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### RESEARCH AS INFORMAL AND MUTUAL LEARNING: REFLECTIONS ON TWO FEMINIST STUDIES IN NIGERIA

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#### **Abstract**

*Although all research involves knowledge production processes; research activities that explore the real life experiences of adult participants are also learning or educational interactions in and of themselves. This article focuses on the author's reflections on two feminist studies that she carried out in Nigeria that support this position. These educational interactions are reflected in her discussion of the framework on which her studies are based, the context of these studies, the identity politics of participants, and the enhancement and limitations (informal and mutual) learning among many participants and the researcher as a participant-observer.*

**Key Words:** Research, Feminist Studies, Feminist Knowledge Production, Informal learning, mutual learning.

#### **Introduction: The Two Feminist Studies**

**Research A.** In 2000, colleagues in the political science department of a Nigerian University, who are democracy and human rights activists and aware that I take part in community education and women's rights activism, invited me to participate in a research project, *Politics of Ethnicity, Nationality and Identity: Restructuring of State-Society Relations*. I was the only female in the research group comprising eight Nigerian academics. The research was supported by the Ford Foundation. I wrote the chapter that focused on women, "Engendering Political Power: Women and the Struggle for Empowerment". Henceforth, I refer to this research as either "Research A" or "2000 research".

At the time in 2000, when Research A was initiated, Nigerians were breathing a sigh of relief after the end of military rule in 1999. In the 40 years (1960-2000) since gaining formal independence from Britain, Nigeria had experience civilian rule for only 10 years. Prior to independence and afterward, Nigerian men and woman engaged in many struggles. They included the struggle for independence, the war to keep Nigeria as one entity, the struggle for

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freedom of the press, and the struggles around ethnic and religious identities. There were struggles waged against Structural Adjustment Programs. There was also the dilemma feminists faced as a result of state feminism (the appropriation of feminist demands by Government and wives of military rulers). In the 1990s, two struggles stood out, one was that of the Ogonis in the Niger Delta region against Shell Petroleum Development Corporation and the Federal Government of Nigeria, and the other was against the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections. After 1999, inter-ethnic and religious violence erupted in some places. Apart from the Ogonis, other groups in the Niger-Delta region, mainly the Ijaws became very vocal. While in the Northwestern part of Nigeria, the Zamfara State Government decided to adopt the Islamic Sharia law as the state's legal code. Finally, there were struggles around women's rights issues and the rights of children and youths (I-IDEA, 2000).

Nigerian women had participated alongside men in all the struggles identified above and probably expected to enhance their social, economic, cultural, legal, and political status as a result. However, the quality of life for Nigerian women remained unchanged particularly when compared with that of men. For instance, by 1999 figures, adult literacy rate was 50% for women compared to 64.6% for men in Nigeria, whereas, the average adult literacy rate for developing countries was 73% (UNDP, 1997; Nwosu, 2000). While the unemployment rate for the active male labor force in 1999 was 2.8%, the rate for the female labor force was 3.4%. In addition, Nigerian tax laws and conditions of service for women in the formal sector of the economy were discriminatory (Fashina, 2000; Amadiume, 2000; Icheen, 2000). The economic status of Nigerian women reflected that male headed households had a higher income than their female counterparts. But, the female headed households had a higher per capita expenditure when compared with male headed households. The explanation given for this was that female headed households spend most of their income on food (50.1%) which, according to Engel's law, is an indication of poverty (Nwosu, 2000). Nigeria's rating on both the Gender-Related Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) of the United Nations Development Programmes' Human Development Report for 1997 was very low. In the GDI, Nigeria was in the hundredth place out of 130 countries and ranked 108 out of a total number of 116 countries on the GEM.

In addition, women did not hold many key and senior decision making positions in the public sphere. As we know, state power goes a long way in determining what rights and privileges different groups have, including whether or not some groups will have access to key resources and facilities such as land, water, credit facilities, motor able roads, education, and health. The General Elections held in 1999 in the transition from military rule to civilian administration resulted in women filling elected and appointed offices as follows: only 13 women were elected to the 360 member House of Representatives; 3 women were elected into the 109 member Senate with 9 women appointed out of 44 Ministers and Special Advisers; only 1 Speaker out of the 36 Speakers of House for State Assemblies in the country was a woman; and there was also one female Deputy Governor and no state Governors (Nwosu, 2000; I-IDEA, 2000). Beyond statistics, entrenched attitudes and convictions persisted about Nigerian women's subordinate position to men. This has led to continuous maltreatment of women, and at times resulted in outright violence against women. By way of example, the perception of women as objects of desire and lacking in will power, within the context and culture of ingrained lawlessness ensured that increasing number of Nigerian girls and women became victims of rape, sexual harassment, and early marriage (that resulted in damage to the reproductive organs of female children), acid attack, battery, and discriminatory widowhood rites.

The key question for the researcher in this first research study was: Why has the social, economic, political, legal, and cultural status of Nigerian women not improved markedly with the aggregate of struggles in which they participated especially when their status is compared with that of men? This was a qualitative research study that used the case study research design. The framework for the study was an eclecticism of the strengths of essentialist, social constructionist, and deconstructionist notions of female identity. I proposed that in reality women make demands based on these notions of female identity. Data were obtained from primary sources (documents from the legislative and executive arms of government and interviews held with key actors in, and a few observers of the struggles or identity politics in which Nigerian women were involved), and secondary sources.

