

# *Reproductive Rights Oral History Project*

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)  
Geneva, Switzerland

## **Adetoun Ilumoka**

Interviewed by  
Nicole Bourbonnais

July 9, July 10, October 10, 2021  
Online via Zoom

### **Background:**

In September 1992, women's health advocates from around the world gathered together to prepare for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. Together, they agreed on the need for a strong positive statement by women to help set the agenda for ICPD 1994, one that would challenge the existing population agenda and reorient it around the concept of reproductive health and rights. The result was the "[Women's Declaration on Population Policies](#)," signed by 2,539 individuals and organizations from over 110 countries. This was followed in 1994 by the more expansive "Rio Statement" on Reproductive Health and Justice, produced after a meeting of 215 women from 79 countries in Rio de Janeiro in January 1994. Together, these documents outlined a thorough critique of the status quo in population policies, outlining the fundamental ethical principles and necessary conditions needed to ensure a woman-centered, rights-focused approach. They played a powerful role in shaping the Programme of Action established at Cairo in 1994, as well as the rise of the global reproductive rights movement more broadly.

This oral history project traces the life histories of key activists who were involved in these activities, exploring how their broader trajectory/life experiences shaped their role in the reproductive rights movement and their activism more broadly. The interviews thus provide material of broad relevance to those interested in histories of population control, reproductive rights, feminism, global health, development, and international activism.

### **Narrator:**

Dr Adetoun Ilumoka was born and raised in Nigeria, mainly in the city of Lagos. She has several years experience working as a lawyer, teacher and an advocate for social justice focusing on health, gender equality and socio-economic development in Africa. An accomplished law and policy researcher, she has done extensive work on human rights, constitutional development and land

law, making vital linkages between academic research, policy and programs that improve people's lives. Her recent research examines the transformation of custom and law within the context of power struggles in Africa and prospects for re-establishing meaningful citizenship for vulnerable groups through local community development and empowerment programmes.

**Interviewer:**

Nicole Bourbonnais is an Associate Professor of International History and Politics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Her research explores the history of sex, reproduction, motherhood and the family in transnational historical perspective. She is author of *Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

**Restrictions:**

None.

**Format**

3 .Wav audio files: (1) July 9, 2021 – 1:25:54; (2) July 10, 2021 - 1:04:27; (3) October 10, 2021 – 45:08

**Transcript:**

Initial transcription produced by Otter.ai; edited and reviewed at IHEID. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Adetoun Ilumoka.

**Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

***Audio recording***

Bibliography: Ilumoka, Adetoun. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Audio recording, July, July 10, and October 10, 2021, Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Adetoun Ilumoka interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, audio recording, July 9, July 10, October 2021, Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID, interview 2.

***Transcript***

Bibliography: Ilumoka, Adetoun. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Audio recording, July 9, July 10 and October 10, 2021. Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Adetoun Ilumoka interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, audio recording, July 9, July 10, and October 10, 2021. Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID, p10.

## Adetoun Ilumoka Interview 1/3, 9 July 2021

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 00:00

So thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview, I'm really excited to hear more about your life, about your work and also how your life has informed some of your work. I thought we'd just start by, if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood, about your early life, you know: growing up, where you grew up, your family, any experiences that have been particularly memorable from your childhood.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 00:29

Right. Well, I grew up in Nigeria. My earliest memories are in Lagos. I was born in Ibadan, a well-known town in Nigeria that had the first university in Nigeria. But I grew up in Lagos, I think we probably moved to Lagos when I was two years old? And so my earliest memories are of Lagos, and growing up here. I had four sisters and it was a lovely childhood. As far as I can remember, we had great fun. And I loved school. I really enjoyed school. That I remember. It was such fun, and Lagos at that time was a really nice place to live. You wouldn't recognize it today. It was very peaceful. It was very pleasant until the Civil War. I think my earliest memories of conflict - of some [widespread public] violence - were during the Nigerian Civil War. I must have been six - I was six years old when the war started, and probably about eight right before it ended. And I remember a heavier and heavier military presence in Lagos, which was the capital at the time. You can ask me particular questions. Those are the sum of my recollections.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 02:11

And what did your parents do?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 02:15

My father was an engineer, an electrical engineer, and he worked for the Power Corporation of Nigeria. And my mother was a nurse. She was a nurse midwife.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 02:27

Okay.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 02:28

Right. At that time, I actually don't remember where she worked at – she probably worked at a hospital in Lagos. Much later on, when we were older, she ran her own clinic in a low income area of Nigeria. I remember those years. And then she returned to work in one of the government schools as the school nurse much later on. But she was a nurse midwife. Very committed one. All the years we were growing up, she worked. So I remember she'd be in her uniform, sometimes in the morning going off to work or driving us to school. Yeah. So that's what my parents did.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 03:16

And, I mean, if she was a nurse midwife, did she tell you any stories about her work or her experiences with women?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 03:26

No, actually, interestingly enough, not a lot. But when she started running her own clinic for a little while, before she moved it to Ajegunle (she had two locations I think) she used to take some patients at home. So we saw some of the patients, but not a lot, because she had a different section of the house where she dealt with them. But not – I don't remember, I was the fourth child, so I don't remember many stories of her work as such.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:02

At that time, would women be mostly delivering – would she be delivering at home, at people's homes or...?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:09

No, they came to her for delivery.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:11

Okay.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:13

And then they also delivered in her clinic.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:16

Okay.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:16

So yeah, she did deliveries in her clinic, and I believe they stayed overnight. She worked with a doctor.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:25

Okay, that's interesting, I think, especially thinking about your own later work.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:31

Interestingly enough, much later on, when I went into this kind of advocacy, she did remark that oh, I was sort of following in her footsteps. Because she was one of the pioneers of family planning in Nigeria.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:46

Oh really?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:47

She was at the Family Planning Council of Nigeria. Yes. I believe she was the first secretary? I have to look up that biography. She was one of the first [members] - she ran the family planning clinic in Nigeria. She did a lot of international work, interestingly enough at that time. So it is quite a coincidence, to meet a lot of people, a lot of even doctors and nurses, who knew her and who started – who were working now within the context of non-governmental organizations, many, many years later on this issue.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 05:29

And what was her name?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 05:32

You mean, my mother's name?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 05:35

Yeah. I'm just wondering if I might come across it in the other sources?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 05:38

Oh, absolutely. Ayoola Ilumoka was her – is her name, I should say.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 05:44

Wow, okay. That's really interesting.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 05:52

I came across it – looking at some of the archives of family planning in Nigeria, I do recall seeing a couple of comments on the first, you know, Family Planning Association, and she was heavily involved with it.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 06:07

Okay. So it's in your family? That kind of- yeah, that kind of legacy. And you said that you really liked school. So you went to school in Lagos...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 06:20

I went to primary school in Lagos, nursery and primary school, and I have good memories of it. It was a very mixed one, and I think what I liked best about it was – it was a private school- , and I think what I remember most about school, and what really made me like it, was that learning was like playing. So you learn through playing at least in the initial years, you were playing and in the process you were learning, and it helps you remember a lot more. So I like the sort of style adopted, and later on, I loved reading. So I guess that was my entry into reading. Yeah. And of course, once we can read, you learn all sorts of things.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 07:11

Right? It kind of opens the world up. And was it a religious school?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 07:18

Yeah, it was linked to a church. It was called St. Saviours School, which is attached to a church, which still exists today. And it was linked, I believe, to the Anglican Church, which at that time in Nigeria, might have been called CMS Church. So it was a church related school. Even though you wouldn't know it. It was in a completely different location from the church. So there was no obvious link in that sense.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 07:49

And it wasn't – was it nuns or...?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 07:51

Not at all.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 07:52

I guess it was Anglicans. Yeah.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 07:57

I don't think they were religious. The teachers you're talking about?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:01

Yeah.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:02

No, the church just ran it probably. But no, the teachers were not necessarily religious.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:11

Okay. And was your family religious at all growing up?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:16

Oh, yes. When you say religious, we – they were Christian. We went to church. So yes, we were raised as Anglicans. My mother was a Methodist in terms of her own family. But my father was an Anglican, so we were raised in the Anglican Church.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:35

And maybe if you can just tell me a little bit more about your family: about your parents, where they come from and a bit about their background before we kind of...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:45

Ah, okay. My father comes from a part of Nigeria, a town in Nigeria called Ijebu-Ode. It's actually on the outskirts of Ijebu-Ode, there's a smaller town [or quarter] called Mobalufon. So that's where he comes from. And my mother is a Lagosian. She's from Lagos, her family has been in Lagos for

many, many years. They have an interesting history, because whilst my father is Ijebu, quite well-known people in southwestern Nigeria, my mother's people were – they've traced their origins to Ibadan as well, but they settled in Lagos as a result of the after effects of the slave trade. And so one of her ancestors, her father's - probably grandfather or great grandfather - was taken slave, and during the abolition years, was set free in Freetown in Sierra Leone and then found his way slowly - partly walking - back to Lagos.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 10:05

Wow.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 10:07

Because of course, because it was so recent, they knew the language, they remembered their home, and so it was possible for them to trace their way back home, so they came back home. But whilst he was in Freetown I think he learned a trade, was probably apprentice to – may have been British, may have been Portuguese, I'm not sure. More likely British because of the history of Freetown. So he had learned a trade and then made his way back to Nigeria, and to Lagos. They were quite well known, that group of people on the West African coast because they became the first elite in the colonial period, because they were trained by the British, they could read and write. And so they formed a small elite in Lagos, and were sometimes referred to as the Saro, which referred to their brief period in Sierra Leone before they found their way back. So they have quite an interesting history, I must say. And since then, you know, some of the things that that group of people did in the nationalist struggle, and what kinds of positions they took after are quite interesting. So I spent quite some time, a few years ago, searching the archives for the history of this family, and I found quite a lot. It's one of my book projects.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 11:44

That would be really interesting to see. I know it's so interesting to see how your own family is connected to these bigger stories.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 11:54

Right? It really is.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 11:56

Yeah. So did you have any memories then of - I'm trying to think of the dates here, in my mind - of colonialism and the kind of nationalist struggle or were you quite young in that period?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:10

I was born the year after Nigeria got independence.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 12:14

Okay.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:14

I don't have direct memory-

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 12:16

Right, right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:18

Yeah, however [there were a] few vestiges, quite a number of the teachers in my school were still British, Irish. But not all of them, you know.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 12:30

Right. They were starting to leave at that point.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:34

Um, yes. So there was – were they starting to leave? I'm not sure. But there were quite a few of them in my school. And then, more and more Nigerian teachers joined the staff as I made my way through the school.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 12:53

And so you said earlier that you remembered the Civil War?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:58

I do. Because I guess I was six - between six and nine years - at the time? Yes, I do. Well, when I say I remember it, I remember what we saw of it in Lagos, which wasn't much. We had all these drills about what to do if, you know, you were bombed. And so we had a shelter dug in the back of the garden in our house and you were all supposed to run there. If you heard the sirens, I remember that. And so occasionally, they'd have a test run. I vaguely remember that. And we'd all run down there just to see that, you know, we knew what to do if that happened. But aside from that, we didn't see much of the conflict. Of course, the one memory I have of it was probably a plane flying over Lagos one night, and it must have bombed quite a few places. Because the next morning, we heard all these stories about, you know, bombs being dropped, a plane having been shot down, in the news. So we sort of heard those stories, but never anything too much more direct. And as I said, there was a heavy military presence in the streets of Lagos at the time, and it was the beginning of seeing quite a lot of violence because [the] military [government], of course, maybe in those early years, were quite arbitrary. And I remember being driven home from school one day (one of these strange memories) and the person driving us - the driver driving us - being asked to stop by the military. And he got out of the car, and seemingly for no reason we could see they whipped him. That was terrifying for a bunch of little kids sitting in the car. And you know, he was so upset when he got back in the car and drove off. I think we were coming back from school, so that, you know, you saw that sort of thing occasionally. You see more of the presence of the military in the streets, which wasn't usual before the war.



