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## **"It Is Not Breasts or Vaginas that Women Use to Wash Dishes": Gender, Class, and Neocolonialism through the Women in Nigeria Movement (1982-1992)**

By Sara Panata<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The first self-declared Nigerian feminist organization was founded under the name of Women in Nigeria (WIN) at a meeting in Zaria in May 1982. WIN was a left-wing movement including women and men. This article seeks to shed light on knowledge production in the field of feminism and gender studies in Nigeria, focusing on WIN's texts and discourses. Approaching knowledge production from the perspective of social history, my analysis examines the biographical trajectories of the association's activists, the ways in which their journeys influenced the use of global knowledge and the production of "situated knowledges", and how intellectual work operated together with the social and ideological struggles of the time. I examine the multilateral, and indeed unequal, knowledge circulations between the Global North and the Global South as well as the logic of coproduction and reinvention of frameworks for globalized theories at the local level, all happening during a period (the 1980s) marked by the progressive globalization of the social sciences. This reflection begins by looking at the context in which the association emerged, its members, and the debates that led to its creation in Nigeria. It then goes on to explore how the association's activists used the concept of gender. It presented a challenge at a time when the differences between gender and sex were still not taken for granted. The final section examines the ways in which WIN members articulated a pioneering rhetoric surrounding the need to study the intermingling of various power relations to understand women's oppression in the country and create a more complex approach to gender-based analysis. The article illustrates how WIN managed to establish itself as a concrete site for knowledge production in the fields of gender studies and feminism, formulating an innovative and locally situated feminist epistemology. The example it sets serves as an invitation to decenter the Global North as the primary perspective regarding knowledge production in gender studies and feminist epistemologies and, conversely, to pay attention to feminist theory formulated by activist and academic circles based in the Global South.

*Keywords:* Gender, Intersectionality, Knowledge production, Nigeria, Left-wing approaches, Feminism

### **Introduction**

Burdened by her role as mother, overburdened by domestic labour and household chores, the woman is left with very little energy to pursue any income generating work or to struggle to emancipate herself. This situation calls for urgent intervention. (Mahmud and Mahmud 79)

In this excerpt, two members of the Nigerian feminist organization Women in Nigeria (WIN), Patricia and Mahoumud Mahmud, described the experience of the vast majority of Nigerian women following the country's 1981 economic crisis. Faced with an oil crisis in 1978, the Nigerian government introduced austerity measures and took out its first international loan, thus launching a cycle of external debt. By 1981, the economic crisis was at its worst after the price of oil, the country's main source of revenue, plummeted even further. This led the

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Nigerian government to take out a second loan from the International Monetary Fund, which recommended a structural adjustment plan with even greater austerity measures. Women were especially affected by the crisis (Emeagwali). Many found themselves unable to continue working full-time in the formal sector because they now had to manage domestic work, childcare, and contend with the growing shortage of common consumer goods (Shehu). Those working in the informal sector were also deeply affected by the increase in everyday expenses (transportation, rent, basic necessities, etc.) (Otobo). Despite the economic crisis, the Second Nigerian Republic (1979-1983) seemed to be unprecedented in the history of Nigerian women thanks to the enactment of new laws and political measures benefiting them (Shettima et al.). The new constitution of 1978 first introduced the principle of non-discrimination based on gender, ethnic group, or birth, allowing women to vote for the first time (Shettima et al.; Osinulu and Mba). Even though the implementation of public policies focused on women, gender inequality did not subside.

Women in Nigeria (WIN), the first self-declared feminist organization in Nigeria, was created as a response to this crisis and the ambient sense of political disappointment. Founded in the northern city of Zaria in 1982, WIN was a collective of men and women of leftist sensibilities. The association undertook academic research in various sectors (politics, education, agriculture, etc.) to understand the reasons for the various ways in which Nigerian women were being oppressed (Imam et al., *Women and the Family in Nigeria*; Shettima et al.; Women in Nigeria, *Child Abuse*). Specific proposals for combatting the inequalities exposed by this research were also provided. These suggestions were either sent directly to the government as recommendations or shared in the press, on the radio, on television, and in academic journals (Osakue et al.; Mohammed and Madunagu) as resolutions and political proposals to be implemented (Imam; Iweriebor).