I focused on 4 categories (cases) of identity politics:

- 1) the struggle against the military, a struggle which women participated in, alongside men against military hegemony;
- 2) the identity politics of the Ogonis, a struggle in which Ogoni women participated alongside men, against the degradation of their environment by multinational companies and marginalization of their ethnic group by majority ethnic groups in the country;
- 3) the identity politics of women, in the context of opposition to the adoption of the Islamic Legal Code in Zamfara State; and
- 4) the identity politics of women in Cross Rivers State.

I adopted the descriptive, interpretive/explanatory, and evaluative case study models, and also cross case analysis. I examined the demands that women made as part of mixed gender groups or as women. I considered whose interests these demands would serve and I considered whether they will serve women's strategic gender interests. I examined the context in which those demands were made and examined the language of the demands. I examined the point at which women entered into the struggles and the strategies they employed in those struggles.

**Women's Demands.** Against the military, women and men demanded freedom for Nigerians and in particular for their children. Ogoni women demanded economic and political freedom including an environment where they could farm and fish without obstructions and pollution. Women challenged the introduction of Sharia law in Zamfara State demanding the education of girl children and women in higher institutions. They demanded the constitution of a council of Ulamaas that would include women, and enactment of laws to protect women's rights at work, and prohibit polygamy, domestic violence, and forced marriage. Two women's groups in Cross River State demanded prohibition of female circumcision, childhood marriage, and demeaning widowhood practices. Calling for improved economic conditions for women, they insisted on peace and demanded protection of their political and civil rights.

**Methods of Struggle.** Many women participated in demonstrations for actualizing the June 12 Presidential Elections and ousting the military; this resulted in their brutalization and imprisonment by the military regime. On one occasion, women in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, stripped themselves naked as part of the protest. Ogoni women participated in peaceful demonstrations, praying and fasting. They walked several kilometers to attend meetings, and although every Ogoni person donated ₦1 to the struggle, a pregnant Ogoni woman paid ₦2: ₦1 for the unborn child and ₦1 for herself. Older women and young women and at times three generations of women in a family were raped in retaliation to the protests. Concerning the

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demands of women regarding the introduction of Sharia law in Zamfara State, there was no immediate move to the realm of a struggle at the time the research report was written. That is to say the women made public their complaints about the imposition of Sharia law, but did not follow up with campaigns, demonstrations, or other means of ensuring their demands were met. The Cross River women carried out voter education, monitored elections, pressed for passage of a bill to prohibit Female Genital Mutilation and childhood marriage. They also intervened to diffuse tension that could have escalated into a war between Ekori and Nkpani communities after the killing of an Ekori youth by an Nkpani person. They played an active role in achieving peaceful change in the state.

**Results of the Struggles.** In 1999, the military handed over power to a civilian administration. The brutal repression of the Ogonis resulted in a huge outcry from individuals and groups both within and outside Nigeria. Consequently in 1995 Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations. Shell suspended operations in Ogoniland, and the Nigerian Government began to pay attention to some demands of Ogoni people. Many of the Cross River State women's demands were met as the State House of Assembly passed laws prohibiting female circumcision and childhood marriage. The women also stopped two neighboring villages from going to war.

However, not all women who had participated in the June 12 Presidential Elections and Ogoni struggles felt they had benefited from the struggles. Madam B, highly literate, deputy governor at the time of interview, was disenchanted with how a conservative, male dominated political party structure was treating her in her role as deputy governor in spite of her role in the June 12 election struggle. Alhaja I, semi-literate, leader of a mixed gender market group) expressed the opinion that once politicians settled into their offices, they forgot the street demonstrations, imprisonment, and other risks that women took to ensure the installment of democracy as they failed to involve women in decision making processes. Unlike the 2 women above, Mrs. Y, highly literate, appeared pleased with what her people, the Ogonis had achieved with their struggles. Although she was still hurt from the violence (killings, rape, and destruction of houses) wreaked on her people, especially the execution of the *Ogoni 9* by the military regime, she was already working on how the Ogonis could progress by preserving their language. However, unlike Mrs Y, Madam D of Wiiyakara (an Ogoni village), who led a group of seven women in our interview, made it clear that Ogoni people were weary of researchers and outsiders. She said they were tired of journalists and researchers like me coming to talk to them about their experiences because the talks have not translated into any change in their condition.

From my analyses of data, I concluded that as long as women do not voice gender specific claims within larger or broader struggles, whether ethnic/racial, religious, economic, domestic or political, and they do not actively pursue their strategic gender interests, their social status will not improve markedly, thus their quality of life will continue to be comparatively worse than that of their male counterparts (Fashina, 2001).

**After Research A.** After I turned in a research report on the study cited above in the first quarter of 2001, my reflections on the research focused on the relevance of the entire study and the implications of the results for my work as an adult education teacher and researcher. I knew in the course of conducting the research that I had picked up lessons which had implications for women's studies and my activist work, but I was searching for the relevance of the research to

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my work as an academic in the field of adult education. It was in the process of this search that I came up with the idea of Research B. I knew I needed to undertake the research to understand and gain new insight on the low status of women in Nigeria. I had personally experienced this phenomenon as a university teacher who interacts regularly with male and female colleagues and young female adults in the university. I had also experienced it as a community educator who interacts with young and older women in town, an activist, a wife, and a mother.

**Research B.** I initiated the second research project, “The Dialectics of ‘Magic Consciousness’, the Hidden Curriculum, and Formal Education in the Construction of the Identity of Nigerian Women”. It was supported by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa’s (CODESRIA) Advanced Research Fellowship Programme. The research was initiated in the second half of 2004 and concluded in July 2005. I refer to this research as either “Research B” or “2004 research”.