**Nicole Bourbonnais** 15:08

Alright, so you really noticed that kind of change in atmosphere?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 15:12

Oh, yeah. There were checkpoints, everywhere...yes, you could tell the difference.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 15:19

And so you talked a bit about your education, you liked reading, were there other subjects that you were really drawn to, that influenced kind of what you decided to go to university for?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 15:33

Well at the point of, well, primary school was what I was talking about earlier. I loved reading, writing, I loved writing, writing essays, writing compositions, as they were called then. But in secondary school, which is where you really start to get to know what you might like, because the subjects are, of course, much more divided up, I loved history. I really, really enjoyed history. And my set of students were the first set of students who learned African history in secondary school compulsorily. So it was a compulsory subject for us. And I am so glad that happened, because I was fascinated. It was so different from learning world history, or British history, or whatever else was on the curriculum before because this time this was about you, it seemed so much closer. So we did West Africa, we did Nigeria. It was really, really fascinating. So I'm really glad to have been one of that first set. I mean, many of my classmates probably didn't like history as much, but I loved it. And the teachers were very excited, because they were also the pioneer teachers of African history. So that was a great period. I also loved English literature, or literature in English, as it's called today. And we also read a lot of African authors, because even at that time, African literature was quite well developed. And so we read, you know, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, all the famous African writers were on the syllabus, and I really enjoyed that. I also enjoyed a lot of the other literature, it was very broad, we did Shakespeare, Chaucer, the lot. And it was...I really liked that subject, very much. The third subject that I recall liking a lot was French. And I think that was basically just because of the way it was taught. We had a teacher who would come to class, and wouldn't speak a word of English. So I found that very challenging. And it was a very interesting way of learning, she acted out a lot of things to help you to understand what she was saying. And I found that a very interesting method of learning.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 15:53

Yeah, I think they say that's much more effective, but it must be very challenging for the teacher and students at first. It's really interesting, what you say about, you know, the first generation of teachers teaching African history, African literature. I imagine before, as you would know, it would have been a very British colonial model of education. And I wonder, then, too, if you felt a kind of sense of nationalism, of the energy of still fresh independence growing up, or whether that even came into your mind...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 18:55

Maybe a little later on in secondary school, as you say, in in the later years, but we were, what, nine years? Ten? More than that, ten to twelve years away from independence. So I don't think you have that, you know, sort of feeling or groundswell of nationalism as much. That would have been in the 50s...

**Nicole Bourbonnais 19:18**

Before the independence ...

**Adetoun Ilumoka 19:20**

Yeah. Before independence, after independence. No, I don't think – you still, of course, heard a bit about it. But at the time I went to secondary school, I think, you know, the government was pretty much Nigerian. And even the teachers in my government school were all Nigerians as far as I can remember. Okay, no, there were a few expatriates, many of them married to Nigerians, but you didn't feel such a colonial presence. Also, remembering that in Nigeria and possibly in West Africa, the presence of Europeans wasn't as heavy as, for example, in East Africa or Southern Africa – never was, you know, not in the same way, partly because of the weather, because of the diseases. I don't know. It was never a settler colonialism. So there were a lot fewer Europeans, and certainly by my generation, they were not so much in evidence. Right.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 20:26**

But yeah, that's – that makes sense. So then, I guess kind of moving on...or, any other stories or things you remember from your years in secondary school?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 20:39**

Oh, secondary school was boarding school. Now, many years later, I went to Canada, where the equivalent of boarding schools - sometimes called residential schools - did not have a good reputation at all, as you know. But boarding school in Lagos, Nigeria, in Nigeria, generally, I think, was such fun. I mean, today, we meet, we even have a Whatsapp group of my secondary school mates. And we all remember very fondly being in boarding school, but it's because boarding school was run by Nigerian teachers. It wasn't always comfortable. But it was – there was such camaraderie. So I think that was what brought us together and why we remember it so fondly. So the students who came from home, we called them day students, it wasn't compulsory, you didn't all have to be in the boarding house. But the students who came from home felt sometimes that they missed a lot, because those who lived in the school were together a lot more. So in the evenings, or late afternoons, we would play games, basketball, netball, at the time, we had all sorts of activities on our schedule, and they would have gone home at two o'clock or 2:30. And so it was very different.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 22:12**

They missed all the fun parts.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 22:16**

At least, you know, home was probably more comfortable physically, but there was a lot of fun that they missed.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 22:26**

And would that have been an all-girls school? Or was it mixed?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 22:29**

Oh, no. My school was an all-girls school. Yes. So it was great fun. And I think the good thing about it was that, when I think back, you didn't think about it, it was just school, you went to school, you didn't think about comparisons. But now, with hindsight, I think that being in an all-girls school was very reaffirming in the sense that everybody who did really well were girls, so there were no comparisons, there was no feeling that girls don't do as well as boys or anything. The thought never even occurred to us. That was the good thing about girls' schools. And most of the teachers, not all of them, were women. And so your role models, you know, were also women, they were brilliant teachers, they were women. So we didn't think it at all extraordinary that women should be really good at what they did.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 23:25**

Yeah, you just saw... everyone was - they were all women. So you could kind of see it in practice.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 23:32**

Exactly.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 23:33**

Yeah, that's interesting. And then you went to university then right after secondary school, or was there any time in between?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 23:43**

You know, the secondary school went up to A levels. And so I went to university after A-levels, yes. And I left the country, I left Nigeria to go to university. I went to University in a town – I was going to say, a small town, but I guess it's not all that small... Canterbury, in Kent in England. So I went to university first in Kent, and that was for three years. The degree then in England was a three year degree.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 24:21**

And what was it like? Do you remember leaving Nigeria? Had you left, had you traveled much before that? Or was that one of your first big experiences of being abroad?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 24:34**

No, interestingly enough, I had traveled when I was in secondary school a couple of times, a few times with my family, with different parts of my family to, I think, Europe and the United States are the places that I can remember. And interestingly enough in Europe, Switzerland – where you

work. I'd been to England, I'd been to Switzerland as well, and to the US. My dad worked in the commercial division of the company he worked for, and so he traveled a lot in his work, and sometimes he would take one or two of us along. He believed very much in broadening your horizons through travel, and so sometimes if he could, he would, you know, take a couple of us along. There were five of us girls.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 25:32**

All girls?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 25:34**

All girls.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 25:35**

So you were surrounded by girls at home and at school?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 25:38**

Yes! Come to think of it, yes. I have some male cousins but mainly surrounded by women, yes.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 25:47**

And was your extended family also in Lagos?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 25:55**

Some of them were but some were outside Lagos. We had an extended family in Ibadan, a close extended family. Most of – ah, we have some in Ijebu as well, where my father was from, but many of them were in Lagos or Ibadan. That's what I remember. The grandparents I had, that I have a memory of, were on my mother's side. And my grandfather on my father's side was alive for many years. whilst we were in primary school, to the early years of secondary school. My grandmother on my father's side, we didn't know her at all. And I think it makes a difference. It's the reason why we cannot speak his dialect. Because she wasn't alive. I think if she had been alive and we had interacted a lot more with her, we would have been able to speak his particular dialect of Yoruba. Right.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 26:54**

So do you speak a few different languages?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 26:59**

Nigerian languages? No, I speak one properly, I mean. I speak Yoruba, which is sort of my indigenous language. I speak a bit of Hausa, I used to speak it better because I worked briefly there [in Northern Nigeria] and I did my youth service there. But otherwise, a smattering of Igbo, maybe the greetings because I have friends, but Hausa was because I lived there. So, I learned it a little bit better, now I am using some of it.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 27:32**

And did you retain the French from the French class?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 27:35**

From school I did, I actually got an A, in my A-level French. I really loved it. And I remember reading a lot of French literature. I enjoyed it very much. Then when I went to university, I did French for Social Sciences as a subject in my first year in university. I think I dropped it in my second year. So my French got quite good, actually. And many years later, when I did a lot of international work and conferences, I actually used to be able to translate. When the translators were closed, I could actually translate - better in one direction, of course, than the other. So I could do French to English better of course. But my French was pretty good in those days. And I also spent, as I said, I spent a little time when I started working - I'm trying to get the dates right - I spent some time in Switzerland. I had a fellowship there, made good friends there. So I had to - I was in the French part, and so I got to practice my French quite a lot.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 28:47**

And that was when you were still in secondary school?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 28:49**

No that was-

**Nicole Bourbonnais 28:50**

No, is that later?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 28:52**

This was university and post-university. I did a summer course as well. During my university years after I dropped French. I still went and did a summer course in Lausanne. And after many years after that, about eight years after that, I had a fellowship in Lausanne at the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law. So I kept up my friends for many years.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 29:19**

Great. And so, to kind of come back to the university years. What were you studying – were you studying law, or other subjects as well?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 29:28**

Yeah, I was studying law. But as you know, you usually study a number of other subjects when you're studying law, and at the University of Kent at that time law was sort of embedded in the social sciences. We were having [a] kind of experiment with law as a social science, and so tended to do quite a number of social science courses along with your core law courses. It was very interesting. I found it very interesting. It's [a] very radical school. A lot of emphasis on looking at social justice issues. It was, those were interesting times, let me think – the years 1978 to 1981 were very interesting years, generally, politically, I would say, when you think about what was

going on at the time. So even outside the strictly speaking university context, I was quite active in a number of associations. I went to conferences. It was quite an interesting, radical time.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 30:33**

And do you remember any of the particular associations or debates that you were involved in at that time?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 30:43**

Mostly African associations that I was active in, particularly interested in, because in that period in England, I think it was a great opportunity to meet a whole lot of other Africans you wouldn't probably have met if you had been in your own country. And so England was sort of a really good place to meet all different Africans, learn about their countries, their struggles. It was a period when Zimbabwe was going through its independence struggle, too. Lots of Zimbabweans were studying in England, I met quite a lot of them. A lot of Kenyans you meet, from all over, Ugandans, from all over Africa, certainly from all over British speaking - English speaking - Africa. So it was really interesting to meet all those people. I was quite active in the African associations on campus, sometimes off campus as well. Quite a lot of activities. There were also a lot of radical organizations at the time, a lot of radical journals. And so I found it really interesting to do a lot of reading. Having lived a fairly sheltered, I would say, childhood, it was really nice to be exposed to all these different things, and to other people who lived quite a different kind of life, even in terms of when you think about what then would have been called the "class position."