This article seeks to argue that this association was a laboratory for knowledge production on gender studies and feminism in the 1980s. Approaching knowledge production from the perspective of social history, my analysis examines the biographical trajectories of the association's activists, the ways in which their journeys influenced the use of global knowledge and the production of "situated knowledges" (Haraway), and how intellectual work operated together with the social and ideological struggles of the time. Based on WIN's production of "situated knowledges", this article illustrates how this knowledge "dialogue[s] with theories produced in other latitudes at the complex crossroads of globalization and localization" (Falquet and Flores Espínola 8). It examines the multilateral, and indeed unequal, circulation between the Global North and the Global South (Dados and Connel 13) as well as the logic of coproduction and reinvention of frameworks for globalized theories at the local level (Keim), all happening during a period (the 1980s) marked by the progressive globalization of the social sciences (Heilbron et al.).

Following in the footsteps of several historians (Awe; De Haan; Ghodsee) and sociologists (Mohanty; Amadiume; Oyèwùmí; Lugones), this study distances itself from the hegemonic view that considers the Global North as a privileged site of theoretical development and knowledge production. Numerous researchers have emphasized the importance of "decentering" the social sciences, and the imperialist construction of this field has been decried (Alatas; Keim). Gender studies have not escaped the same observations (Connell). Several scholars have criticized the "eurocentrism" of this field, whose theories are largely produced in the Global North and uncritically applied in the Global South (Amadiume; Awe; Oyèwùmí). Thanks to these long-standing criticisms, texts from scholars and activists from the Global South, proposing "situated knowledge" and renewing the theoretical framework forged in the Global North, have been *slowly* recognized in the international field of feminist and gender studies. However, these scholars are for the most part based in Northern academic institutions. The theoretical productions of authors *from* and *based in* the Global South have received little

to no consideration outside their countries of origin. Notably, knowledge production on feminist theories and gender studies *in* Africa has been largely neglected. Taking into account these gaps, this article seeks to shed light on the history of knowledge production in the field of feminism and gender studies in Nigeria, focusing on WIN's texts and discourses and on the ways in which this production challenges the theoretical frameworks produced in the Global North.

This reflection begins by looking at the context in which Women in Nigeria emerged, its members, and the debates that led to its creation in left-wing, feminist circles in Nigeria. By examining the rhetoric formulated in conference reports published by WIN, it then explores how WINers, as the association's activists called themselves (an acronym emphasizing their desire to defeat various forms of oppression), used "gender" as a useful category of analysis. The final section analyzes the ways in which WIN members articulated a pioneering rhetoric surrounding the need to study the intermingling of various power relations to understand women's oppression in the country and create a more complex approach to gender-based analysis. Their prism for seeing the way in which several forms of domination operate jointly and reinforce each other evokes the concept of intersectionality coined by American civil rights advocate and professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw). Several sociologists (Buscatto; Falquet; Gallot et al.) have shown that the intersectional approach did not emerge out of thin air and that its academic and militant use preceded its theoretical conceptualization. Its genealogy was specifically associated with Black Feminism and the activist writing of Black women in the United States (Beal; Davis; Bambara; Hull et al.; hooks). WINers' observations were part of this conversation in that they looked at Nigerian women's social position and experience as shaped by the intersection and interaction of various forms of inequality. This confirms that the intersectional approach was already in use before being theoretically labelled as such and illustrates the fact that theorists and activists in the Global South were involved in its early development, although their contributions have so far been largely ignored.<sup>2</sup>

To reconstruct WIN's ideological history, I began by assembling the nine official scientific publications edited and released by WIN between 1982 and 1992. Published in small numbers, they had to be located in libraries across the cities of Ibadan and Zaria, London, and New York. Not all of the contributions included in these publications were academic studies. Indeed, many were based on members' personal experiences. This blend of the scientific and the personal in the writing was a deliberate choice<sup>3</sup> often found in feminist knowledge production (The Personal Narratives Group; Passerini; Thiam) and facilitated a sociohistorical approach to intellectual output. I also conducted ten semi-structured interviews with former activists, both women and men, between 2016 and 2019 in Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja, Zaria) and the United States (New York, Connecticut).<sup>4</sup> These interactions helped me to retrace the biographical and activist trajectories of many WINers and understand the connection between the historical context, the choice of a certain kind of involvement, and specific epistemologies, thus making it possible to propose a sociohistorical approach that transcends the study of the association's rhetoric. I went on to consult WIN member Norma Perchonock's personal papers (hereafter NPP) in Zaria. They included newsletters, meeting reports, and manifestos. These papers made it possible to analyze the generative process of collective formulation behind the texts published between 1982 and 1985, providing access to prior discussion and debates that

<sup>2</sup> The sociologist Awa Thiam's texts are worth examining through this lens (Thiam).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Ifeyinwa Iweriebor.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with: Gloria Emeagwali, 12 October 2017, Connecticut; Jibrin Ibrahim, 26 July 2017 and 4 May 2019, Abuja; Ifeyinwa Iweriebor, 17 October and 12 November 2017, New York; Ngozi Iwere, 29 September 2016, Lagos; Mma Odi, 4 May 2019, Abuja; Adetoro Oladapo, 9 May 2019, Lagos; Amina Salihu, 27 November 2016, Abuja; Esu Nkoyo Toyo, 4 May 2019, Abuja; Norma Perchonock, 24 April 2019, Lagos; and Charmaine Pereira, 9 May 2019, Abuja.

led to the subsequently published texts. This corpus also enabled a more detailed examination of the contextualization of this knowledge production, which was unmediated by the editing process preceding publication.