From the premise that all educational provisions are value-laden and from the post-structuralist feminist pedagogy framework, Research B challenged the position often taken for granted, that women’s acquisition of formal education is the key to their socio-cultural and political empowerment. The question I set out to answer in the study was why the social, political, and cultural status of Nigerian women when compared with that of men has not improved in spite of their education. This question became necessary because apart from salaried employment and healthier households (these are important too), there were no indications that education had benefited women in the area of political participation and freedom from violence. I-IDEA (2000) reported that, “despite a comparatively large pool of well trained and able women, their absence in major institutions of power and decision making processes is particularly striking” (p. 3). This observation was apt and the situation persisted for three years after that observation. After the 2003 General Elections, two out of 36 Deputy Governors were women, 3 women were elected into the 109 member Senate, and 21 became members of the 360 member House of Representatives (Akiyode-Afolabi and Arogundade, 2003). Violence against women both in private and public contexts persisted; and there were no indications that more illiterate than literate girls and women were victims of violence and overt sexism and discrimination. Equally important was the fact that many men and women, boys and girls, even in educational institutions, were uncomfortable with the campaigns around a fair share of rights and resources between men and women. For instance, during a workshop that deliberated on human rights in tertiary institutions, a male respondent who was a leader of a students’ organization, in response to the presentation on women’s human rights said, “In African tradition, women are expected to be submissive. It is not right for women to be claiming that they have equal rights with men. It is not done” (Fashina, 2001, p.112). Yet, the consensus among opinion moulders at public talks and in newspapers, as well as discussants in non-formal education settings, like workshops and seminars, is that access to formal education and literacy training for girls and women will ensure more active involvement of women in politics.

The argument presented in Research B was that although colonialism met unequal relations of power between women and men in many Nigerian communities, its legacies, in formal education, for instance, remain and the processes that it created have fused with the omnipresent Christian and Islamic religious ethos within and outside classrooms and schools (as part of the hidden curriculum and socialization process respectively) to construct women’s identity: an identity that is essentially disempowering.

The approach adopted for the study was a phenomenological reading of the lived experiences of women. Through open-ended questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and observations, data were retrieved from female and male religious leaders; lecturers in tertiary institutions; literate women and men in the formal sector of the economy; semi-literate women in the informal economy; and female and male students in tertiary institutions in two locations in Nigeria. The locations were Ibadan in the South West, and Lokoja in the Middle Belt in Central Nigeria. In the proposal submitted to CODESRIA, I expressed hope that the process of data collection would be a learning and consciousness raising process for participants in the research, e.g. the researcher and the respondents.

The results of data analysis showed that the four groups of female respondents in this study defined themselves in at least 15 different ways and many in more than one way. Many inhabit multiple identities. However, all categories of women connected most with their identity as women and their individual character. For literate women, gender identity ranked first, and character ranked second. Semi-literate women ranked character as first and gender as second (Mejiuni, 2006a). Respondents categorized their gender identity as: female human person reflected as the following: a) socially constructed female, i.e. caregiver and one who accepts the leadership of men; b) feminine, i.e. caring, feeling, and nurturing, which has the potential to be put to productive use; and c) socially constructed male, i.e. aggressive, bold and breadwinner. Women defined their character as being honest, forthright, hardworking, and, or, any, or some of the following: being gentle, peace loving, and submissive to men. Notably, there was a substantial appeal to religion or to God in their responses. Sixty eight percent (68%) of highly literate women in formal work settings made references to religion, and half of this percentage group referred to religion more than once. Sixty Nine percent (69%) of female students, 91.1% of semi-literate women in the informal economy, and 39.5% of female apprentices made obvious references to religion.

With respect to literate men's perception of women's gender identities, we found that men who saw women as female human persons, affirmed women's rights to be whoever and whatever they wanted. There were few men in this category. Many of those who saw women as socially constructed females supported their views with religion and indicated that women should either take low level civic and political leadership positions, or should not take leadership roles at all. Most of the men who took a positive view of femininity affirmed women's capacity to provide leadership even at the topmost level of civic-political life. For the others, although being feminine was a positive trait in the public sphere, it was a negative for leadership in the public sphere especially in higher institutions. Half of the men who identified some women as having "masculine traits" thought the women would make good leaders, while the other half thought such women were bad omens for men and women because they would oppress everybody.

Regarding literate men's perception of women's character, most of the men who thought women should aspire to low level positions only, and those who affirmed women's capacity to hold topmost positions viewed women as honest and hardworking. However, those who held that women should be submissive to men because it had been "ordained" and was the "natural" order expressed the view that women should attend to care giving, lead other women, or at best aspire to low level civic-political positions. It was also in this category that we found most of the men who said they could physically beat a woman.

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The major findings of this study were: First, that because Christianity and Islam have, in some respects fused with Traditional cultures when they have similar interests and goals and the two religions have in the main superseded Traditional religions in most places in Nigeria to the extent that many adherents and custodians of Traditional religious rites are openly Christians or Muslims, these two religions have imposed many of their beliefs and practices on Traditional cultures across much of Nigeria. Further, since patriarchal norms prevail in the teachings and practices of the new religions and power preserves itself, many of the women who try to make meaning of life by balancing spirituality rooted in religion with critical reflections on their experiences and those of others were usually unable to transform their gender identities to realize their full potential and/or to convince other women to do the same (Mejiuni, 2006b).

Second, female students and respondents who had gone through tertiary education experienced discrimination and sexism within the school, in teaching-learning interactions and classroom contexts, as well as outside the school. Higher education was thus an arena where unequal relations of power were perpetuated, women's identities constructed, and where many women internalized these constructions (Mejiuni, 2006a). For some women however, their experiences in tertiary institutions helped them question taken-for-granted positions about who they ought to be. Also there were female and male lecturers who were conscious of the need to make tertiary institutions a place of emancipatory learning for women.

