitter) to the group. These women, in turn, sent out invitations to the women in their own circles. This new group was touted as a space for self-identified feminists and women interested in gender equality and women's rights – a "women only" space that would allow for freedom of expression, free from the trolling by men that is a regular feature of most women-centred campaigns on social media.

Within six weeks of its existence, the platform had over 2,000 members, and the administrators changed the group settings from closed group² to secret group.³ The reason given for this change was the high number of men sending requests to be added to the group.⁴ In spite, and maybe because, of the change in the group settings on Facebook, Female in Nigeria was growing exponentially, with a resultant change in the culture of the group and power dynamics. This Profile outlines some of the successes and challenges faced by FIN in the course of these changes.

Context

The Nigeria in which FIN came into existence is a complex, postcolonial, patriarchal country, grappling with terrorism, poverty, high unemployment rates, poor to non-existent health management systems, hyper-religiosity, declining quality of education and short life expectancy. Several studies have highlighted the role of colonialism in shaping the diverse gender inequalities presently experienced in Nigeria. These took on quite varied forms in different parts of the country; my focus here is inevitably selective. Among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, for example, where women predominantly engaged in trade, women's relationships to land were deeply affected by changes introduced by colonialism, when "the advent of title deeds made men the sole owners of land. Consequently, women lost access and control of land... their vital role in food production was overshadowed by the more lucrative male-dominated cash crop cultivation for the international market... [C]olonialism brought with it Christianity and a masculine fundamentalism" (Chengu, 2015).

This is not to say, however, that there were no gender inequalities prior to colonialism. For example, although women were members of the Ogboni⁵ – since "membership of the Ogboni included sectional and lineage heads, war leaders..., women chiefs and priests" (Oduntan, 2010) – women were not allowed to be members of the policing arm of the Ogboni, the Oro Cult. Various military regimes and nationalist governments that emerged after Nigeria gained independence also contributed to deepening these inequalities and gender gaps in access to resources.

Gender inequality today can be seen in several domains and varies with location. One such domain is education, but the gender disparities are not as great in more urbanised southern states as they are in the northern part of the country (AHI, 2011). Gender inequality is evident, too, in high maternal mortality rates (Index Mundi, 2016) as well as discrimination in the workplace (Bamidele, 2010). Internet access is also differentiated by gender. According to Internet Live Stats, in 2016 there were 86,219,985 million Nigerians who had access to the Internet, comprising 46.1% of the Nigerian population. Out of the 69,086,302 female population, only 33% have Internet access.

Nevertheless, women's organising against inequality has a long history in Nigeria. During the colonial era, when British colonial policies effectively pauperised and disempowered people, women mobilised to push back against

the new regulations. The 1929 Women's War in the South East (Ibibio, Andoni, Ogoni, Bonny and Opobo) erupted when women accused warrant chiefs of overtaxing and restricting the role of women in governance (Zukas, 2009). In the South West of Nigeria, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, alongside Elizabeth Adekogbe, organised a group called the Abeokuta Women's Union. Primarily set up to bridge the gender gap in Western-styled education, the group eventually morphed into a powerful political tool. Simola (1999) shows how the disruption of the authority structures operating in pre-colonial Abeokuta, particularly the systemic exclusion of women from governance, led to the eventual dethronement of the king by the Abeokuta Women's Union led by Ransome-Kuti. Today, even with much reduced powers, women's groups can still be found all over Nigeria as market women's associations, self-help groups and religious groups.

The advent of social media in the contemporary era has catalysed African women's digital engagement. Activists are blogging, sharing posts on Facebook, tweeting updates from meetings and conferences as well as sharing links to videos, websites and petitions calling for gender equality (Radloff, 2013). By 2015, Nigerian feminists were actively using different social media platforms to promote gender equality. The #BringBackOurGirls (BBOG) campaign is one of the most visible and successful examples of activism around violations of girls' and young women's rights in Nigeria.⁶ In Lagos and Ibadan, the feminist-led activism of BBOG is gradually changing the way Nigerians engage with topics such as sexism, rape, child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other issues that are signposts of gender inequality.