### **The Emergence of a Feminist Movement in the Left-Wing Nigerian Landscape**

By April 1982 many Nigerians had lost faith, not only in the Second Republic, but also in Nigeria as a political entity. Some politicians had even started to call for a break-up of the country, or at least a confederal arrangement. Nigerian women long abused, exploited and marginalized, watched as the nation was being pushed down the drain. This was the state of the nation under which Women in Nigeria came to existence. [...] Ours was a historic intervention to save and strengthen Nigerian womanhood as a weapon to save the nation. (Madunagu 13).

In this excerpt from the brochure marking WIN's tenth anniversary, Professor Bene Madunagu, a WIN member and a staunch Trotskyist, describes the association's creation. In 1982, she was a professor of chemistry at the University of Calabar. She and her husband, Professor Edwin Madunagu—mathematician and journalist—were two central figures of the left in the country. Since the 1970s, they had been activists in a number of left-wing student organizations strongly opposed to the military regime. Beginning in 1975, the couple was imprisoned for their opposition to the government. Following their release, they went underground and created a radical commune in Calabar as they waited for the country to be democratized. The democracy that was achieved in 1979 fostered a dialogue with other left-leaning academics around the country. Inspired by Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, and Maoist ideologies and organized in various left-wing political groups, these academics formulated a common critique of the Nigerian ruling bourgeois class, which was viewed as a puppet for Western imperialist orders, pushing Nigeria towards total collapse. In these groups, Nigerian women scholars and activists protested about their peculiar subordinate position and questioned the origin of their oppression.

The first national meeting around these issues took place at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria (ABU), the cradle of the Nigerian left in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>5</sup>. Five women played a key role in organizing this initiative: Ayesha Imam, a Nigerian undergraduate who had returned from London to study sociology at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FAAS) at ABU; Hauwa Mahdi, graduate of the Department of History at ABU and one of Usman's students; Altine Mohammed, an architecture student; and two American anthropologists teaching at the Sociology Department since the 1970s: Norma Perchonock, former Women's Liberation Movement activist in the United States (Borun et al.) and Renée Ilene Pittin. With the support of the Sociology Department, they organized a two-day national seminar (May 27-28, 1982) at the FAAS. 120 people from across the country (75% of whom were women) registered for the conference (Women in Nigeria, *Women in Nigeria Today* 1-9). The academics ended the conference by proposing ideas for further activism (Women in Nigeria, *Women in Nigeria Today* 231-247). Many stressed the importance of creating a mixed-gender organization (including women and men) that would collectively reflect on the nature and the forms of women's oppression in Nigeria to make plans and act as a group. Three other personalities

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<sup>5</sup>As more and more young left-leaning Nigerian scholars joined the staff of ABU in those years, they felt constrained by the nature of the university structure that remained very colonial and undemocratic and became very vocal in their attempts to change things. With leftist people of different orientations, like Bala Usman (Head of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 1976), and others leading the way, there began a constant struggle to change the rules of the university as well as the curricula.

played a crucial role in this early planning phase: Ifeyinwa Iweriebor<sup>6</sup>, a journalist for the *News Agency of Nigeria*, Gloria Emeagwali<sup>7</sup>, a lecturer at the Department of History and Salihu Bappa, a lecturer of the Department of English at the ABU. This organization aimed to gather scholars and activists of various left-wing political orientations.

The first challenge was finding a name for such an organization. After a year of indecision, 'Women in Nigeria' was chosen and formally adopted in Zaria in April 1983.<sup>8</sup> The decision was based on steering clear of any direct reference to feminism.<sup>9</sup> This made it possible to downplay the subversive potential of this women's liberation movement to attract as many members as possible and earn the approval of less radical figures. The Marxist WINer Jibrin Ibrahim stressed that some members were against the term "feminism", which was readily associated in Nigeria with a movement imported from abroad.<sup>10</sup> Yet the logo that was chosen—a raised fist holding a pestle in front of the stylized shape of Nigeria—explicitly displayed the association's aim of fighting discrimination against women.