Finally, concerning the empowering potential of women's identities specifically related to how they enhanced or impinged on women's ability to attain political power or transform gender relations, Research B found the following: that these identities shaped how women experienced violence and women's ability to resist violence. In addition, two types of identities favored by highly literate and semi-literate women, in particular their character as defined by their religion, and the identities that men would rather women favor were potentially disempowering because of the preservative nature of power (Mejiuni, 2006a; Mejiuni, 2006c).

*After Research B.* My reflections on the experience of Research B, and then Research A began immediately after I submitted the report on the second study. My thoughts continuously reverted to the learning experiences that the research participants and I gained from the process involved in the two feminist studies. This article represents my reflections on informal learning and non-learning, and mutual learning by participants in the two feminist studies described above. These reflections have implications for adult learning.

### **Why Were the Two Studies Feminist?**

When I agreed to embark on Research A and chose to carry out Research B, I wanted each study to yield knowledge that would serve women's interests. So I knew they were not going to be value-free studies. It is doubtful that there can be value-free research or what is sometimes referred to as objectivity or dispassionate neutrality in conducting research. Blackburn (1996), in discussing Nietzsche's position about objective knowledge said, "Objectivity is revealed as a disguise for power or authority in the academy" (p. 295). I therefore decided to develop an explicit framework. Each study had to be feminist and had to take cognizance of the context of the study. This was why the framework for the first research was an eclecticism of the strengths of essentialist, social constructionist and deconstructionist notions of female identity, and the approach adopted was a case study research design. The case study research design was chosen because the complex phenomenon of women's identities and their social status needed to be

studied within the context of their socio-economic and political realities along with other contending identities.

The second research was based on Tisdell's post structuralist feminist pedagogy framework which connects the psychological orientation of the gender model (personal perspective) of feminist pedagogy with the structural factors of the liberatory model (the collective, systemic perspective) of feminist pedagogy (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). The approach that was adopted for the second research was a phenomenological reading of the problem of the low social status of highly educated Nigerian women. The author followed Bakare-Yusuf's (2003) suggestion that a phenomenological reading of African women's everyday experiences is imperative. Bakare-Yusuf indicated that it is through lived experience in concrete situations that an African woman, for instance, comes to understand what her context has contributed to her identity as an African woman. That is a woman's lived experience alludes to the complex layers of socio-historical (personal and collective) and cultural context that makes an African woman who she is. So apart from the goal of serving women's interests, especially women's strategic gender interests, the frameworks that under gird the two studies' approaches paid attention to women's experiences, their voices and realities. They took cognizance of the socio-economic and political contexts of participants in the research and explored the lived experiences of women in concrete situations in 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria.

hooks (2000) offered a definition of feminism that persons who subscribe to different strands of feminism, including African feminism would understand as addressing the basic minimum issues that are central to feminist thought. She defined feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (p. viii). According to Mackenzie (1993), sexism is "when people stereotype, discriminate against or show prejudice against other people because of their sex" (p.162). hooks (2000) argued that we can only end institutionalized sexism and patriarchy, if we all, women and men, change our minds and hearts, and let go of sexist thoughts and actions into which we have been socialized from birth. One is of the opinion that an understanding of how sexism works is essential to understanding the low social status of Nigerian women.

Of course some would argue that the inferior social position of Nigerian women today is attributable to a whole range of historical processes, i.e. colonialism, neo-colonialism/globalization. These influences are acknowledged in the two studies. In fact, Nigerian men, as much as women, were and are victims of those historical processes. However, the findings of the two studies have shown that Nigerian men, like men around the world, continuously exploit sexism for many ends. They benefit by it and they are trapped in it. So when I chose to approach each of these studies from a feminist framework, I knew my research was going to be guided by politics. In each study, I wanted to use the experiences of women to generate new knowledge, skills and attitudes, and provoke a rethink of or a rupture in knowledge, beliefs, and frames of reference that were constraints. Each research study was a process of knowledge production and political engagement (Harding, 2004). After I began the process of systematic reflection on the two studies, I realized they had resulted in and held the potential for learning and mutual learning. They also resulted in non-learning for some participants in the research.

In my opinion adult educators, feminist educators, and persons who engage in feminist research would find the reflections contained in this article useful. In the paragraphs that follow, this author will: 1) draw the attention of adult education researchers, theorists and practitioners to



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the fact that feminist research, situated within the social purpose tradition of adult education, is a human, intellectual, and political activity that presents opportunities for informal and mutual learning by and among participants in the research; and 2) show that informal learning and non-learning resulted from interaction of participants during fieldwork. Together these reflections affirm the position in the adult education literature, usually taken in respect of formal and non-formal education that learning depends on: the framework from which learning commences; the politics of identity in which teachers and learners are engaged; the relations of power that shape the context of learning, and the environment in which learning is being fostered. A discussion of key concepts on informal learning and non-learning and experiences related to these concepts found in these two studies follow.