**Nicole Bourbonnais 32:16**

So they were talking – you were kind of made aware of class position, of maybe almost like a pan Africanist...

**Adetoun Ilumoka 32:24**

Yeah Pan-africanism, African Marxism, those were the days when there were lots of debates about Nyerere's version of African socialism. It was also the period of the anti-apartheid struggle, as I said, most heightened in Zimbabwe, but even South Africa. So there were a lot of anti-apartheid movements, also, with a lot of activities in England. It was also a great opportunity to travel in Europe as a student, because during holidays, especially the shorter holidays, I often traveled with my sisters, my older sisters at the time. Some of them were also in England at the same time. And so that was really nice, because we could travel together, at least the one who was just older than me. So during the holidays, we explored Europe a little bit. I'm sure we probably traveled in many of the European countries, at least four or five of them during the holidays in those three years studying in England.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 33:43**

And had you traveled at that point to other African countries, or it had mostly been Europe, US?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 33:51**

At that point it had been Europe, US but during those years of being a student in England, for the first time, I think. I and one of my sisters went to Kenya and Zambia. That was an eye opener. It was very nice, indeed. It was quite different. You know, it's very different from reading about it, studying history – actually going back. Going back and seeing some of the things you studied about in history, hearing some of the languages, the ethnic groups you talked about, you know, that you studied in history – you're actually seeing, you know, the place. It was very, very interesting, and I think it triggered my interest in traveling a lot more in Africa. Interesting that we went to East and Southern Africa or Central Africa. It was so different from West Africa.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 34:45

Right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 34:47

And I think maybe the year after I graduated or maybe even during those years of university, we did one road trip with our parents (I have the time mixed up, it could have been earlier than that) across the nearest countries to Nigeria: across Benin, the Republic of Togo, to Ghana. And so that was really interesting, to do that kind of road trip. That's when you see the countries that are your neighbors, some of them French speaking, some of them English speaking. It was very interesting. So we traveled a lot. And that was nice. The family traveled quite a bit. My dad loved traveling, and my mother did too, actually loved traveling. Yeah, they did a lot of traveling.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 35:40

And do you remember when you went to Kenya and other places during your university years, was it just straight travel? Was it connected to these associations that you were involved in?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 35:52

No no, it was private, we just went on our own, my sister and I, that was, to Kenya and Zambia.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 36:01

And Zambia, okay.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 36:02

I didn't have any other association.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 36:06

And do you remember at all in that time, in your university years, was there any involvement with women's rights debates, activism? Or were you more interested in the African, leftist...?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 36:23

Those were really interesting years, there was a very strong lesbian movement. And they were very active on campuses. And I think, partly just out of curiosity, I went to a number of their meetings, I was quite fascinated about how highly organized and passionate they were. And I was



learning a whole lot of new things about the whole politics of gender. And so, I think that was very much my introduction. I was a bit, just experiencing new things, you know, you're in university, you're young, and you want to know what's going on. So I was sort of curious, so I went along to all these political meetings, I got to know all these debates – and some of them, I tell you, they were extremely heated in those years. It was also a really good, in a sense, experience for a law student to hear all the fiery arguments going on, on all sides.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 37:31**

And what interested you about law, what made you pursue that path?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 37:36**

To tell you the truth, I wasn't particularly interested in terms of choosing to go into law. I finished my A-levels, I sat down for a number of sessions with my dad: "Okay, so what would you like to study? What will you study?" And he was just like, "Strong advice: go into the professions," he said, "because later on, you can set up on your own." And I could have done anything. I could have studied French, I could have studied history as single honors courses. I don't think I would have studied English literature. But those were the three subjects I did at A-levels, I would probably have veered towards politics, I was quite interested in it because of my interest in history. But my dad was like, "I think you should study Law." And I had no particular objections, so I studied law. And it was interesting enough, and I'm glad I studied it, in a sense, where I did, in terms of Kent University. He wanted me to go to Oxford. So I took those exams, but I was too young, and they suggested I wait a year, and I was not going to wait a year when all my classmates were going to university. So that's how I ended up going to Kent University because they gave me admission immediately, even though I was rather young. I was 17, I think. But it was really interesting, because you did – a lot of the approach to understanding law was also very political. So that was very interesting.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 39:17**

So you were kind of able to combine your interest in politics...

**Adetoun Ilumoka 39:23**

Exactly, in politics, learn a lot in terms of sociology, sociological approaches. So that was really very interesting. So I think if I had studied law in a much more formal, I'm not sure what the term is - a university where it was studied in a in a much narrower way - I think I might have been a little bit more bored. But it was really interesting to study here where I did.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 39:54**

Right. And you said it was kind of like a social sciences approach.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 39:58**

Yes, it was. So that went very well with my interest in history, with my interest in the origin of things. So what is law all about? Why do you have law? Why do you have different legal systems?



So in terms of the analysis, in terms of understanding the social origins, the social context is what I should call it – this approach really appealed to me. I've always tended to be interested in the social context of things.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 40:34

And did that – did you also think of the law in terms of social justice, the different movements that you were seeing at the time? Did you think about the role of law in that?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 40:49

Oh, very much so. Even formally, a lot of the studying – some of the subjects that I took were looking explicitly at that. But definitely, in the movements I was interested in, in some of the associations I was interested in, it raised many issues of law. Even when you look at the anti-apartheid movement at the time, it raised issues concerning law and the nature of law, because they were applying a law, isn't it? There was a legal system that underpinned that. And yet there was a movement against it, arguing that that legal system was unjust and so that was a glaring example of looking at law from different sides.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 41:40

Right, and seeing also the limitations of the law, I guess.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 41:43

There were severe limitations of law, yeah.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 41:47

So anything else from your university years that you can remember? I mean, what was it like living in England at that time? You know, besides university experiences...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 42:00

Right, as I said, it was really interesting, because it was such a mix in England. And beyond even the Africans, there were all kinds of people in England from all over the world. And I think that that made it so diverse and so interesting. People from Malaysia, Singapore, people from all over. I have friends from, you know – Chinese, I had friends who were Indians, Pakistanis, they were all from all over the world. That was a really interesting experience, I think, and not just in the university, even in England. During the holidays, we spend quite a lot of time in London, a very diverse city. Even the theater, the film, very diverse indeed. They were very interesting years. But I must say that when I first got to England, my first year in England, it was a little bit of a – should I call it a shock? You could call it a bit of a culture shock, to encounter racism firsthand. I think I was very lucky because I had a support system. I had sisters there. Otherwise, I imagine it could be quite a difficult adjustment, and probably was for many people. But I got over it fairly quickly, because I had a whole support group, so to speak.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 43:28

Do you remember any particular instances or it was more the kind of subtle, general everyday racism?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 43:38

Yeah, it would be a lot of the subtle, general everyday racism, in spite of the fact that there had been Nigerians, Africans, West Africans in England for so, so many years, as you know, but a lot of it still persisted. I think where you encountered it most in a way that actually affected you was when you were looking for housing off campus, because you were only guaranteed one year on campus at that time. And so when it was time to look for housing off campus in a small town, then you would encounter some racism. So that was interesting, even in terms of the university and the classes. Now, with hindsight, I think England was...or maybe my particular University, but I think England in general, because they had dealt with so many African students over the years, it wasn't as glaring, but it was definitely still there with some teachers. I think also, the thing about having gone to school in Nigeria and having been raised in Nigeria is that a lot of it, I don't know, good or bad, was lost on you. So there are probably lots of little instances of racism that you just either didn't notice or it just was water off a duck's back. Because you acquire, I think, from living in your own country till a certain age, a certain degree of self-confidence, that, at the point at which you leave – at that point anyway for me, is difficult to shake.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 45:31

Right. And you kind of move from being a majority to a minority, right?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 45:35

Right.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 45:35

Yes.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 45:37

Normally, but a minority I think also because – probably because we had such a good educational system, I think when you got to England, you almost felt that you were better educated than some of the English students, simply because your education was so much broader.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 46:00

Right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 46:00

And they were educated in their system, you were educated - because of the colonial influence - in their system as well as yours. It was much broader. So, where they might have studied a lot of English history, you had studied some English history, but you'd also studied a whole lot of world history. And then, in my case, African history. So you had a much broader perspective in that sense.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 46:30

You knew about them and yourself, right? And then, after your university, then you went back to Nigeria?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 46:39

Yes, in 1981, yes. After I graduated, I went back to Nigeria because, as you know, after you graduate from university in law, you usually do one year- it's usually one year- to get called to the bar. Or to become a solicitor, if it's England, they have a split professions. In Nigeria, you all go to what is called law school, by which they mean, the place where you learn more of the practical subjects. And then you get called to the bar, they still call it a 'call to bar' even though you're both a solicitor and an advocate or barrister at the end of that. So I went back to Nigeria to do that. I went straight from university to go to law school in Nigeria for one year, and then got called to the bar in Nigeria.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 47:36

And did you always want to go back after? Did you ever consider staying in England? Or was that even an option or...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 47:43

At that time it didn't even cross our minds. Certainly not me, and I don't think my sisters either. You were definitely going back. So it was...you went to university – it was like, you just went to university for a different experience with no idea of staying.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 48:04

And all your sisters went also to England?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 48:10

In the end, yes, they did. I had a much younger sister who was still at home all this time. She was a lot younger. But the three, the sisters who were older than me, yes, they were in England at the same time, and they all went back as well.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 48:29

So maybe if you can just talk a bit about your early experiences as a lawyer?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 48:38

Yeah. After being called to the bar I – we have in Nigeria, what we call the national service here. So it's called the National Youth Service Corps. Okay, so you become part of the National Youth Service Corps for one year. And so after law school, I went to do that. And it's sort of general orientation, some aspects of, you know, military training for a few weeks, and then you get posted out to organizations related to what you studied, at least at that time. Either that, or you get posted out to teach, but most of the lawyers got posted out to some sort of practice, a place where

they could practice. And so you either were posted to the Ministry of Justice, or you were posted to legal departments of different organizations. So interestingly enough, I was posted to the legal department of the Nigerian Army. So that was my primary posting. Not that much was going on there. But it was interesting because it was also my first encounter with the military as an organization, and so it was an eye opener. It was, you know, an experience you probably would never otherwise have had. We were the legal department. There were I think two of us who were posted there, two or three of us. The legal department of the Army Headquarters in the city we were posted to – it wasn't Lagos, which is home for me. I was posted to a northern Nigeria city called Kaduna. And initially, we just did a lot of reading. And, you know, for the first time, I sort of got to think about how the military have a different system. We learned about court martials, we learned about some of the military law. It was more of reading initially, because your chances of encountering a court martial are quite slim, at least in those days. And so it's not as if we had any practical, you know, experience. So a lot of what we were dealing with was documentation. And there was one lawyer, a trained lawyer in that department, and we were supervised by him.