**Figure 1: WIN's Color Logo (Osakue et al.)**



WINers chose as their symbol a domestic tool that most women in Nigeria owned. It signified the workforce and the invisible labor of the Nigerian women who used it to prepare food, often as part of a group. This object, associated with the domestic sphere and now

<sup>6</sup> Born in Nigeria, Ifeyinwa Iweriebor obtained her BA in Journalism in Jamaica, from the University of the West Indies. She returned to Nigeria in the early 1980s and became a journalist for the *News Agency of Nigeria* before joining the *Agricultural and Rural Management Training Institute* from 1984. She was a member of the *Nigerian Association of Media Women* affiliated to the *National Council of Women's Societies*. In 1984, she was elected *Publicity Secretary* of WIN. In 1985, she attended the United Nations conference in Nairobi to represent the organization. At the end of the 1980s, she withdrew from the association. She then left Nigeria and moved to New York where she continued her work as a freelance journalist and consultant on women's issues, and also taught at a technical college.

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Emeagwali obtained her BA in History from the University of the West Indies in 1973 and then moved to Toronto University for her MA. She completed her PhD in Nigeria at Ahmadu Bello University. Between 1979 and 1989, she lectured in the Department of History at ABU, the Nigerian Defence Academy and the University of Ilorin. From 1989 to 1991, during her sabbatical, she was a Visiting Scholar at the University of the West Indies and a Visiting Fellow and Senior Associate Member at the University of Oxford, UK (1990/1991). She was appointed Full Professor in 1995 at Central Connecticut State University, where she is still lecturing today.

<sup>8</sup> NPP, *Box 012*, WIN, press release, May 1982.

<sup>9</sup> For example: Women's Liberation Movement of Nigeria, Women Society for the Liberation of Nigerian Women or Feminist Movement of Nigeria. NPP, *Box 012*, WIN, Steering Committee.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jibrin Ibrahim, 2016. Ibrahim grew interested in Marxism and began participating in the Zaria Group, a Marxist-Leninist study group founded at ABU, as part of his university studies at the age of 18. In 1983, he moved to Vichy, France, where he earned a degree in French and pursued a master's degree followed by a PhD in Political Science at the University of Bordeaux. Upon completing his PhD in 1987, he returned to Nigeria to teach at ABU.

brandished in public, suggests a call for women to collectively step into public spaces as well as an invitation to politicize private concerns. It also recalls an incident highlighted in the press at the time involving a Nigerian woman who killed her abusive husband in self-defense using a pestle.<sup>11</sup> The dual connotation of weapon and domestic tool went against the grain of the conventional image of the peaceful housewife.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to making a distinctly African reference, the raised fist primarily serves as the international symbol of the collective fight for feminism and against fascism and racism (Du Plessis and Snitow 501).<sup>13</sup> The decision to use it reveals what made WIN so unique, in that it combined the global debates found in left-wing and feminist literature with WINers' local concerns. Nonetheless, WINers stressed the desire to create a militant feminist association that was socially acceptable. To make progress on a national level, it was key to act strategically. WIN had to appear radical without giving the impression of overly deconstructing social order. A compromise was found with the adoption of a symbol of struggle through the logo and a seemingly innocuous name devoid of any overt reference to feminism.

The logo, which displays the stylized shape of Nigeria, offers a glimpse of another important dynamic in the association: the desire to assume a national dimension. Beyond its aim to include activists from all over the country, the association considered women's liberation to be part of a broader political and national mission. WINers formulated theoretical discourse and plans for political action that could speak to the whole country, beyond the bureaucratic divisions and internal schisms (class, ethnicity, language, religion, or region) that characterized the country (Iweriebor). The abolition of forms of oppression was only possible if the Nigerian state and its structure of governance were called into question. That is why WIN declared itself independent from the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), the other women's national association in the country.

Established in 1957, the NCWS was a national umbrella association encompassing all of the women's associations in Nigeria. While the affiliation of women's organizations with the Council was neither compulsory nor regulated by a legislative text, it was presented as such by members of the NCWS. This implicitly made it possible to be recognized nationally and receive state support through funding. WIN, however, asserted its desire to remain independent to maintain its political mission of challenging the existing government. In 1982, WIN was established as an independent association with the purpose of examining women's oppressions and finding concrete solutions. However, not every member agreed on the association's theoretical and analytical foundations.

### Engendering Social Change in Nigeria

The confluence of left-wing thinking and feminist thinking within WIN led to a reading of women's oppression based on the use of two analytical tools: gender and class. WIN's first meeting report illustrates some of its lively debates on the definition of gender, which were linked to the desire to propose a concept distinct from sex.