### **Informal Learning, Mutual Learning, and Non-learning**

Prior to the establishment of formal educational institutions, human beings were involved throughout life in activities and experiences that resulted in learning (Hrimech, 2005.) Obanya (2004) pointed out that in Nigeria, the colonial experience resulted in the formalization of education in a non-indigenous language supported by a system of values and beliefs largely foreign to the colony. The result is that formal and to a lesser extent non-formal education institutions have displaced indigenous education systems. In indigenous education systems persons, young and old, learned their languages; acquired farming and hunting skills; acquired knowledge about medicinal plants, roots, leaves and fruits, the weather and climatic conditions; acquired knowledge about the meaning of songs and drumming, and acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes that shaped their character through structured practices and apprenticeships (Fafunwa, 1974). Some ways these knowledge, skills, and attitudes were acquired included intuition practices, observation, imitation, and socialization (Hrimech, 2005), as well as reflection on experiences and oral tradition. This is informal learning to the extent that specific buildings or comprehensive programs were not established and labeled “education”. Marsick & Volpe (1999) described informal learning as “learning that is predominantly unstructured, experiential, and non-institutional” It is the acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills or attitudes, which people do on their own and which has not been planned or organized in formal school settings (Hrimech, 2005) nor in non-formal education settings, and it involves action and reflection on experiences (Larsson, 1997; Marsick & Volpe 1999; English, 2002). While there are specific structures and practices involved in indigenous education, these were not readily identifiable to Islamic and Western groups, so much of indigenous education was and continues to be labeled “informal” (Abidogun 2007; Dei 2010).

While Islamic and Western style formal education institutions are here to stay, it is clear that they cannot teach many of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that adults and young people require. Fortunately, opportunities for indigenous and informal learning abound in Nigeria today, even if they are inaccessible to many (Evans, 2003). Individuals learn through reading, traveling, exposure to the mass media, and socialization. They learn as they take part in: income generating activities or work (Marsick & Volpe 1999; Marsick, Volpe & Watkins, 1999); household, leisure, voluntary and community activities (English, 2002; Findsen, 2006); social movements and as they reflect on their own experience and those of others (Hernandez, 1997; Lander, 2003; Obilade & Mejiuni, 2006; Gouin, 2009).

This discussion focuses on informal learning. Some scholars have attempted to explain the different types of informal learning that are observable. Hrimech (2005) identified four types of informal learning. They are self directed learning, tacit informal learning, explicit informal

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learning, and auto-didactic learning. Two of the four types of informal learning he identified, tacit and explicit informal learning, are similar to those that Evans discussed. He described tacit informal learning as experiential, unconscious, and unplanned. It could be socialization and the conditions for learning could be set by others or by contingencies of the environment resulting in incidental learning. Hrimech (2005) described explicit informal learning as learning, which occurs when the individual situates himself where the learning can take place, and he consciously chooses or recognizes the situation or persons as capable of providing significant learning. An example is when individuals decide to watch specific programs on television.

From these descriptions of informal learning, we observe that tacit and explicit informal learning are the most common forms of informal learning in Nigeria today. However, there is yet another form of informal learning which is insidious in Nigeria's education system and constitutes the hidden curriculum. Garrett (1987) refers to the "'hidden curriculum' as values, attitudes, and behavior that are not part of the official curriculum, but which are nevertheless communicated to pupils and students in educational institutions" (p. 81). Informal learning thus takes place outside of formal and non-formal educational institutions, as incidental and or explicit learning), during teaching-learning interactions in formal and non-formal education and in formal and non-formal teaching-learning contexts (Fashina, 2001; Mejiuni, 2006a&b).

When informal learning is compared with formal and non-formal education, differences are evident in several areas of intentionality including planning, determination of contents, methods and methodology, measures of impact, budgeting for the programs or learning experiences/contents, and the choice of who will benefit from the programs or learning experiences. These are the obvious areas on which scholars under immense pressure to publish what is deemed relevant to the educational needs of their country would focus. In spite of the pervasiveness of informal learning in Nigeria, this form of learning remains shadowy within the context of Adult Education. Perhaps this is also a source of concern in the global North since some scholarly works have drawn attention to the need to focus on how informal learning occurs, what can enhance and inhibit it, and how it can be supported, encouraged and developed (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

Mutual Learning is a recognition that individuals learn, alone as individuals, but they also regularly learn from others; persons with whom they interact in different settings. They can be co-workers, co-participants in a social movement, persons with whom they interacted at a conference, a seminar or workshop; or as it happened in the case of this research, persons met in the course of participating in a research project. Anyone who interacts with others in any of these settings could be a source of new knowledge and attitude. They could provide a fresh insight on an issue, initiate a discussion, or make a remark that triggers learning. In these contexts, individuals may not learn the same content from one another, and learning would probably take place on either or many sides, if there is mutual respect and trust. Informal learning is so closely linked with mutual learning that a distinction may be unnecessary. However, persons who are interested in factors that enhance or limit informal learning, and the role of intentionality in learning will find the distinction useful. An understanding of the concept of mutual learning is a good framework from which to track the direction of informal learning, i.e. who is learning what from whom and under what conditions in different settings (Nedergaard, 2006).

I adopt Jarvis's description of non-learning, which is the acknowledgement that people do not always learn from their experience or those of others (1995). He indicated that non-learning could be presumption, non-consideration, or rejection and explained each of them.

Presumption is when persons assume their present knowledge is valid and sufficient to see them through circumstances not so different from the ones they have always known. Non-consideration is when a person does not apply her mind to a potential learning experience, perhaps because she did not have room for reflection or she fears the outcome of such reflections. Rejection is when a person has had an experience, reflects on it, but then rejects the possibility of changing a form of knowledge, attitude, skill, orientation or belief as a result. S/he digs in, not because it would dehumanize her to learn from the experience or it is beyond her capacity to do so, but because s/he may not want to be changed by the experience. S/he might also fear the loss of perks and power if she allows herself to learn from the experience.