But what really happened is that when we closed at – I think work officially stopped for us, probably by about two o'clock. Very often, if it wasn't that busy, we could leave before that. And so what we did was we signed up with an active practicing lawyer in town, and so we'd go from where we were posted to in terms of work, and we would go and work in a private law firm in the town. So we were getting quite a bit of different experiences, and the private law firm I worked for in the town was called after the man who founded it: [Festus Oguntoye] Company, a really interesting man. He'd been trained in Eastern Europe, I think – quite a different system of law as well. But everybody comes back to law school in Nigeria. And he was a very gregarious guy. He gave the opportunity to a lot of young lawyers to join his law firm, even those of us who were just doing a youth service, and we would have these – what should I call them? There is a term for it, these meetings where we would discuss the law in relation to cases he was handling. Really forward-looking man, I must say, because he was that open, and it was sort of: the more the merrier. So the lawyers who worked in his office, who were actually paid to work in his office - we just got a stipend, because we just we wanted the experience - all of us would attend these, like mini conferences, and discuss actual cases. So he got all these different viewpoints. And you know, he would chip in, in terms of his experience. It was really interesting, I learned a lot. I learned a lot. So we would be challenged to apply the law we learned in concrete cases. And we would go to court with them sometimes, which was really good exposure. And once in a while, he'd actually ask you to argue a motion, which was quite something because most senior lawyers, you go with them to court and you keep your mouth shut, even though you are fully trained. As far as they are concerned, it takes you years before they allow you, you know, to do anything substantial without that close oversight. He was a very open kind of guy.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 53:50

And lots of mentorship, I guess.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 53:52

A lot of mentorship, very. And he loved – I guess that for him was why he went into law - he loved the discussion, the argument. And so he loved to do it in the chambers or in the law firm as well as in court, you know, so we had lots and lots of exciting arguments.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 54:15**

And you say 'we would,' so was there a kind of a cohort of others...?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 54:20**

...in the youth service who were doing what I was doing. There were at least - in that office - there were four of us. Which is quite a lot. And so how I got to go there is that one of them said, "Oh, why don't you come and see if he'll take you on?" And he did. We didn't get paid much. But you know, he was open enough at least to take you on. So there were four of us. And then he had three lawyers who were employed in that chambers.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 54:54**

And what was the military like – working at the military...?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 55:03**

In terms of law, much of it was reading and looking through documents. But I think what was interesting about it for me was encountering – getting to even know the military as an organization. It was the first time I discovered that even the uniforms they wear, if you look at them, it can tell you who's who. I mean, I would never, before that, having passed a soldier in the street – a soldier's a soldier. It's when I learned that no, of course, there are a lot of hierarchies. But you get to learn that, you know, first time in close quarters, who's who, you get to learn about how the organization is set up, even nationally in Nigeria. So what are particular – like it was called the military headquarters, but headquarters in what sense? Technically, I would have thought the headquarters would be in Lagos. So we learned the military structure, so to speak. And that was really interesting for me, I learned about military structure in Nigeria. And because of the war, and because of some of the experiences of military rule, I think many civilians - let me call them that - had a very negative view of the military, including me. And so our boss (or our bosses), not necessarily lawyers only now, the other military officers that we had any kind of contact with, spent quite some time trying to disabuse our minds and to, you know, at least expose us to the more positive aspects of even their own training as officers and "oh no, you shouldn't think of them – it's not just pure violence." It was interesting to get that perspective too.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 57:00**

And was it intimidating to be there as, I mean, still kind of a relatively young woman, at a military institution?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 57:09**

Not at all. And I think, you know, that has to do probably with the way I was raised in part, but also with school. It just never occurred to me to be intimidated. It was work, you'd been posted

here, you go to work. So as long as I'm going there, I'm doing my work, I didn't expect anybody to bother me. And if they tried to, I'd find out where I could report them, or I'd tell them where to get off. So I didn't feel intimidated. And I guess that was partly what the people in charge of our department, who were not necessarily lawyers at all, were trying to show us all – to tell us that it's a very disciplined organization. So nobody would bother you just like that. Do you know what I mean? And so we didn't feel intimidated. You come to work, and it is a disciplined organization in that sense. I mean, except the officers themselves, if they were trying to bother you. But no, there are rules. People would be careful. And you were posted there by the government. At that time – let me remember, was it a military government? Yes, it was a military government. And so nobody bothered you, you were working there.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 58:37**

That's really interesting. And so how long did you stay there? For a year, I think you said, with the National Youth Service?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 58:44**

Yes, a year.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 58:46**

Do you feel that kind of stayed with you, that experience of the military years?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 58:55**

It definitely did in the sense that otherwise, I think I would have had the impression that I suspect many Nigerians have of the military as just, you know, sort of a bunch of violent, you know – it's associated with so much violence, I think mindless violence. And as if it's war, but no, it's the whole organization. It has its rules. We were now reading the military rules/law. It was a whole different exposure, which I think many Nigerians are not necessarily exposed to. They also have a – I don't know if you call it a code of ethics. Even most rules concerning behavior, whether or not they keep to them. And so it was good to be exposed to that as an organization. And it's really interesting that in later years, just the way things turned out in Nigeria - because there have been that many military regimes - that the head of the legal department at that time was many years later accused of being involved in a coup. Very interesting. He was our direct boss. And he was, you know, eventually I believe he was court martialled and even locked up for a number of years. And the man who supervised him, or who was his superior, also within that department - bigger department - became the head of state of Nigeria for a brief period of time. he was our direct boss, and a very pleasant man very, you know – he was the one who talked a lot about military discipline and about impressions of the military. I remember. So it was just interesting. The way things turned out that you encounter these people much later on in life, in a different context.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:00:59**

Yeah, it changes it, I guess, to have had a personal relationship at some point. And so after your service, and then with these programs, what did you do next?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:01:17

I went, let's see, I returned to Lagos. Because remember, I was in Kaduna in northern Nigeria. And...1983, I think? I went straight back to school for a master's degree. Yeah, after law school, I went to do a master's degree, probably work very briefly in Lagos for a few months. Because, as you know, the term starts for the university in October. I think we finished our Youth Corps by August? Something like that. Anyway, so I went back to university for a master's degree in law at the University of Warwick, in Coventry. So in England, but now in a different part of England, right near Birmingham.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:02:11

And do you remember why you wanted to do a Masters?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:02:16

I think I was interested in a little more specialization. And I remember at this point in time, I actually wanted to do a master's by thesis. So I wanted to specialize in a particular aspect of law, rather than having had this broad law degree. I think, for me, it was always – I always had that deep interest in going a little deeper, a little narrower and a little deeper. So I had always intended after the first degree to do that. And I particularly wanted to do a Master's by thesis because I hated exams. I mean, I do okay in exams but I wanted to do it by thesis, I wanted to go into depth, I wanted to write something at length. And I believe it's a much better exposure, it's a much better indication of "knowledge" - in quotes - than doing exams. I've always hated exams.

[Break]

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:03:24

Okay, so kind of continuing...we just reach your master's thesis. So maybe if you can tell me a bit about what you studied?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:03:33

Oh, okay. I wound up in the end doing a fairly general degree, even though it focused – it was called Law and Development - although it embraced aspects of what I was really interested in in terms of development, by which - in those years development usually meant "Third World" - in quotes - development. That really wasn't what I wanted to do, I didn't want to sort of be marginalized, or in a kind of ghetto in terms of learning, especially in England. But somehow, that's what I wound up doing. Looking back, no particular regrets, because they had set up this LLM program, which was different from – they had what they called, I think, an LLM in Law and Society, and then they had the LLM in Law and Development. And basically they sort of encouraged all the African and other so called "Third World" students towards the law and development. And I didn't particularly want that, but it was okay, because I was very interested in



development. I was, by that time probably quite knowledgeable, because of – I had taken a big interest in it right from my undergraduate days. And a lot of my friends who were political scientists and social scientists, we'd done a lot of reading together. We'd been in associations together, discussing and debating issues of development. So it wasn't anything new to me. It didn't mean I wanted to do a Master's, you know, along those lines, but it was interesting enough.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:05:39

Do you remember how they justified the difference between law and society versus law and development?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:05:45

I think there was just a group of scholars who had a particular – they had worked in Africa, in Asia, maybe Latin America, and they were just particularly interested in the whole question of – I think at that time, it would be termed legal transplants, yes. About taking a colonial legal system or English or other European legal system, and because of the colonial contact, sort of imposing it in a different, a very different context, a different social context. And so those were the sorts of issues they were interested in and looking at. And effectively, it was interesting enough, so no regrets. It was totally focused on those issues, and looking at different case studies, and colonial law and the history of legal systems in different colonial settings. So it was quite interesting. We looked at, you know, parts of Asia, the Maldives, we looked at parts of Africa, a lot of the scholars were interested in Africa, because they had worked there. So it was quite interesting. And it raised the general issues. Anyway, it was just that the case studies were a bit more focused on some of those areas of the world. It's quite interesting.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:07:15

And you say that you had already been debating concepts of development. Do you remember - I mean, it's obviously hard to think back - but do you remember what some of the critiques were at the time or the different discussions?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:07:31

Oh, yes. I do remember fairly well, these were very, very heated and interesting debates at that time when I was an undergraduate. There were a lot of debates, as I said, about the Tanzanian experiment with socialism. And what were – there were a lot of critiques, as you know, and the critiques were both on the right as well as the left in terms of, well, was this really the best way of going about it? Wasn't it a little draconian in terms of imposition as well? And so, there were those debates going on. Then generally, more generally, within the African context, there were debates about whether or not Marxism was – not so much foreign, but did it [African social organization or structure] fit in the categories of Marxism, the Marxist analysis in terms of class, for example. You're a political scientist, aren't you?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:08:34

Historian.



**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:08:35

Oh, you're a historian. Okay. So, those were the debates in political science, and as you know, there were so many theories at the time that were making, should I call them, adjustments? To classical Marxist theory anyway, as I said – there were so many strands. And so, there were all those debates going on about the strands. And there were some local debates within countries in Africa that were going on about how applicable some of these foreign theories were in the African context and to African development. And so I think that was what – I got quite deeply involved in very, very interesting debate.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:09:23

And then, in your masters, continuing to think of it directly in terms of law...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:09:30

And the question of transplanting legal systems and why it didn't work. And I guess this in a very big way is what took me back to my interest in history. Because I think you cannot look at those issues without understanding and looking at the history of law in both contexts.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:09:49

So, anything else from your Master's that you remember that interested you?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:10:00

I enjoyed the time very much socially, in terms of being in a different setting, being a little older, being more accustomed from that point of view to England. And so, for me socially, it was much more interesting time. Yes. But apart from that – and remember, it was just, I believe it was a year - it was either a year or it was 10 [months], no, it was a little over - yeah, it was about a full year, a Master's then was about a year. So it was a relatively short time. And then I started looking for work right before the Masters ended. And in fact, I got work. Just after I finished writing, because it was partly by thesis, partly by exam. It was a sort of an unusual hybrid. So I did mine to write. And so I got work, just as soon as I submitted my thesis, I think. But I'd started applying and I actually interviewed in London, through an office – at that time in London, Nigeria had an office at the National Universities Commission. And so when you applied to different universities, sometimes you got interviewed through that office or contacted through that office. And so I already had a couple of offers by the time I went back to Nigeria, to teach in the university. So I decided that that was the next thing I was going to do, pursue a sort of research career.