Perhaps the most confusing terminological problem arising in the seminar was the distinction between sex and gender. In the course of discussion, it was explained that sex refers to biological, physical characteristics of male

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Ifeyinwa Iweriebor and Norma Perchonock.

<sup>12</sup> I see a parallel here with the *cacerolazos* of Argentinian activists beginning in 1982. By reclaiming a domestic tool—empty pots and pans—to punctuate their marches and protests, these women overturned the housewife image attributed to women as a way of turning an apparently harmless kitchen utensil into a political tool (Telechea).

<sup>13</sup> NPP, *Box 012, WIN*, Newsletter no. 2, November 1982; Women in Nigeria Emergency Steering Committee Meeting, 18 November 1982.



and female. Gender, on the other hand, is the socially defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their alleged sexual characteristics. Gender is a social not a biological category. Thus, for example, in some cultures, farming is men's work, and is associated with masculinity; in others, it is done by women, and has feminine connotations.

At the seminar, one commentator heatedly expressed the idea that women are emotional (and hysterical), while men are rational. This is a typical example of social stereotyping according to gender. However, this individual seemingly disproved his own thesis by violently storming out of the room to the amusement of the other participants.

What is crucial in the sex/gender distinction is that we must always differentiate between the actual biological differences between men and women (such as the differences in reproductive capacity), and the socially defined roles ascribed to men and women supposedly on the basis of these differences. As one participant noted, it is not breasts nor vaginas that women use to wash dishes or clean the house—these roles are assigned to women by society, not by biology (*Women in Nigeria, Women in Nigeria Today 2*).

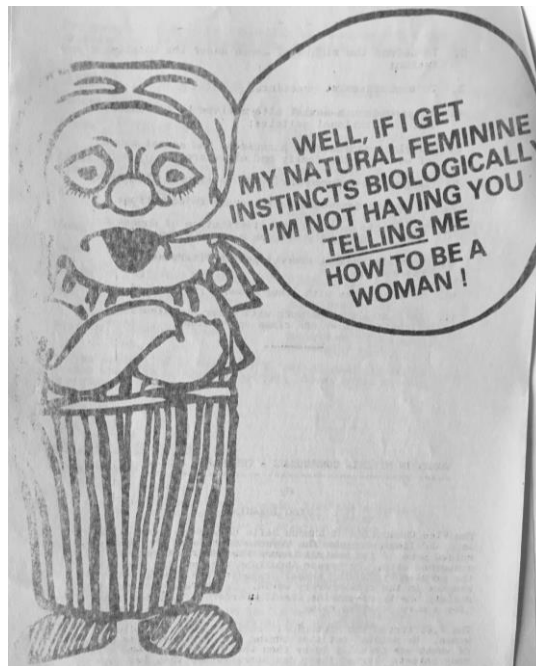
In this excerpt, a clear rejection of an essentialist ideology feeding the conventional image of women and their social roles can be detected. WINers adopted the perspective of a socially constructed gender versus the idea of a natural, biological sex. This position was foundational for the anti-essentialist, Western feminist approaches that are explicitly cited in this publication, notably *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir), *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan), *Sexual Politics* (Millett), and *The Main Enemy* (Delphy). These were known as second wave radical, materialist and socialist feminist texts (Pavard). These works reached Nigeria much more easily—and cheaply—in those years than they do today, through university libraries and thanks to Nigerian researchers' international travels.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the early internal debates glimpsed in this extract, WIN adopted an anti-essentialist reading of social relations. WINers emphasized the fact that women's subordination was in no way justified by their biological nature but was instead socially constructed and could therefore be deconstructed. One of the posters sold at the WIN's first meeting, entitled "Feminine Instincts", comically illustrates this position<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Norma Perchonock, 2019. At the time, the most widely known and circulated feminist texts were largely by middle class white authors, which is the reason why there was less frequent critical dialogue with African Americans authors or other authors from the Global South.

<sup>15</sup> At the first conference, the organizers were already selling posters with the purpose of raising awareness. They were extremely successful, albeit facing criticism from some members. NPP, *Box 012, WIN*, Report of the Steering Committee, June 1982-April 1983.