Finally, who is a literate person, a semi-literate person and an illiterate or non-literate person? The questions that I sought to answer in the two studies influenced my operational definitions. A literate person is someone who possesses the ability to read, write and perform basic numeracy tasks, with understanding in the language of formal institutions in Nigeria (English) and who is able to employ those skills for functioning in daily activities. An illiterate is someone who is unable to read, write and conduct basic numeracy tasks in the English language. This person may also be non-literate in that he/she has command of their indigenous or mother tongue and numeracy skills in that language. As many Nigerian languages are not taught as written languages, it is customary to consider these individuals non-literate (Abidogun 2007, Dei 2010). While a semi-literate person is a person who can read in the English language, but has limited writing skills, e.g. can only write his/her name or signature for legal purposes or reads and writes but without understanding such that these limited skills cannot then be applied to a wide range of daily activities.

### **Informal and Mutual Learning and Non-learning from Two Feminist Studies**

In the following discussion, I will explore the (potential for) informal learning that occurred in the process and as a result of the two feminist studies described above, and also examine the non-learning that took place. The author will show who learned what. For example, what new knowledge, skills and attitudes did the researcher and the respondents acquire in the course of the research, or as a result of the research? What frames of reference or perspectives were changed, reinforced or re-assessed? What knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs did the researcher and respondents fail to comprehend? The author will discuss how and when learning occurred and what supported or limited learning.

**Research A Learning.** In my interactions with female interviewees, I found that they all had a strong sense of self; they were confident people who were comfortable with and proud of their roles in their different struggles of identity. I learned from women who were illiterate or non-literate, Madam I and Madam D in particular, that “intellectuals do not hold the monopoly of revolutionary consciousness” (Olukoshi & Nyamnjoh, 2006). Madam D was very clear and articulate about the issues at stake in the struggle of Ogoni people.

During the interviews with women involved in the June 12 Elections and Ogoni struggles, I asked questions to suggest that if women had made gender-specific demands (Mikell, 1997; Hassim, 2002) within the broader struggles against the Federal Government/military regime and Shell, the multinational oil company, they would feel less disenchanting and perhaps women’s condition and status would have improved. The following are some of the women’s responses to my suggestion:

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Madam B said all hands had to be on deck to send the military oppressors packing. I reckoned her response as non-learning but did not rule out the possibility that a seed may have been sewn that would trigger critical reflection on that suggestion.

Alhaja I did not quite see the point, and she reiterated the position that Nigerians needed to send the military packing so they do not have to serve the military forever. I reckoned her reaction as non-consideration.

Mrs Y made it clear that while the struggle was on, the gender question was secondary to the environmental question. She thought that once the environmental question was addressed, the gender one would fall in place. When I persisted in my line of questioning, she admitted that she had never really thought of bringing both demands together in a struggle. I reckoned her response as rejection, that is, non-learning and then learning.

Madam D dismissed the suggestion. Although she had indicated that Ogoni men were like other men around the world, and reeled out a list of their misdeeds, she was categorical that Shell was the source of all problems, and has actually been responsible for why their men behave the way they do. This was rejection, non-learning.

### Discussion

The question asked actually suggested an alternative strategy to the ones used, but most of the key participants failed to catch the strategy that the question was supposed to offer in the context of hindsight. Perhaps it was because they were not feminists, so they were convinced that the gender question was not a serious enough issue to consider along with the struggles against the military and environmental degradation. In this case, it is not clear that we (researcher and interviewees) approached those interviews from the same framework (Taylor, 2005); that is a feminist framework that would insure they could draw lessons from my suggestion. Patriarchy may have such a strong influence that among men and women, raising the issue of women's rights would have been considered a betrayal by both genders at the time of the struggle. What is obvious from the responses of the women is that they favored a particular identity at a period in their history, and struggling around that identity would serve their interests. So my suggestion, which was a lesson subtly overlooked, resulted mainly in non-learning and in one instance a movement from non-learning to learning. In that one instance, the participant was conscious of the ambiguity that men within and outside of her ethnic group felt about her activist work for the Ogonis in the heat of the struggle. In her response to a question about the status of Ogoni women she said:

A lot of people like me and thank me all the time for the work I'm doing ..., but I have a problem. Most men want their wives to be like me but not like me (laughs) ... they don't want their wives to be talking about rights ... they like me, but they don't like me. (Mejiuni, 2001)

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In addition, the research participants (Madam D in particular), may have sensed that I was trying to “teach” them something, and that resulted in resistance because I was an outsider. She may have seen me as a researcher who is well off and a member of one of the major ethnic groups oppressing Ogoni people. Someone who has never experienced anything close to the trauma the Ogoni people have lived through as a result of the degradation of their environment, and as someone who has probably never suffered the hazards of direct conflict. Clearly then the different politics of identity in which the feminist researcher and the interviewees were engaged effectively limited or constrained learning (Mejiuni, 2005). I was also aware of the dynamics in the practice of power that characterized the nature of our interactions (Foucault, 1980). When I decided to use interviews as the major instrument for data collection, I did not anticipate that interviewees would learn from my interactions with them. I went to the field with much empathy and respect for the roles prospective interviewees had played in the different struggles in which they were engaged. My mind and heart were in the struggle against the military and the struggle of the Ogonis. I noticed that my interviewees in 3 of the 4 case studies exerted nearly absolute control over our discussions most of the time which was okay by me. I went to the field so they could tell me about their experiences, their own stories, which I needed to analyze so I could discover truths and gain insight. In this context, it was improbable that I could hope to “teach” my interviewees any lessons in how to or how not to conduct struggles or that they would learn from me even though they listened to my suggestion couched as a question.

In Research A it was not apparent that there was mutual trust and respect between the researcher and the interviewees, especially Madam D, at least, not enough to result in mutual learning. The obvious informal learning that occurred was on the part of the researcher. This made the direction of learning one-sided and the learning incidents were too few. Perhaps the seed of insight and movement to learning had been sown in the hearts of the women? Only follow up interaction could confirm that our initial exchanges offered anything meaningful to them.