So I got a job at the University of Jos, I decided to accept the job from the University of Jos. Partly because I had been to Jos briefly whilst I was in Kaduna. They're not too far from each other, about an hour, an hour and a half. And so, I was quite interested in being in that part of the country. It's very well known for being temperate climate and for it's beauty, the highest part of Nigeria, the plateau. It is in a state called Plateau state. And so I was quite happy to be going to

work there. It was another of my adventures. I accepted at the University of Jos, and I came home, and I moved to Jos. And I enjoyed it tremendously, I think, in the first year. So that was my first job in that sense, and certainly my first academic job that was supposed to be long term. Yes. So I lived and worked in Jos. I think I joined the University of Jos in '84 for six years. Yes. Very interesting. Yes, indeed, those years of my career. It was very, very interesting.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:13:11**

Anything that kind of stands out to you from those years?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:13:16**

Well, in those years, I also, again, was very active in certain associations. And it was in those years that I became particularly active in the women's movement in Nigeria. Yeah. Should I say by accident? Not really by design, I was interested enough to go to meetings or to make, you know, sort of proactive moves. Otherwise, before that, I don't think I had ever thought of being active in women's organizations. But it started through conferences, I think there was a particular conference where one of my colleagues challenged me to do a paper on women's, you know, situation in Nigeria, and what it meant in terms of human rights. And that was an interesting beginning. It made me reflect on all the women in my life because my sort of starting point was, you know, why "women's liberation," in quotes? Why "women's rights?" And I thought about all the women I had encountered in my life and I thought, did they need a particular struggle for rights? They seemed terribly, you know, well established to me, and certainly very vocal, but it takes a closer look. So those were interesting years, looking at issues of women's position, women's status, looking at issues of gender relations, as they will be called today. And so it started for me through a sort of academic - if I can call it that - and personal, reflection. And as I said, a little after that, getting more involved in a broader women's movement came from being invited to give papers on these issues. And that was how I met someone who was involved with the International Women's Health Coalition, who was at the University in Zaria, and who invited me - I think she was coordinating a conference on women's health. And they were raising issues relating to abortion, and rights to choose. And because I was a lawyer, they were inviting me to give a paper on the situation in Nigeria or the law in Nigeria. So that was the genesis of my analysis of that, and my interest in the whole question of women's health and rights.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:16:24**

Do you remember at all roughly what years that would have been? 19..?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:16:38**

1988-89, something like that? I would say 89.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:16:46**

Late 80s, basically.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:16:48**

Definitely late 80s, the tail end of the 80s. I think it was 1989. I'd have to look that up to be certain, a long time ago now.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:17:01

And can you think of, before that moment, had something like abortion ever – was it something you had thought about before or heard about in your life? Maybe even not just thinking about it academically, but in kind of personal life?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:17:21

Well I heard about it definitely. But I think it was the first time I was reflecting on the legal situation, and what it meant. And that was what was interesting to me, because I think most people don't think about things in terms of the legal situation, partly because of the history of the legal system. It's just, you know, you think about things in terms of how they affect you, but not overtly in legal terms. Let me explain that a little bit more. And so there were, I'm sure, lots of women who found themselves in a situation where they wanted to have an abortion. What they needed was information on how to go about it, which they might get from their peers, they might get from friends, they might get from whatever sources. And the next issue for them would be okay, so how do I go get this done? It will rarely occur to them to think: is this legal or illegal? If not, you know, why would you think that? Partly because - and this is the thing about a colonial legal system - because nobody's going to try and come and arrest you, or, you know, prosecute you because you had an abortion. And this was what was interesting about looking at the history of the law, that it is a colonial law. So it's not that spontaneously people think in Nigeria, this is a terrible thing to do. And if you do it, we should prosecute you in some way. No, if prosecutions happened it is because somebody prompted somebody in the police to do it. It wasn't spontaneous, people didn't think in those [terms] – and this is where you see law and "morality" (in quotes) not quite in tandem. And I think there are many situations we can think of that reflect that, and I think it has to do with the history of the legal system. There are a whole lot of laws on the books that people don't even know exist, and a whole lot of things that are supposedly criminal that people don't think of as criminal and they don't, you know, they don't think: oh, wow, someone's going to come and arrest me if I do this. Yeah. So I think that was an interesting thing about the legal situation. And so the interest in the legal situation in Nigeria, I think, definitely came initially from outside.

So the International Women's Health Coalition was interested in it – because coming from their angle, the legal situation is important in North America and in Europe. And so it was like, this is wrong – it shouldn't be criminalized, women should have the right to choose. And they were bringing that mindset that women all over the world should have the right to choose. But I think in all fairness, it was a little more than that. They were also looking at: if it's illegal on the books, then how can provision be made for it to be safe? And that I think was an important issue. Because it means that if women wanted an abortion, whilst doctors were doing it everywhere - as far as I know, there are lots of doctors who do it - and yes, they might do it in some secrecy, but not overtly so, as far as I know, in the Nigerian situation, because they weren't particularly afraid of being

arrested. But it might have been at the back of their mind that oh, maybe this is – I wonder if many doctors – well yeah, they probably knew it was illegal on the books. But people just didn't think in those terms, those kind of legal terms, I don't think. But it does become important when you are saying, okay, there is so much unsafe abortion. There are quite a number of doctors performing unsafe abortions in unsanitary and not well-equipped circumstances. Women, if they don't die, they get affected, their health is affected in some way due to these abortions. And so if we want to make the procedures safer for women, better for women, we have to deal with the law. I think that was another angle of the argument. So I guess – it was very interesting to look at all that within the context of academic research, within the context of even advocacy in terms of interacting with doctors on this issue. But I think at the end of the day, what was really interesting to me was looking at the social context of the law, and looking at: how do you seek a remedy for something that didn't seem to be a problem? Or where the context of the problem was so different that you cannot simply import a remedy into it? So I think this, for me, was what led me and what later on, I reflected very carefully on, you know.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:23:11**

And were you already thinking about all of this when you had this initial conference, this invitation to explore, or did that kind of develop later?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:23:24**

To me it was exploring at that point in time. I didn't even know what the law was.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:23:31**

Right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:23:33**

I researched the law as a result. Yeah. What is the law on abortion in Nigeria? So, I researched the law, because I was invited to do so. It's not – criminal law is not my big thing. But I mean, more than that, I just never encountered this in particular. So I researched it.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:23:58**

So, you said it was your colleague who kind of challenged you to write this paper?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:24:04**

Yes.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 1:24:05**

A colleague in Nigeria, at your university?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 1:24:09**

At the Ahmadu Bello University, yes, she was a Ugandan. I'm not too sure where she is now, but she taught at that university. And so she was organizing this conference. And the conference had

the support, I later discovered, of the IWHC. And at the actual conference, where the paper presentations were made, for the first time I met some of the people from the IWHC.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:24:37

Do you remember any of the names - of the Ugandan colleague or of...

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:24:43

Oh yes of course, her name was Mere Kisekka. She later edited a book, where I think my paper is published, and I think the book was called Women's Health in Nigeria. I would have to look that up. But yeah, so that was her name and at that time the Vice President - I think she was - of the IWHC was Adrienne Germain and the President was Joan Dunlop. I'm saying her name right? Yeah. And we had a program officer [for Africa] - but I don't think we met her initially, she came later - called Andrea Irvin. Yeah. And in later years, I've actually been in touch with Andrea.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:25:40

Anything else about that initial conference, that you remember, before we go?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:25:51

Not particularly.

[End of First Interview]

## Adetoun Ilumoka Interview 2/3, 10 July 2021

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 00:00

Today is July 10 2021. This is the second interview with Adetoun Ilumoka. We ended last time talking about the conference. Actually, I was looking back and I was wondering whether it might have been a Society for Obstetricians and Gynecologists' conference?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 00:20

That's it.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 00:21

Okay, yeah. I found that back in some of my notes. That makes sense. We are going to start today by thinking a bit about how you got involved in the women's movement, in some of the women's organisations. And you mentioned that it really started with Women in Nigeria. So maybe you can tell me a bit about the organisation, what you know of it, of its background, and, when you got involved, what it was working on.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 00:53

So I first got involved with Women in Nigeria, not in a very active kind of way, [but] because I was at the launching ceremony. I happened to be in Zaria when Women in Nigeria was forming (for another conference) and so I attended the launching of Women in Nigeria, and I met some of the women who were involved. But that was just the launching, when it was first established. My active involvement - I followed some of the things that they did, I read a bit about it - but my active involvement in Women in Nigeria was when I was teaching at the University of Jos. I was invited to join by one of my friends, so I was really enthusiastic. I'd heard so much about this organisation. And so I joined the organisation. It wasn't very active in Jos at the time. So I was, to some extent, involved in strengthening, I should say, not setting up the Jos branch. And after that, I think the year later, I became the coordinator for that state, a part of the state. But it was always an organisation that fascinated me, as I had said to you, my involvement or my understanding of issues being raised, issues of women's rights being raised, had started off in university. I told you, I went to quite a few meetings organised by radical feminists at the University of Kent. And so I heard a lot of the debates about what was going on at the time. I was very interested in the whole politics of gender. So when I was back working in Nigeria, and was invited to join Women in Nigeria, I was very excited. And then I went on to run a couple of projects for Women in Nigeria, on women's health. This was, I can't remember if that was before or after – it was after the SOGON meeting, and after my involvement in researching women's rights to abortion in Nigeria, we then did a much broader study of women's attitudes and experiences of abortion in Nigeria, which unfortunately never got published, but it was a very interesting one. We did it amongst students, university students, which is a great group to survey on the issue. And some of the findings were pretty interesting. I believe I still have some of the material. And I really think that it's something that should get written up, even if in an article, you know, someday soon. Its on

my lists of things to do, yes. I do refer to it in the article that you talked about on a feminist politics of knowledge, in that lecture.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 04:19

Yes.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:20

I refer to some of the findings of that study, but also to the findings of many other studies that we did thereafter. So that was Women in Nigeria. I think what was most interesting to me about the organisation was the commitment of the women involved. We used to go to meetings, meetings used to rotate in different states, different towns in Nigeria, and as you know, it's quite a big country. And whichever branch of the organisation was hosting the meeting would set things up and would house the participants that were coming from outside the town. You know, it was basically a voluntary organization, and that was really nice. The camaraderie was very encouraging. So it was very much a [feeling of] solidarity. I liked that very much.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 05:23

Do you remember what the demographic of the group was? Was it other academics? Was it professionals? Middle, upper class? Do you remember at all what the other profiles were?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 05:39

No, I think it was a mix. I think it was very much a mix. It varied also by state to some extent. Yes, there were quite a number of academics in it, but there were also journalists involved in it. There were women involved with labour unions involved in it. A couple of women who, I'm not really sure what their background was – but definitely not all academics. So it was a mix. But I think later on in terms of who defined and who did the documentation, yes, there were quite a few academics. But in terms of the meetings, the way they were held, the way the issues were discussed, it wasn't academic. You asked about whether it was upper middle class? No, I wouldn't say so in the Nigerian context... middle class, maybe, but also some lower middle class, if you want to call them that. Difficult to use those terms sometimes in the Nigerian context.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 06:52

And was it mostly doing research projects, or mobilizations, or policy?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 07:03