**Figure 2: “Feminine Instincts” Poster<sup>16</sup>**

A woman with arms crossed in determination ironically highlights the paradox that if “being a woman” means having natural instincts dictated by biology, then women naturally know how to behave without outside interventions. Such conceptions therefore proposed to go beyond the rhetoric used by other Nigerian organizations operating from the 1950s through the 1970s, which was linked to a system of values, representations, attributions, and roles “naturally and/or traditionally” divided between men and women (Panata). Professor, feminist theorist, and WIN member Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie noted that these “natural or traditional” systems of gender generated a “personal, emotional, psychological and institutional oppression” (*Women in Nigeria, Women in Nigeria Today* 128) that was so integrated in Nigerian society that it was sometimes impossible to grasp, even by the “victims” of this structure.<sup>17</sup>

Gender was therefore used by WINers as a framework for analyzing and taking action, making it possible to historicize, denaturalize, and challenge these power relations. The fundamental difference between WIN and all previous associations in the country lay in this ability to speak in terms of gender, which made it possible to criticize socially constructed and deeply embedded divisions based on sex differences (especially the division of labor) and to challenge gender stereotypes. In the 1980s, such a proposal was innovative in Nigeria and elsewhere too, as the issue of the distinction between sex and gender divided feminist movements on a global scale (Delphy). WIN’s observations were therefore part of a renewed feminist reflection taking shape worldwide. Through research, WINers tried and captured the daily lived experiences of Nigerian women of various social classes, thus challenging and remodeling a category of analysis that was theoretically conceptualized in the Global North.

<sup>16</sup> NPP, *Box 012, WIN*, Newsletter No.1, June 1982. I am currently unable to determine who designed this poster and whether it was a Nigerian design or borrowed from other collectives.

<sup>17</sup> Odundipe-Leslie joined WIN after 1983, when she was a lecturer at the University of Ibadan (Department of English). She went on to teach English at the University of Port Harcourt, where she helped establish a branch of the association. She made a name for herself as a writer, poet, and feminist and Marxist theorist in the 1980s and 1990s. After her experience at WIN, she theorized an African-centered feminism that she called “stiwanism” (*Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*). She advocated for the use of this term over ‘feminism’ (Ogundipe-Leslie).

This is where a fundamental difference emerged with the well-known work of the Nigerian researcher Oyěwùmí Oyěwùmí.

In, *The Invention of Women*, Oyěwùmí Oyěwùmí argues that the biological question is a Western one and she criticized the use of gender to understand African societies. She illustrates the fact that in pre-colonial Yoruba society social relations and hierarchies did not derive from biology because “the nature of one’s anatomy did not define one’s social position” (Oyěwùmí 13). Thus, “the Yoruba social order requires a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumes biology as the foundation for the social” (Oyěwùmí 13). These observations opened a whole field of studies that challenged the use of gender as a useful category of analysis to understand African societies and argued for the establishment of new theoretical frameworks, rejecting analytical categories conceptualized in the Global North. WIN took a different approach. WINers insisted on the need for contextualized research on Nigerian women while still using gender as “a useful category of historical analysis” (Scott) in Nigeria. In this, they were closer to other authors who criticized the domination of Global North theories and pushed for locally grounded analysis while retaining some theoretical frameworks forged in the Global North (Bakare-Yusuf; Mama, Mohanty).

However, the association emerged during a deep economic crisis and a single narrative of gender inequality was not enough to help explain the oppression of the great majority of Nigerian women. In the process of exploring the intersection and reciprocal exacerbation of different forms of inequality, deep ideological rifts come to the fore.

### **An Activist Use of Intersectionality before its Time**

WINers were divided when it came to the intersection of class and gender in understanding women’s oppression. Was one struggle more important than the other? Could they be combined? In the discussions held at the first conference, a whole range of positions emerged. At the extremes of the ideological spectrum, there were orthodox Marxists at one end and “radical feminists”—as some WINers defined themselves—at the other.

#### *Marxists versus Radical Feminists*

WINers (primarily men) who were deeply attached to Marxist orthodoxy proposed a classical analysis of women’s oppression based on Marx, Engels, and Lenin, whose “sparse observations on women, which were gathered and canonized in the early years of the Third International, provided an official theory for all communist countries in the twentieth century” (Guidi). These WINers acknowledged the specificity of women’s oppression but described it as subordinate to class oppression. In other words, women would no longer be oppressed in a system liberated from capitalism. Women’s liberation was therefore subordinate to the anticapitalist struggle and the establishment of socialism. These activists were heavily inspired by the experiences of other socialist countries that took the issue of women into account but as a subordinate matter (Molyneux).