**Research B.** On the last page of the open-ended questionnaires that male and female participants completed, I asked them to comment freely on the questions they had responded to if they so wish. Most of them responded. Many of their responses indicated that informal learning and non-learning had resulted from the process of providing data for my research.

First we examine non-learning among female participants. One woman complained that the questionnaire was time consuming. A few women wondered about the purpose that my line of questioning served. Another woman said the problems between women and men were not that big, so we should not overstate them, and someone else said the problems were so big, the questions will not solve them. I was able to categorize the first three responses as non-learning because one woman felt safe as a woman, and two others either rejected the messages that the questionnaires carried or were unwilling to consider them. Unfortunately, I could not categorize the last respondent who did not learn because she thought the problems between men and women were so big that my attempts at provoking critical reflection and doing consciousness raising through research would not work.

The responses provided by female participants reflect substantial informal/incidental learning on the part of interviewees. A female student reflected that the questions were therapeutic and would like the issues raised in class:

These questions have helped me to pour out my heart about men. I think if issues like these are raised in lectures, male dominance will fade out.

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Another saw the research as awareness or consciousness raising:

I am happy because I know this is another forum for enlightening women to wake up and take their rightful positions in the contemporary Nigerian society. I am also the outgoing president of NAPPADS (2002/2003) session in Kogi State Polytechnic and I've been encouraging other female students to take their rightful position in the campus and in the society at large. Thank you.

A highly literate woman indicated the questions asked provoked critical reflections and sparked her yearning for gender equality:

The questions gave me the opportunity of thinking deep into some areas I've not really thought about before. They are very stimulating questions – stimulates my quest for gender equality.

Another woman declared the research as sisterhood, holding our sisters' hands (hooks, 1994) and affirming one another, stating:

It is good to know that there are still women like you who have the welfare of the women folk at heart. I must say I dove my hat for you and more grease to your elbow. Please keep the flag flying I am solidly behind you in your course to free women from the wicked hands of men. There is really a case of inequality between the sexes and we must fight it collectively. Thanks.

The response from yet another woman portrayed a deep understanding that the research was to serve women's interests:

They are questions that work through the life of women, and how to make maximum use of the potential of women in the public and as public figures. Thank you.

Many men who commented on the questions understood the purpose that the line of questioning was supposed to serve and they thought the issues needed to be raised. However, some men were resistant, defensive, and unprepared to begin the process of reflection on strongly held beliefs. Some sample responses from men included:

- Actually, women play roles that are different from those of men, but are also important. But no matter their urge to be like men, it is not possible, for God has already made it that men are superior to women. So let women respect men, for the position is a divinely endowed one. Thanks.
- They are normal questions but somehow myopic.
- Men are still regarded as the head of the family when it comes to decision making and this will continue to be so even in USA, Russia, Britain.

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When a semi-literate woman was asked whether she would vote for a female aspiring to the topmost leadership position in the civic-political arena, she answered with an unconditional and emphatic, “Yes”, indicating that she does not understand why men think that women cannot do what they do. She then added, “After all there is no role for the . . . in those jobs and some women attain higher [achievements] than men.” I thought that statement was profound. This woman ruptured the presumed positive relationship between maleness and decision making and wanted to be convinced that men brought more than the physiological male to those offices that they insist are theirs by right. Her response and those of other semi-literate sisters in their questionnaires reinforced my belief that although these women are highly knowledgeable, the formalization of education and language does not readily allow us access to this knowledge.

Informal and mutual learning also took place in the focus group discussions. Women told wonderful and inspiring stories about how they wrested other women from oppressive relationships; helped other women with few resources get started in the retailing business, and paid the school fees of children whose parents they did not know. Once again, I learned the lesson that intellectuals do not hold the monopoly of revolutionary consciousness and action.

The informal learning that resulted from the focus group that involved semi-literate hairdressers, tailors, and market women in Lokoja could be regarded as transformative. In the informal sector of the economy in Nigeria, hairdressers (or beauticians as they would rather be called) perceive themselves as superior to tailors, market women, etc. There is the widely held belief that market women are poor because their retailing businesses do not usually amount to much, many are illiterate or non-literate and they do not dress in fashionable ways. So when we began exploring our assets and sharing our dreams in the group, the two hairdressers who were present felt like they did not belong in the group. They sat askance and whispered across the table intermittently. Then one of the market women began telling the group about her assets. She said her strengths were determination and wealth creation. She said a few years back on a rainy day, after a neighbor refused to give her son a ride in his car to school and her boy came crying, she promised him she would get a car. Two years later, she bought a pick up van from income she earned through her retail trading in foodstuff and she employed a driver. Now, the two hairdressers were all ears. They became part of the group. She also told us how she mentors women in the art of retail trading by helping them begin with very small quantities of foodstuff. The countenance of the hairdressers changed completely. Their faces showed respect. When we got to sharing our dreams for ourselves and other women, that market woman, who was then in her 50s, apparently sensing respect from others and feeling safe (Cranton, 1994) declared that her dream was to obtain formal education once she has seen all her children through school. When the focus group was over we all hugged one another like long-term friends.

What enhanced learning in research B? The environment in which the research took place was conducive for informal learning. It was 5 years into civilian rule and the few women who were in key leadership positions were visible and performing well, while their male counterparts were perceived as bumbling. In addition, many international and local organizations were raising women’s rights issues seriously within Nigeria, having recovered from the prohibition on state feminism posed during the military regimes. In this context, it was easier to further women’s interests through research. This was more so because the research focused on the experience of women as women in the public and private spheres, not their experiences as women participating in the identity politics of their ethnic and religious groups. There was therefore mutual trust and respect, and mutual learning. The questionnaires allowed women to express themselves freely,

and guaranteed anonymity; and the focus groups explored women's assets and their dreams, so the focus group was not a space for trading blames and feeling guilty. The questionnaires and the focus groups were therefore safe spaces for women.