It was mostly advocacy. It was commenting on government policy, it was commenting on issues that related to women's rights, women's position. And so sometimes, we had a theme like “women and education,” and we looked at particular aspects of education. But it wasn't projects at all. It was more of advocacy for policy change, advocacy for implementation of policies in terms of education, in terms of health. And so very often Women in Nigeria would issue communiqués at the end of meetings, it would lobby government officials for things to change. It would make statements in the media, on topical issues, things that were going on in the country. So that's what

it did. It wasn't – I would definitely not call it projects. It wasn't that kind of organisation, much more of an advocacy organisation. And it did publish some of its findings. It did sometimes do studies on the situation of women in education, health..., it had those kinds of position papers. And sometimes they grew into full length books. Women in Nigeria did publish a few books in that time.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:39

And these would be collaborative books with different members?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:48

Yes, people contributed to the books. I'm trying to remember if any of them were edited collections, or – more collaborative, if I remember rightly. I should pick up some of my copies of the books. And they became go-to publications for sociologists, students in universities. So they were really well-researched and well-written and raised issues that people cared about.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 09:28

And do you remember what other issues they were working on in that period? You mentioned, obviously, women's health.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 09:36

That I was working on?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 09:38

Yeah, or the organisation more broadly as well?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 09:42

Oh, okay. The organisation more broadly, by the time I joined them, became very active – a lot of what I did with the organisation in Jos (remember I was in a branch, a particular branch) did relate to health. Some of it also related to conditions of work, I think, women in the workplace, some of it related to harassment or to the position of students in the university. A variety of issues, but I was particularly interested in health. And at this time, my research was also going more and more into looking at human rights and social justice. And so I was seeing women's rights as one particular aspect of social justice, and human rights. And I did quite a lot of research in that spirit on the concept of human rights in the African context. Let's put it that way. And that went on for some years, because a lot of the human rights literature I was reading at that time, a lot of the way in which the issues were being defined, I felt were, in those days – I will term it "Western". So there was a huge debate about whether human rights reflected Western concepts and priorities. Since then, I think, quite a lot has changed in my thinking on human rights. But at that time, I was particularly interested in looking at: what issues are many everyday Africans interested in? And would they necessarily express them as human rights issues? And would they see themselves as struggling with human rights? So this, for quite a number of years, was a preoccupation of my research.



**Nicole Bourbonnais** 11:58

And did you draw a conclusion in regards to those questions? Or was it kind of an open debate?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:08

I did at the time, even though, as I said, my position has changed over the years somewhat, but I did certainly at the time draw conclusions. As I said, this was ongoing. It wasn't necessarily within the context of WIN [Women in Nigeria] alone, it was within the context of my own research. It went on too when I left the university and worked through the vehicle of EMPARC, the Empowerment & Action Research Centre. And one of the earliest projects we did in EMPARC was called "reconceptualizing human rights in the African context". And I think one of the most interesting things that I did in that regard, quite apart from the theoretical research (because there was quite a lot of debate at that time) was on this small question of whether or not human rights were Western.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 12:59

Right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 12:59

So it was an ongoing debate, so to speak: whether they were universal, or whether it was an imposed language, in a sense. I think, later on, I concluded that human rights were indeed - in terms of their origin, in terms of the discourse - Western, but that the issues and the idea was much more universal. And in a training that I had the opportunity [to do], which I valued very much doing, with Women for Change (the name of an organisation in Zambia) - I did a training for their staff, and also another training with the staff of NGOs in Nigeria [for Alliances For Africa], on what they thought of human rights as. And what was interesting about it is that I approached it from the point of view of: what things, what issues, do you think are worth fighting about? Because one of the things that irked me in this period was advocacy organisations saying: "oh, people don't know their rights, so we have to have human rights trainings to teach them their rights." I am like, hmmm. It was as if the rights were somewhere there, a very lawyerly perspective, to some extent, that they were entrenched in various documents - whether it was UN declarations, whether it was CEDAW - and you had to go and teach people about this, so that they understood that they had rights. It just sounded a little strange to me, because where did those documents come from? Weren't they built because a group of people felt passionate about establishing standards? And they felt this way because they felt that these were important things and that people should be treated humanely. And so I was like: well, is there a suggestion that somehow Africans don't have issues that they feel strongly about, that they're ready to stand up and fight for, which is basically what human rights are, about struggling for what people believe in? And so it was really interesting to see people talk about the things that they felt were worth fighting for.

And so I began to look for, in a sense, things within some African communities that were considered fundamental to humanness, fundamental to humanity. So for example, I would say: the right to work, right to a livelihood, and this is related also to the right to land. If people were to be able to eat, in largely agrarian societies, clearly they needed access to land. And usually land was available to people precisely for this reason, because to deny them of land, of access to land to farm - under whatever conditions - was to deny them of the ability to have a livelihood. And I think you see reflected in many African communities, certainly in Nigerian communities, a sense of this being a fundamental right. And so even “strangers” to a community who came into the community, and asked to be given land to farm, are given land to farm even though they're “strangers”. There may be some conditions - you don't own it outright, it's leased to you - but the idea that they wouldn't even be given land, they wouldn't even be allowed a place to build a home to settle to farm: it was tantamount to denying them an existence. Just to give an example of how, when you start to look more closely at the way societies are organised, you begin to decipher their concept of human rights and their priorities. I think that's the most important thing about it. It's the priorities that people have that arise from the context in which they live. And so that is why sometimes certain debates on human rights, certain human rights being prioritised in the West, appeared to be not quite the priorities - let me put it that way - of Africans.

And of course, a glaring example on which I wrote somewhat was abortion. So: all the talk about a woman's right to choose. And it was like, the only reason why it's such a big issue, [why] it became such a big issue in the West, was because of the position of the church, because of active attempts to deny women access. And when I looked at the Nigerian situation, I just felt it wasn't the same. There wasn't that moral standpoint, arising from Christianity. It wasn't as strong. As we earlier said, when we were speaking yesterday, the law on abortion is on the books because it's a colonial law. It's not as if, actively, Nigerians thought of abortion as such a terrible thing, [we] must criminalise it. No. It appears on the books because it was part of the criminal law that was established in the colonial period. And as I said, it was rarely enforced, if ever. So this was a glaring example of how, in fact, priorities differ. And so whereas the struggle for a particular right may arise from particular circumstances in a society, it's very difficult to move to a different society where this is not a priority, and to expect people to make it a priority and to sort of join in this struggle for a woman's right to choose. It's like: but who was denying a woman's right to choose? The issue wasn't so much a woman's right to choose to have an abortion being denied, it was more a question of technology, was a question of access. Where do you go to get the abortion done? Does it cost a lot? Can you afford it? Yes, there were elements of secrecy, especially with middle class women: you didn't want your parents to know, that sort of thing. Because girls, I should say, young girls – but there are also quite a number of married women who routinely sought to procure abortion. And it wasn't seen as a huge moral issue. This was my impression. And in fact, later on, during the collaboration with other international organisations on this issue of women's rights to abortion, I think we actually triggered an opposition that wasn't there before. And so when it was being suggested that abortion should be decriminalized - and many people interpreted that as legalizing abortion - you had a whole reaction from the Christian fundamentalists and the Catholic church about this, something that they hadn't particularly

bothered to comment on at length, and suddenly now had this reaction to it. So in a sense, you triggered it, and this for me was very interesting.

It was a very interesting lesson on how to strategize when you're keen to advocate the right. First of all, it has to be grounded in a particular context, actually part of people's priorities. And secondly, you have to adopt strategies that take into account your particular circumstances, and what kind of backlash you could trigger and perhaps seeking to avoid the backlash by adopting a different strategy. And so if the issue was access, the issue was, in a sense, technology, because part of the problem was the ways in which abortions were procured using dilation and curettage . And there were more modern ways of doing it, or doing it earlier, so that it didn't jeopardize women's health that much. And so issues of technique were important, I think, in the Nigerian context. And maybe we could have promoted better access of practitioners to these techniques - and eventually, I think that did happen to some extent - rather than focus on the aspects of emphasising a woman's right to choose.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 23:37

Yeah, it's interesting, I've seen in some other contexts, abortion movements mobilising more around public health discourse or even a social justice discourse, about pointing out that it creates inequality between wealthier people who can pay for more expensive procedures versus the poor.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 24:05

Right.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 24:06

[And] making that argument of: one discourse is not going to work in every context.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 24:13

Yes. And I think women that I met in the International Women's Health movement, like black women in the United States, made this point very strongly, that their situation was, in a sense, a little different from middle class white women, because they were getting enforced sterilisation, they were almost being encouraged to have abortions, as part of a sort of eugenicist [project], as opposed to their problem being the right to choose. If you know what I mean. It was more the right to choose to control their bodies and I think they broadened the issue in that sense. It then became an issue of what the women want, and shouldn't they have more say over what happens to their bodies? But it wasn't so much in terms of access to abortion, it was in terms of vis a vis the state and the provision of services.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 25:24

And so, did you also see those kinds of – since you mentioned the coerced sterilization, of course there's the history of incentives used for contraception in other contexts. Were you also seeing those kinds of things in Nigeria when you were doing your studies during this period?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 25:45

No. We weren't seeing as much. In fact, it was just the whole family planning, the promotion of family planning – in the late 1980s was happening in the context of the idea of population control, [the] population is too large, to bring it down, the birth rates need to come down... That kind of discourse. And so that was an interesting area in which you had the feminist advocates both saying that women need the right to contraception, they should have access to contraception, but population policy as the driving force is not necessarily in woman's interest. So it was an interesting debate at that time, that women were advocating for contraception, but not driven by the idea that population should be controlled and should be controlled through women. And so the point was made in the women's movement at the time in Nigeria, that, yes, women want the right to contraception, different kinds of contraception. But if your goal was population control, then perhaps you should push as hard for men, because in a polygamous society, men could have four wives and have therefore 16 children. They have four wives or partners. And so if you really were serious about population control, you should be looking at the men more, and not the women. I think this point was made quite early on. But the idea of women having access to contraception was important. When we did some of our surveys in those years, in the nineties, one of the things that turned up was that a lot of women were concerned about modern contraception and side effects. And so the family planning clinics that tended to push for certain modern methods of contraception were not always embraced by women, because they were concerned about the after effects of pills, the side effects of the pill. They were concerned about the side effects of the IUD. And we saw some other interesting cases where in terms of service delivery, some women had had IUDs in for years and never come to have them checked. And it had caused, in some cases, infection that hadn't been attended to for quite a long time. So in a context with the medical system, where access to the modern medical system is very restricted, pushing for modern forms of contraception, where you cannot follow up with the women, can also be quite problematic.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 29:28**

I'm just curious, because I remember you telling me that your mother was a midwife and worked in family planning.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 29:36**

In the 60s, yeah.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 29:38**

Yeah. In the 60s. Did you ever talk to her about some of these things you were finding in your research and whether she had seen that kind of thing at that time?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 29:50**