WIN’s radical feminists (primarily women), however, deemed this purely Marxist approach inadequate. These activists proposed an analysis based on the dual oppression of class and gender experienced by women (Women in Nigeria, *Women in Nigeria Today* 101). In articulating both forms of oppression, WIN’s feminist activists were drawn to the left-wing material analysis of social relationships while also introducing some additional nuances. WINers proposed an alternative reading of these socialist experiments by engaging in a critical dialogue with texts by Marx, Lenin, and Castro. In their view, class analysis was central but insufficient for understanding the forms of oppression exerted over women. Women were subjected to a form of class oppression like that faced by men, but on a different and more severe level. Besides, they were subjected even further to a second form of oppression specific to them. Reading the works of Global North radical socialist feminists (Firestone, Canadian;

Delphy, French; Mitchell and Rowbotham, British) led to more complex observations. In the 1970s, despite internal debates, Global North radical feminists began adopting an approach that consisted in challenging and subverting orthodox Marxist thinking that considered the proletariat as a single class characterized by economic exploitation and employers as a single class, owing to their position as the exploiters. In their place, Global North radical feminists substituted two other equally monolithic groups defined by a relationship based on domination: men and women. In order to liberate women, the fight against capitalism had to be led in tandem with the fight against the patriarchy. However, WIN's radical feminists also distanced themselves from these theorists by breaking away from Global North literature. As Ayesha Imam explains:

Both Delphy and Firestone claim to be applying Marxist method (i.e., historical materialism) properly in their analyses. However, while it is agreed that, hitherto at least, much Marxist analysis has distinct gaps in the treatment of women, neither Delphy nor Firestone have used this method. [...] the main criticism of both these theorists however is that, as with other theorists positing universal system of sex oppression, they are ahistorical. They cannot account for the differences between for instance, working class and bourgeois women within capitalism, or changes in the position of women from one dominant mode of production in a social formation to another, or for variations in women's situations for one society to another, such as the different situations of women in Nigeria under purdah [isolation] in dependent capitalism and white women in the USA under mature capitalism. ("Towards an Adequate Analysis of the Position of Women in Society" 18)

According to Delphy, "patriarchal exploitation is the common, specific and main oppression of women" (18). In her view, this patriarchal oppression was an experience shared by all women and the primary vector of their exploitation. Imam's criticism points out that such positioning, which was generally agreed upon in Global North socialist feminisms, did not make it possible to highlight class differences among women with varying experiences of oppression or the diverse positions held by women in different national contexts, where historically constructed colonial power relations were still at work. Ogun-dipe-Leslie expounded upon this, saying that "there is the black/white posing of issues which socialist feminists reject, insisting on the class view of the history and human society" (71-72).

By openly criticizing the radical socialist visions of Global North feminists, WINers' analyses attributed a great deal of importance to race as a social category that could signify power relations. They stressed that, despite the independence gained by formerly colonized countries, the world continued to be governed by colonial power relations, which could not be reduced to a bilateral axis formed by former imperial powers opposite former colonies. The mere existence of these neocolonial forces at work was what made Global North radical feminists' observations incomplete. According to WIN's radical feminists, neocolonial power relations operated on two levels: international and national. At the international level in the 1980s, the Global North retained supremacy as a neoliberal economy, dictating the rules of structural adjustment plans and economic aid. These relationships of power were also reflected within Nigeria, which was considered "a neo-colonial nation ruled by an indifferent, oppressive and wasteful black bourgeoisie" that was "subjecting the total population to stress anxiety and insecurities" (*Women in Nigeria, Women in Nigeria Today* 123) through its participation in these neoliberal economies, massive privatization, and disinterest in social responsibility.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For observations on the way in which race structured power relations in Africa, even in non-multiracial societies, see (Pierre).

These national power relations had an especially strong impact on women, who were the first to be affected by such structural adjustment policies.

These observations resonate with those of the Association for African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), with which WIN had strong connections. AAWORD was established in Senegal in 1977. Founded by African women activists and scholars from several countries, this association was created following the Women and Development conference held at Wellesley College (Boston) in 1976, where feminists and women's studies scholars from all over the world convened to discuss women's issues and development. Participants from the Global South, however, disagreed with the intellectual positions of European and American participants. Namely, they criticized the side-stepping of their positions, problems, and observations (Awe, Ogundipe-Leslie 4). Based on these disagreements, the African feminists and scholars who were there continued to meet and founded AAWORD. The association insisted upon the need for African feminists to continue to distance themselves from Global North feminism as a universal framework for activism, because of its gaps when it came to understanding the neo-colonial and racial domination experienced by African women. Academics within WIN and AAWORD established solid ties between the two associations. Namely, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie was a founding member of AAWORD as well as its executive secretary. The Ethiopian feminist academic Zenebework Tadesse attended a meeting hosted by WIN in Nigeria. The connection continued through the circulation of literature between the associations.<sup>19</sup>

### A Historical Compromise

These developments demonstrate some of the lively debates running through WIN's activist and intellectual arena, which were based on a dialogue taking place on several levels (national, continental, and international). The "historical compromise" (Ibrahim and Salihu 8) between the various positions that WIN's activists had to find to keep the association alive was difficult. The desire for an alliance was both ideological (most women being leftists) and strategic. Radical feminists needed ideological support in the conservative context of Nigeria at the time.<sup>20</sup> For the Marxists (mostly men) in their ranks, however, contributing to WIN constituted a step toward a socialist revolution in Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> In order to achieve this revolution, Marxists needed women, and WIN was considered a front organization. The final document released after the first conference therefore constituted a "necessary pact" made by both parties.