FIN in Action

Against this backdrop, FIN established itself as a place where the usually taboo subjects – like sex, domestic violence, rape and depression – were actively discussed. Lola Omolola, on a gofundme.com page she had created to raise funds to finance a social media site for FIN, described the group as “a movement of... women on Facebook focused on building compassion, providing support and nurturing the power of self-expression in a culture where women are to be seen and not heard” (Omolola, 2016). Almost from the onset, there was an outpouring, as women shared stories of their trauma. On hand were women who had had similar experiences and could empathise, as

there were professionals offering pro-bono services in order to help solve these problems. At the same time, there were women sharing stories of successes in the face of all the odds stacked up against them. They were providing a much-needed positive example of women who were able to triumph by standing their ground.

Due to the support and compassion women were getting on the platform, smaller groups – based mostly on geographical location – started emerging. Friendships were increasingly moving from the official Facebook page to smaller spaces on WhatsApp and other social media networks, and to real-life interactions. By September 2015, FIN members were actively seeking one another out for companionship, and posts about meetings between FIN members, with pictures attached, started appearing on the group's timeline regularly.

In December 2015, the first set of FIN Hangouts was being planned for Lagos, London and Port Harcourt. Hangouts are designed to encourage women to interact without interference from their daily lives, so men, non-FIN members and children are not admitted into venues. Aba, Atlanta, Enugu, Cairo, Houston, Ile-Ife, Johannesburg, Kaduna, Kano, New York, Taraba, Toronto – practically every city around the world that has more than one Nigerian woman inhabitant has held at least one FIN Hangout. And since the first successful event, there has been at least one Hangout happening in a different part of the world every month. Unfortunately, I have been so far unable to attend any of the FIN Hangouts. My account of the Hangouts is based on interviews with participating FIN members and shared pictures as well as videos from the events, posted exclusively on the group page.

According to Ayilara,⁷ although there was a lot of excitement amongst the women when the proposal for the first FIN Hangout to be held in Lagos was made, the planning committee did not know what to expect, because “Nigerians are well known to talk game online, but [will] not budge when it's time to act”. Participants, with a sense of ownership of both the group and the event, ensured that the Hangout ran as smoothly as possible. Over 200 women attended the first event. The bonding that was happening on a Facebook page translated into real life, as the women ensured that nobody was left out. The best part for Ayilara, however, was what happened when the main event ended: “the women were reluctant to return home... Even after the event-centre management switched off the lights, we sat in the dark and kept talking. It was amazing, the way we bonded”.

Between June and December 2015, the group had developed the rules of engagement on the platform. These rules were formed over the first three months of establishment, as a response to the way women were interacting with the posts:

- No screenshots/copy or we shall ban you and all involved.
- Sharing on FIN is a statement of courage: speaking up may require desensitising oneself to unproductive responses.
- Being respectful trumps free speech: if you must comment, be sensitive.
- No judgement / show empathy / be fair / no agenda. Privacy: what happens on FIN stays on FIN.
- You are encouraged to share only when you're ready. We are here to empower you to embrace who you are at all times, even in public.

It is important to note that when the group had been made up predominantly of feminists, there had been no need to make these points, because the women were engaging each other respectfully. As more women joined the group, however, they brought with them platitudes, slut-shaming,⁸ homophobia and victim-blaming. At one point, survivors of domestic violence and cheating spouses were asked to watch the film *The War Room*,⁹ in which a woman is encouraged to pray for her marriage instead of confronting a cheating husband.

By January 2016, not only was FIN 30,000 women strong but the rules were enforced such that it led to the development of a new kind of culture. This was one that:

- helped women connect on a deeper level
- facilitated global meet-ups and networking
- provided a non-judgemental atmosphere for sharing
- linked women in crisis (domestic violence, sexual assault, depression, contemplating suicide) with therapists, lawyers, physicians and other professionals.

By this time, Lola Omolola had appointed four new administrators and thirteen moderators to oversee recruitment into the group. The powers of administrators include the power to approve or ban members, to moderate comment threads, turn off the threads or remove comments that do not follow rules. Moderators have the power to approve membership but cannot remove people from the group. They can delete comments but cannot turn off comment threads.

The administrative infrastructure helped accelerate the process of admission but this in turn led to politicking, because not all the women were feminists, and new arrivals seemed to have other agendas. With the expansion of the group came an influx of Christians who, through their posts and comments, tried hard to uphold patriarchal values without breaking the rules outright. For example, the approved daily average of posts is 20; recently, 18 of those posts would celebrate family, particularly husbands. This is unlike the early days when there was a mix of diverse voices and the contents of the post were more intimate and honest.