Nothing in great detail. Interestingly enough, I guess, I wasn't home a lot at the time. I was working in Jos, so I was quite far away from Lagos. And so I didn't get to talk to her a lot. But certainly in her time, just researching the different trends in her time – although research does show that there was a strong link between the eugenics movement and family planning – the promotion of family planning – within the Nigerian context, I think it was driven more by a

concern that women should have access. And it was relatively small, it wasn't a huge movement at the time. It wasn't driven by governments, it was driven more by private organisations [although still linked to "foreign" organisations with links to the Eugenics movement]. And so it was quite different from now, when there was some sort of push to encourage the Nigerian government to take a stand regarding population policy, regarding the provision of family planning services [on a national scale]. I think this was a different trend, isn't it?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 31:08

Yeah.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 31:08

So no, I rarely got to speak to my mother about those differences.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 31:13

That's interesting. So where do you think that push was coming from? Was that coming from international donors?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 31:20

Oh, yeah. Um, it was coming from international donors, it was coming even, definitely from the U.S. "influences" I should call them. And you could see it also coming from other international donors like Scandinavians who had a greater interest, I think, in the whole question of women's access to contraception. So some donors were mindful of the fact that this could be problematic, this push that was driven by a population control kind of motive or agenda. But others, I think, bought very much into that. More of the North American sources, or the US donor community, and in particular, the US government, which was a big sponsor in defence of these programmes in the 90s.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 32:29

Did Women in Nigeria work with international donors as well, at the time?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 32:35

No, they came to work with international donors much later. I think this was one of the unfortunate things in the history of Women in Nigeria, which probably, I think contributed to it's – shall I call it – it's demise? And so partly with hindsight, but even at the time, this was an organisation that was totally voluntary, that was driven by women's solidarity, that had a couple of international donors come in with enthusiasm. You know, because they saw a feminist organisation, in the Nigerian context, perhaps the *only* feminist organisation, and they were interested in supporting it to do advocacy projects, to do policy work and advocacy. And in infusing donor money, it created a lot of tensions in the organisation. How do you fund a movement that is not set up to execute "projects", to use your term earlier? It was very much a solidarity organisation, an advocacy organisation, it was voluntary. It didn't even have a professionalized secretariat. Yes. And then suddenly, donor money was coming in and seeking to encourage this.

And so a lot of disputes arose as to: who was going to coordinate projects? Who was – who had the capacity to coordinate projects? Who was going to control the money? It really – I think it created a lot of problems in an organisation that wasn't established to – if the organisation had deemed it necessary to have these kinds of projects and had gone out to seek donor funding itself, I think it would have been a different matter, because perhaps it would have been thought through, it would have been restructured to some extent to be able to do that.

And I must say that was one of my motivations for establishing, at some point in time, the Empowerment and Action Research Centre. It was, I thought: "no, this organisation, this isn't what it does. It's more of a movement." So I wanted to establish an organisation that did research, and did advocacy in a "professional" way. Technically, if universities were set up in a different way, this kind of research and advocacy, well, the research angle anyway, could have been done within the context of a university. But there wasn't a lot of room, I felt, at the time, and flexibility to do that kind of work within a university. And so if you were really interested and wanted to do it, the question was, how else would you do it? And that's how the idea of a private, nonprofit organisation, in this case, a research centre, I thought, was one alternative vehicle. And I believe it was one of the first and I approached a couple of colleagues. So we were having talks, and a couple of them were members of Women in Nigeria, one or two, and I wanted it to be broader than just a feminist agenda. I wanted a broader social justice agenda. And so for that reason, I was also talking with male colleagues. And I saw it more as something that would focus on research. So a lot of the people that I was having this discussion with were academics, but I think it was felt within the context of Women in Nigeria - and I think a couple of people did comment on this - that this was, like, pulling out of Women in Nigeria, and doing something else. And maybe in a sense, they felt, drawing resources away from Women in Nigeria. I thought it was unfortunate it was being understood like that. Because for me, Women in Nigeria as a movement was important, because it's the groundswell movements that have a large membership. But it's very different from a research centre that's focusing on particular issues. But I think there was that feeling. And that feeling, I think, came from the whole question of the infusion of donor money into these organizations.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 37:56

So, then, did the Empowerment and Action Research Centre...was it based again on voluntary work or did you have other kinds of funding?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 38:06

No, it was set up specifically to do research and to find funding to do research on social justice. And so it was almost like, I'm setting up a private – it was setting up a private research centre, which was quite unusual in the Nigerian context. So I believe one of the early ones, too, was established by a well-known Nigerian professor for four decades (he's now dead) and he established what he called the Centre for Advanced Social Science. So basically, it was doing something quite focused, which normally could have been housed within the context of a university, or a public research organisation, but it was now doing it within the context of a

private research organisation. And this was just the beginning, if I can – yeah, I think I would be correct in saying this is just the beginning of a trend in Nigeria in those years.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 39:19

And what kind of research did the Centre work on in its early years? Do you remember some of the key projects ?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 39:27

It was mainly on reproductive health, because that was where I was coming from as a researcher at that time. But it was somewhat broader than that because, as I said, I also had a very strong interest in social justice, and in reconceptualizing human rights. So I thought: I prefer to use the term social justice instead of human rights, even though they are very much related. A number of my colleagues who were involved with the Centre and those ideas were also interested in social justice issues. Lots of them were sociologists. And so this was what the Centre focused on. We did projects on women's health, reproductive health, in terms of quality of care. We did projects on HIV/AIDS prevention, because this was a period when, you know, we were just beginning to learn quite a bit about the transmission of the HIV virus. So we did some early work on prevention and control, especially among young people. We worked in that project with schools in the Lagos area, it was a very interesting project, because we found that young people hadn't been addressed directly on those issues a lot. And when you did, they were extremely enthusiastic. They were extremely responsive. They almost overwhelmed you. And there were a couple of organisations working with young people, and I think we all found that there's a great enthusiasm, great energy from young people when you actually involve them in the discussions. Those are very interesting project. We did a project looking at domestic violence, and those were sort of the earlier years to try and understand what was happening in the Nigerian context, in relation to domestic violence. And that was coordinated by a colleague of mine, at the time, who was a sociologist at the University of Jos. So that was another interesting project.

But a lot of work on women's health – we got drawn into very interesting collaborations with women around the globe. I became quite active in those years in the international women's health movement. And it certainly was a very rewarding and interesting experience, occasionally frustrating. But with hindsight, definitely one of the high points, I would say, of my life. And that is where I guess you, in your project, got to encounter these initiators of this Woman's Declaration, as those were the years when the International Women's Health Coalition was trying to organize a women's lobby, in a sense, that intervened at the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development). This was several years prior to the conference, it was a lot of organizing prior to the conference so that we could have a strong intervention when the conference actually came around. And with hindsight, it was successful. Some of it was frustrating, just the process of women from different parts of the world, trying to arrive at something of a consensus on: how can we intervene in ways that are meaningful to all of us? I think that that whole process was a learning process for all of us. And there again, I think it triggered one of my preoccupations, perhaps to this day, on the whole question of democratisation of human rights: how to not have

hegemonic conversations within these large international movements, how to have them take democracy seriously, take the voices of different women seriously. Give space, democratic space, so that they can express their experiences and be taken seriously in formulating a joint agenda, so to speak. I think this is really what it was all about, and how we do that. And it's a process you find locally. Interestingly enough, whilst you're involved in it, you think of sort of struggling within a particular context. And when you think about it more broadly, it's like those things happen all the time, at different levels, whether it's locally, whether it's nationally as well as internationally. There's always this tension between those who originally seek to control the movement and the pushback they get from the membership.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 45:14

Yeah, and – I guess it also maybe comes back to your point about the need for things to be based in local experience. So how do you balance that with an international frame? You know, how do you make an international framework that also keeps in mind the priorities of different contexts?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 45:32

Right. And I think there is a lot of tension there. But it can be a creative tension, because sometimes you find that you're getting what, I think, much later in the analysis would be termed colonial discourse. So feminists often think of themselves as progressive, but in actual fact, within the feminist movement, there were very strong sort of imperialistic tendencies. And that was what some of the women from other parts of the world, Africa, Asia, Latin America, were pushing back against. And so that whole colonial experience, the way in which the international system has evolved, the way in which even the UN system is funded, it expresses itself in these organisations, in any kind of international alliances. And so, working through those tensions is very important. Yes. So I think there was some idea of: of course, this is what feminist discourse is about, this is what a feminist agenda looks like. And there wasn't enough appreciation that it might look different, depending on what context you're in. So, the women who felt that way, and felt that their context raised different issues, or different priorities, or raised the same issues in a different way, had to follow, while they're struggling to have their voices heard. But I think ultimately - and that's the important thing about struggling to have your voice heard - when it is heard, I think it does change things. But it's just the tension before that point is reached.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 47:37

Can you remember any particular examples of that? Maybe when you or colleagues were trying to push a particular point within the context of the Women's Declaration or other kinds of international women's health advocacy where you directly experienced that? Or was it a more of a general sense of tension?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 48:03

No, I think beyond the general sense of tension there, it took a while to arrive at some sort of a consensus in working towards having a more progressive and women-friendly statement come out of the ICPD Platform of Action, in that whole process of women trying to influence what was



reflected in the Platform For Action. I think you have strong lobbies, from Europe, North America, that emphasise the right to abortion. It was partly because those groups just happened to be well organized, perhaps well funded. But there was quite a bit of tension. So you'd hear things like at some of the prep forums, as they were called, preparatory meetings to the ICPD, you'd hear comments like: "oh, the African women are being ambiguous," or "they're not coming across strongly enough" – on the whole question of abortion advocacy. And it was true. I mean, some women expressed reservations, they didn't want to be associated with all this push for the right to abortion. But I think the point that they did try to make was that it wasn't necessarily a priority for them. Yes, it might be an important issue, but how important? What about the right to livelihoods? What about rights to access health services in rural areas? What about maternal mortality and morbidity, which actually also was a big issue that was being raised. So I think these were some of the tensions. And it took a while, I think, in this push and pull and discussion for some of the women who felt abortion was such a priority to understand these different contexts. And I think what it was, was the inability, because of exposure, to understand the difference in contexts.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 50:43

Right, they're coming from their own context, as well.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 50:46

That's right. And they think their context is the most important, the right objective to use, and so they're not giving sufficient space and freedom for other people's priorities.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 51:03

And did you feel that was largely along geographic lines, you know, kind of North South? Or was it ideological: radical versus liberal or Marxist? Or maybe multiple types of divisions?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 51:20

Maybe multiple, but honestly, I think that to some extent, it was a geographical line. It was understanding, I think, the important issue was understanding what today would be termed intersectionality, instead of looking at single issues. That really the idea that a woman's right to choose to have an abortion was so central really is quite narrow. It's not understanding the context of unwanted pregnancies. It's not understanding that, in fact, in some of these societies, there is pro-natalism, in a sense of, you know, there's a celebration of motherhood, especially [for] people still in rural contexts, and that therefore there wasn't this kind of shame and immediate recourse to abortion as the solution to unwanted pregnancies. It was the need - and I think it was eventually very well expressed, which was the value of all this discussion - that the problem is not abortion, the problem is unwanted pregnancy. Why is a pregnancy unwanted? And understanding that pregnancies actually, in certain contexts, are very much wanted. And that within the context of some of these African communities, you get the problem of wanting out of these pregnancies – because of the Western system of education, that does not give space. Lives are changing, girls are going to school, and so it's deemed not the right time to get pregnant. It's an inconvenience, they

get expelled, because, you know, the history of the educational system didn't tolerate girls getting pregnant within that period of time. And so you have to understand the broader context of how pregnancies *became* unwanted rather than assume that the problem of unwanted pregnancy is a universal problem across time and space. And I think, eventually, we came to understand this after much discussion and trying to analyse: what really are we agreeing or disagreeing about? And so these things became set in broader and broader contexts. And I think it has strengthened the discourse on feminist issues and the ways in which they're expressed, and the existence of "many feminisms" as opposed to [the] one it's "supposed" to be.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 54:19