1. The majority of women, like the majority of men, suffer from the exploitative and oppressive character of Nigerian society;
2. Women suffer additional forms of exploitation and oppression;
3. Women, therefore, suffer double oppression and exploitation—as members of subordinate classes and as women. WIN feels it necessary to fight class exploitation and sex subordination together.<sup>22</sup>

By asserting that the fight against capitalism could not be undertaken without the fight against the patriarchy, this approach took a stance against the orthodox Marxist fringe, which brought WIN's official line closer to the radical feminist position.

<sup>19</sup> As soon as they began collaborating, AAWORD and WIN proposed to communicate with and support each other. The association paid for its subscription to WIN's bulletin to remain in contact. (NPP, *Women in Nigeria (Kaduna) Meeting*, 18 March 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ngozi Iwere.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Jibrin Ibrahim.

<sup>22</sup> NPP, *Box 012, WIN*, press release, May 1982.

While WINers spoke in terms of the “addition” of forms of oppression, the materialist presuppositions upon which WIN based itself concretely translated into an analysis that, instead of overlapping categories, sought to understand how various social relations mutually influence and exacerbate each other by creating dynamic and ever-changing power relations. WINers studied how power relations were articulated in terms of gender, class, and neo-colonialism but also, depending on the situation being analyzed, in terms of “ethnic group”, “religion”, or “age”. WIN’s activists thus proposed an analysis that considered these various constructed categories as “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins 221), in which the type of entrenchment determined an individual’s social position. This positioning is close to that of a number of feminist movements (Black American, *chicana*, Arab) emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They challenged hegemonic feminist analyses of that period, by questioning the various power relations exerted over non-white women of different social classes. Each in their own way and according to their respective national histories, they also included racism, as it was enacted through colonial, neocolonial, and capitalist power relations, to explain women’s oppression. Therefore, WIN was an integral part of this international movement of critique of hegemonic feminism.

### Conclusion

At the height of its activity between 1982 and 1992, WIN produced an unprecedented range of studies and research in Nigeria. Ideological disappointments linked to Marxism, various internal political issues, and generational shifts around 1992 led to the association’s decline despite many unsuccessful attempts to revive it (Ibrahim and Salihu; Robson). Though short-lived, WIN nonetheless managed to establish itself as a concrete site for knowledge production in the fields of gender studies and feminism, formulating an innovative and locally situated feminist epistemology. The example it sets serves as an invitation to decenter the Global North as the primary perspective regarding knowledge production in gender studies and feminist epistemologies and, conversely, to pay attention to feminist theory formulated by activist and academic circles from the Global South.

By combining a rejection of essentialist theory and a strong orthodox materialist approach, WINers saw women’s oppression as an intermingling of gender, class, and neo-colonial relations, and adopted a distinctly unique approach for the time. Unlike studies that highlighted the need for the production of local categories (Amadiume; Oyěwùmí), WINers considered gender as “a useful category of historical analysis” (Scott) in Nigeria while still proposing a situated exploration of this tool. These observations, identified today under the heading of intersectionality, were therefore also employed on the African continent before being theorized in the Global North. Largely forgotten in women’s studies, gender studies, and feminist theories, the circulation of this output remains uneven.

While WIN’s theoretical observations did not circulate much internationally, they still influenced some researchers. In 1997, the publication *Engendering Social Sciences in Africa* (Imam et al.) continued in the same vein as WIN’s theoretical output, deftly showing the importance of combining gender and other categories while avoiding “an analysis by addition”. The article demonstrates clearly that rich feminist theories were formulated outside of Global North activist and academic circles. This begs the question as to why WIN’s contributions are still largely neglected in Northern academia despite the rich literature they produced on feminism and gender studies.

Uncovering certain mechanisms of knowledge (co)production at the local level in the areas of gender and feminism, based on the global circulation of specific concepts, this article is therefore an attempt to write an intellectual and social history of knowledge on gender and feminism in Nigeria. It involves examining the trajectories of these concepts across various geographical areas and through different eras by tracking the people who participated in their

circulation. This approach thus constitutes a rejection of the unequivocal domination of the Global North in feminist theoretical production and a contribution to the decentering of this part of the world in gender studies.

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