Some of the positive features of FIN's culture are still evident today, giving rise to an astonishing 634,000 members by January 2017. FIN's phenomenal growth in its early days was evidence of women's defiance of prevailing social norms, restrictions and disempowerment, particularly notable since the group is made up of women from different socio-economic backgrounds, of differing sexuality and religious inclinations, and from varied geographical locations.

The rapid growth of Female in Nigeria had not gone unnoticed by Nigerians on social media, especially since a number of women were leaving violent homes and becoming more vocal on their personal social media pages. At the same time, there were also increasing numbers of women removed from the group for persistently breaking the rules. The narrative that emerged over the first six months, on different Facebook posts, was that FIN was a cult of lesbians and devil worshippers out to destroy the sanctity of the Nigerian (Christian) family. Later, this narrative appeared in a blog (Daniel, 2017).

An article by Okolie (2016) dismissed reports concerning the sinister intent of the group. She was dismayed, however, that "even though the founder kept insisting FIN was a 'safe house', where women could come and share their secrets, unburden their minds and receive pats on the back, even when they needed a good telling off", "the group founder made up the rules as she went, and sometimes they were... unrealistic... if you expressed a disagreement, you were deleted for not being empathetic enough".

Okolie went on to describe FIN as "Telemundo central",¹⁰ essentially raising the question of confidentiality within the group. Her major concern was the screen-sharing ("munching") that was rife within the group: "Nothing is ever secret on social media...". All this notwithstanding, by the time Okolie's article was published in June 2016, FIN had grown to 170,000 members.

Conflicts

Apart from the external attacks on FIN, an ideological divide was growing between Lola Omolola and a majority of the feminists who were the foundational members. This process called into question whether FIN was in fact a platform nurturing women's self-expression – as described when feminists were invited to join the group – or just another women's group where the one voice speaking *for* the women was that of the “founder”.

In early June 2016, an Abuja-based businesswoman, who identified herself as Chacha Deepdeal Jayn on social media (real name Charity Aiyedogbon), made a series of posts accusing her estranged husband, David Aiyedogbon, of domestic abuse, infidelity and money laundering. A few days after making these posts, she sent another saying that some members had screen-munched her posts and sent them to her husband.

One week after the incident, Charity Aiyedogbon went missing.

According to Ayilara, the feminists on the platform believed that, given FIN's numbers (over 170,000 women at the time), the group should be able to launch a successful search, both online and offline, for Aiyedogbon. Group members started making and sharing posts about the missing woman on their personal social media pages and within the group. Theories about what had happened to Aiyedogbon abounded.

When, in July 2016, a decapitated body believed to be Aiyedogbon's was found, and it appeared that the police were reluctant to conduct further investigations into her disappearance, the feminists on the platform began to agitate for FIN members to share posts demanding for justice. These were to be a prelude to street demonstrations if the online activism did not work. Even before this event, some FIN members already appeared to be preparing themselves for activism beyond the secrecy of the group. According to Lateefat:¹¹

around this time some women were posting about how they rescued children from homes where they are being maltreated, or that they got between a man beating a woman and stopped him. FIN was getting crazier and crazier... There was also one time that a bunch of women travelled from Lagos to Abeokuta to get bail for one woman whose husband had locked her up, accusing her of armed robbery, because she moved out of his house and took everything in the house with her.

Nigerian women on FIN had begun to see themselves as sisters, and this extended beyond group members. Consequently, feminists in FIN had expectations that the group could become a powerful tool to push for a reversal of societal norms as well as a change in the government policies that had brought them to that point. Lola Omolola, in her bid to keep the group under control, however, became openly hostile. She banned all discussion around Aiyedogbon on the platform and dissociated FIN from any online activism or street protests. Her reason was that she lived abroad and would not be able to “monitor” and “control” whatever was happening in Nigeria.

In my opinion, this position is not tenable. It is impossible for one person, or even 17 people (the administrators and moderators) to monitor over 170,000 women. All efforts to ensure that “what happens on FIN, stays on FIN”, for example, failed woefully. Women still took screenshots of posts and comments, and shared them amongst the smaller groups that had either broken away from FIN or found new homes on other social media platforms (mostly on WhatsApp).

Living in the diaspora seemed to have dissociated Lola Omolola from the daily experiences of women living in Nigeria. She also did not seem to appreciate that the feminists volunteering to lead the protests were veterans. Most of them were part of the #OccupyNigeria protests which took place in 2012, during which Nigerians were demanding for better governance. They had also organised #BBOG marches in their various cities and have been consistently participating in several online and physical forms of activism concerning women’s rights.