*What limited learning in research B?* Although we had observed that the environment of research B enhanced informal learning, we also need to consider that the same environment created resistance and rejection because some men and women were generally uncomfortable with the seriousness with which international and local organizations in Nigeria were raising women's issues and concerns. In this context, the overtly feminist framework of this research led to some resistance, rejection or non-learning among a few men and women. But then, the questions contained in the questionnaires simply asked women about their experiences. To summarize what resulted in non-learning was the presence of sexism or institutionalized patriarchy; the very problems that feminism seeks to end. So while a few female participants did not see the problem with patriarchy, and one was overwhelmed by it, a few men insisted on patriarchy.

### **Feminist Knowledge Production and Learning**

It could be observed in the preceding paragraphs that the researcher encouraged respondents in the two studies to cite their stories, and share their experiences; and also engage in critical reflection and critical self reflection through the questions raised and issues explored in interviews, open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions. Hence, in the two studies, the research process was also a consciousness raising exercise (Hart, 1990), during which the researcher subtly suggested alternative perspectives to respondents (Mejiuni, 2012) and also through some of the questions raised and issues explored in those three instruments. The instruments of the research were therefore the vehicles of consciousness raising because it was through them that one-on-one and group dialogue took place.

As the researcher, I also observed that the respondents who provided data for the research had themselves been involved in the process of knowledge production, albeit informally, when they cited and reflected on their primary experience and others' experiences, and when they sought to understand and proffer explanations for those experiences. For instance, we recall the position of the woman who ruptured the presumed positive relationship between male anatomy and decision making, and wanted to be convinced that men brought more than the physiological male to those political offices that they insist are theirs by right. This is what Aspers (2009) referred to as the "first order constructs of the people studied." Aspers cited Schutz (1962) as referring to this as the common sense thinking of persons living their daily life within their social world.

On the part of the researcher, the two studies resulted in insights, understanding, and (re)discovery of facts about: why, when compared with men, few benefits have accrued to women from their participation in different politics of identity, and why and how women's social status has remained low in spite of their educational attainments. These were products of her systematically planned search for knowledge.

The point here is that while the researcher was engaged in systematically planned search for knowledge, the respondents who participated in her studies were also engaged in informal knowledge production or common sense thinking; even though the researcher had apprehended some of the products of respondents' thinking as "data." Most significantly the process of a systematically planned search for knowledge led to informal knowledge production on the part



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of some respondents and was also a consciousness raising exercise for the researcher and respondents, but more so, on the part of the respondents. Informal learning and mutual learning therefore resulted from these processes; but, we do not want to forget that some of the respondents in the research rejected the messages in the research, while some were unwilling to consider or reflect on the messages.

The learning outcomes from Research B and to a much lesser extent from Research A were enhanced insight; disruption of some taken-for-granted positions; new knowledge and attitudes; reassessment of one's positionality; reinforcement of life enhancing beliefs, and a change in behavior resulting from the process of recalling, writing about, sharing, listening to, and reflecting on experiences. In Research B, the issues explored in the open ended questionnaires and focus group discussions led the informants and the researcher to face and address questions previously avoided due to denial and fear. From the point of view of the respondents in the two studies, the learning that took place among them could be classified as tacit informal learning because it derives from experience, the learning outcomes came to the respondents unintentionally as they did not plan to learn. On the part of the researcher, in addition to achieving the goals of a systematically planned search for knowledge, she had situated herself in the research to learn so her own learning can be described as explicit informal learning.

It is important that we observe that it is expert knowledge that allows the researcher to separate the process of knowledge production from the lessons that participants in the research took away from the process of research. It is also expert knowledge that allows the researcher to acknowledge that the learning that took place on the part of the respondents that she calls attention to in this reflection was the product of a process of informal knowledge production. However, for many people who are not professional researchers, especially women and other minorities whose experiences and concerns are not represented in classrooms and textbooks; they cope with life by continuous engagement with informal knowledge production, learning, unlearning and knowledge production. A thin line therefore separates knowledge production from learning among such persons; the process of knowledge production is for them, a process of learning. So research that requires participants in the research to cite and reflect on their experiences is an opportunity for informal and mutual learning for the researcher as much as it is for the other participants.

### **Conclusions**

Based on reflection on these two feminist research studies, the following conclusions are drawn. The two studies cited in this reflection explored respondents' experiences around issues central to their lives. This includes their identities and identity politics, status as persons, educational attainments, participation in politics and community life, and experience of violence. Second, the researcher and respondents engaged in formal and informal knowledge production that were also consciousness raising exercises. In this way informal and mutual learning resulted from the process of research for some while a few others did not learn. Third, informal learning, mutual learning, and non-learning resulted from the process of research because of the context of the two studies. Contextual factors included the identity politics of the participants, the practice of power between and among participants, and the framework from which the two studies proceeded. Finally, in a study conducted on how international adult educators learn, English, posed this question, "If a more systematic, but yet informal effort were made to ask people to name their experience and to reflect critically on it, would more learning result and would the transfer of learning be more effective?" (2002, p. 246). Given the reflections discussed in this

article, I would respond to English's query with: Yes, if the politics of identity in which co-learners are engaged are not multilayered and/or oppositional, the relations of power are not skewed in favor of a party. The framework from which learning is approached affirms co-learners and the context or environment supports or is, at least not overtly opposed to, naming and reflecting critically on experiences.

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