Ultimately, women’s social experiences of being monitored and controlled were exactly what underpinned the formation of FIN in the first instance. Yet it appeared that the platform itself was now turning into another source of control because it was “owned” and “controlled” by one single person. The initial appearance of power-sharing amongst women as equals was a façade; in the face of resistance, Lola Omolola took on the stance of an authoritarian.

Concluding Thoughts

Having participated in the June 2015 #BeingFemaleinNigeria activism on Twitter, I joined the Facebook-based FIN group with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Excitement, because I had been invited to the platform by a fellow feminist; trepidation, because I’ve had to leave several

Facebook groups in the past since they appeared to be an extension of the oppressiveness that constituted my daily life as a Nigerian queer woman and feminist. My perspective, however, is that demands for equality and equity are not practicable without taking on board homophobia, sexism, racism, xenophobia, ableism. FIN initially appeared to be an entirely different world, one that promised such a vision. The women I met in the group and those who subsequently joined us in the early days were willing to be open and follow the rules. The group encouraged me to start a feminist e-zine, an intersectionalist space where diverse feminist voices are documented.

The downside of FIN today is the current size of the group. There are presently so many members that it has become nearly impossible to enforce rules and there is no longer a sense of ownership and sisterhood. In spite of the exit of feminists and the more forward-looking women from the group (and I dare say because of it), FIN has been growing. By 5 April 2017, the number had risen to 815,000. Unlike its beginnings, when there were diverse voices expressing themselves, the dominant voice on FIN today has mutated into the “traditional” Nigerian woman with more conventional viewpoints. The comment threads are full of the kind of advice and opinions that the administrators battled with when the group was newly established.

I had believed that FIN would evolve into a platform where there would be peer education, that actively demanding equal rights and equity for women would in no way impact negatively on your ambitions to reach the pinnacle of being. But towards the end of 2016, I went quiet because hyper-religiosity had seeped back into FIN and there were a large number of women who seemed to have their own agenda, constantly posting subtly religious posts celebrating husbands and marriage, which were approved by the administrators. Although I’m still a member of FIN, I have stopped writing posts or commenting on the threads because I feel like I’m shouting in the wind.

The early FIN still stands as a prototype for feminist organising, particularly in terms of providing safe spaces where feminists could share their trauma and get support. FIN initially provided a zone free of judgement, where women from different socio-economic backgrounds, religious/spiritual leanings and sexuality could rub shoulders as true equals and work together for a more equitable society. Despite the shifts in its culture and power dynamics, FIN represents a possible world where Nigerian women, in all their diversity, could come together and see why feminism is so important, a place where women could learn of their

history, and get to know that even in the face of oppression, there have been women who stood up for justice, for what they believed.

Endnotes

- 1 Adichie is not a member of the Warmate Bookclub, although she participated in the #BeingFemaleinNigeria activism on Twitter.
- 2 “Closed group” is the Facebook term for groups that you can join by sending a request to the group administrator. Like public groups, closed groups can be found by search engines.
- 3 “Secret group” is the Facebook term for groups in which membership is by invitation only. The group cannot be found by search engines.
4. The reason men have tried, and are still trying, to infiltrate FIN is because they are used to being able to enter such spaces without any protest and therefore feel entitled to do so.
- 5 A traditional civic council, the highest in pre-colonial Yoruba states.
- 6 On the 14 April 2014, 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria were abducted from their secondary school hostels by members of the insurgent group, Boko Haram. The Bring Back Our Girls campaign was formed around the rescue and return of the schoolgirls to their families. www.bringbackourgirls.ng
- 7 Not her real name. Telephone interview with Ayilara, 18 January 2017.
- 8 Slut-shaming is the act of criticising a woman for her real or presumed sexual activity, or for behaving in ways that someone thinks are associated with her real or presumed sexual activity.
- 9 *The War Room* is a Christian drama film written by Alex Kendrick and produced in 2015 by Stephen Kendrick. It follows the matrimonial travails of Elizabeth and Tony. A chance meeting with Miss Clara changes the course of their lives when she champions prayer as the solution to Tony’s cheating.
- 10 Telemundo Central is a Spanish-language television network features melodramatic tele-novellas.
- 11 Not her real name. Interview with Lateefat in Ibadan, 6 February 2017.

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