And then to come back again to how this played out in terms of the Women's Declaration...I think there was an early meeting in London, which was partially organised by the International Women's Health Coalition to come up with this - to talk about it - and then a second meeting in Rio in 1993, so the year before the ICPD, where the language was kind of finalised and put forward to these organisations. Do you remember participating in those at all?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 54:55

I do remember participating in the Rio meeting. I don't think I made the London meeting. Can't remember what was happening around then. I wasn't there in London, I saw the documentation that came out of that, after. I do remember participating in the Rio meeting. And it was a very good meeting, very interesting meeting because of all these discussions and the Women's Declaration that came out of it, I think we managed eventually to get a consensus document. But really, there were very hot debates as to what should go into it. And as I said, that whole process was very important in Nigeria, not necessarily very well accepted by those who felt that they were the leaders or the doyens of the movement. But nonetheless, I think at the end of the day, we all learned a lot about how to arrive at consensus. With hindsight, I would certainly give kudos to the women who organised and came up with that declaration. As you know, in any political movement, they're thinking: oh, this is a great opportunity to get these issues in. They matter to women in other parts of the world. And if we can get a groundswell of opinion of women from all over the world, it makes us that much stronger, because we're at the international level, and we're pushing for the UN to support some of our priorities. And so it's difficult to give room within that to other points of view that appear to be diluting that. Because really, it is a moment and an opportunity for you to get these issues through. So yes, I certainly understand that. But not everyone is in the same place, at the same time.

To give you an example of something I think I learned through this period: another issue that was raised very often, maybe in slightly later years, the ICPD, or in that same period (but it went on much beyond that period) was the question of violence against women, even in those days. It's a big thing today. But the question of violence against women even then was being raised as an important issue that needed to be addressed. And I remember that a lot of women from East Africa were also raising the problem of violence against women triggered to some extent by alcoholism and other... I remember, at the time, feeling that it doesn't seem to be a huge problem where I

come from, and I remember raising that issue and saying so. And it was met with tremendous hostility. But you know what, it was my perspective at the time. Today, it would not be my perspective, because I think what it was – it was probably hidden. And quite a few women at that time probably made the same point that this is hidden, it is a universal problem. Maybe it's hidden. And I was like "No, don't assume that is a problem that's universal in every part of the world". Today with a lot more knowledge, a lot more coming to light, I would certainly say that it was very much hidden. There are a lot of silences around aspects of it. But that certainly is a problem in my eyes, as we see, a growing problem.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 59:01

And so do you think those moments when you faced hostility, did those challenge your own beliefs? Or did it more make you feel defensive, that you needed to defend your rights to see it in a different way?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 59:19

Oh, yes, definitely. It made me feel: is this a democratic movement? Why can't I express what I think? Tell me if you see it differently, tell me the basis on which you see it differently. Maybe you have some information I don't have, but don't try to shut down my view. And so that's why I said more generally, it raised the question of democratization – which was extremely important. A very good thing that there were quite a lot of women raising these cases, because I think it has changed. It has fashioned the feminist movement today. It is part of its history. It has made it better, it has made it stronger as a result of these processes, as a result of discussion and understanding.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:00:28

And were you involved at all in the ICPD as well, in Cairo?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:00:33

Yes, I did go to the ICPD at that point in time. And I didn't always agree with some of the [organisers of the NGO caucus] – it wasn't not agreeing with, actually, it was more not agreeing with the attitude to power that informed their action. I think at the end of the day, the issues being raised are certainly pertinent and important issues. We might have had somewhat different priorities. But I think that there was some measures of agreement on many of the issues. It was a question of the emphasis given to it. Also, the emphasis given to the idea of secularity, that [this] was a natural thing that was based in the context of women's health, and certainly in the context of abortion, the position of the Catholics, the position of Christians, etc. I remember that was also a big issue. So yes, I did [go], because I participated in so many of the meetings and discussions that led up to the ICPD, I was quite determined to see it through by being at that meeting, and seeing what matters to it.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:01:57

And were you there through the Research Centre, or were you involved in the Nigerian delegation at all?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:02:05

No, I wasn't involved in the Nigerian delegation. So I went on my own, independently...

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 1:02:16

Do you remember any of the feeling of Cairo, whether you felt excited at the end of it, disappointed, kind of mixed, with the outcome in the end?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 1:02:31

Mixed. I thought it was a very interesting process. It was the opportunity to meet women who were not involved necessarily or intimately involved in the organising that was done through, for example, the IWHC, but there were many other new civil society organizations, and it was at the ICPD that I sort of met them more, and that they also tried to collaborate by having meetings - I believe it was in the mornings - to discuss strategy, etc. Yes. So it was much broader. Now, it wasn't so much of an emphasis on particular issues. A lot of the economic issues involved were being raised by other groups. The link between the question of health, the question of population policy, and access to particular kinds of health facilities was being raised by other groups. So I think that was important. And of course, there was the important interaction with government delegations, including our own country delegations. And the interesting thing was, whereas you might not have had an opportunity to interact with your country delegation, at your national level, now at the international level - because you were there as part of a lot of people - you were now able to interact with them and to lobby them so I think that's the big advantage of international organizing for women, feminists and other social justice groups.

[End of second interview].

## Adetoun Ilumoka Interview 3/3, 10 October 2021

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 00:00

Okay, so this is the third interview with Adetoun Ilumoka. Last time we spoke, we were discussing the Women's Declaration on Population Policies and the ICPD meeting in Cairo when the reproductive rights framework was adopted. I wanted to start today by asking you if you wanted to add anything to that discussion, whether there were any key points or takeaways you had from those experiences that you wanted to talk about today?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 00:30

Well, I think the one thing I wanted to say is that now with hindsight 20/20 vision, looking back, I think those years of organizing around issues of women's health were quite important even in terms of local organizing too, in some of the countries in question. And when we look at some of what is happening in the various countries that have active groups, and women working, we can see the kind of impact it's made. I think we're coming back to some of those issues, some of the similar issues like even in the US around abortion, in Texas, and in other countries around questions of quality of care, the way in which advertising on so-called family planning, or contraception is being couched. I think we can then, with hindsight, begin to see the importance and the impact of that movement. So I think it's sometimes a good thing to pat ourselves on the back, more in terms of moving forward to feel that it wasn't all lost, sometimes when you're in the middle of it. In fact, it made quite an important difference, because I used to be one of the people who used to argue, "well, you know, it's such a drop in the ocean", but that drop in the ocean sometimes makes quite a difference in terms of building eventually an awareness and a critical mass of women who get involved. And now with social media added into the mix, I think that we have quite an escalation in women's activism, which is a good thing.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 02:29

And do you think in the context of Nigeria, in particular, did women who went to the ICPD, such as yourself, continue working with/through now a reproductive rights framework, did it change the way you understood your work, or the way you framed it?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 02:48

I think they definitely did continue - even before ICPD, as we discussed earlier, there was Women in Nigeria. It was many of those same women who were active. And I think what happened in the new organisations that they worked through, they trained a lot of younger women. And those women are today working in the field and are adding value, doing their own thing, doing things their own way. And so this is what I mean, I think that there has been that kind of escalation as a result of that consciousness. We still may think "oh well, it's a drop in the ocean", but it tends to be, how shall I say, expanded (I don't think that's quite the right word) by the impact of social media. Younger women are using social media a lot, and therefore communicating much faster, getting in touch with each other, responding and doing advocacy in a different way.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 03:53

Right. And one thing, I guess, brings me to another question. I thought it was really interesting at the end of our last conversation, you mentioned how international organizing actually gave you more access to your own government representatives. So you know, you kind of had access to them in an international space that you maybe didn't have on the national space. And I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about that, about how you see the relationship between these international movements and national action and national governments.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 04:11

Yes. Right, I think in the NGO space then, interacting at the UN level made that difference to some extent, because there was that chance to even communicate and meet, which wasn't always that easy locally. And then when you go back, you kept in touch. Now some of the women in the NGO space got government positions. They were more conscious as a result. There was the Ministry for Women's Affairs, there was increasing interaction with them. They, I guess, also kept in touch with NGOs as a means of improving their credibility and activity. And so there was a lot more interaction, I think, thereafter, after some of those international meetings that raised the awareness and that changed the way in which even government thought about and worked on international issues. Because, for example, they have to go to the Status of Women meetings and states, give a progress report. It was important for them to be able to say, okay, we've done this, we've done this. So I think the international level did put some pressure of a fashion on national governments and national government ministries, certainly in relation to women's issues, to be seen to be doing something anyway, and have some credibility. I think that was important. And I think the interaction only got even more intense over the years.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 06:15

Following these kinds of international events in particular.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 06:19

Yes. The international events, I think, are less important now. But they were at that time, so they form the basis of this kind of interaction. I don't think they're that significant now. I could be wrong, but it seems to me that there isn't as much international advocacy that could put the same kind of pressure, that women's non-governmental international advocacy seems to me has weakened somewhat. Now, you know, people might disagree with me, I don't know. But it's my sense that it's not necessarily as strong in some areas. But as I say, I guess it really does depend on the area, maybe not as strong in reproductive rights, it seems to me. In violence against women, yes, it's strong. Yeah, but it's not because of UN meetings, as far as I can tell, even though there are UN initiatives that are significant, and encourage the representation of women from all over the world. And that is important. But now I think it's a lot of the local level activity, I'm seeing, that as particularly encouraging, because that really is the basis. And I think for many years, that was more of my concern that if you have all this international activity, and it's not really linked to or coming out of local level activity, you're not going to go very far. So I think it's encouraging to

see what looks to me, like more local level activity. But as I say, maybe those are the impacts of social media.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:05

Right. You don't have to go to one big event to connect, right? The way you had to in the past.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:12

Yes, and you can connect fast, you can send pictures, you can do all kinds of things without moving. And you can contact people, ask them to do lobbying work. It's really changed the way we work, and I find that somewhat encouraging,

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 08:34

Right. Although I think now, with the pandemic everyone misses in person meetings again.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 08:44

I think eventually, we're gonna have something of a balance, like everyone is like "Oh, this is the new normal." No, I think, for as human beings are still currently constituted, they want the contact too. It matters.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 09:00

Right. So maybe to continue with your personal trajectory after ICPD. So at the time, you said that you went independently, you weren't part of the government. I believe you were still with EMPARC at the time, the organisation?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 09:17

Yes.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 09:18

So how long did you continue with the organisation afterwards? And what kind of work were you doing?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 09:24

Many years, until 2006 when I left the country. Even after that, on a much smaller scale, we continued I believe until 2010. For some of the projects we were working on, funding became a little bit of an issue. And we were working more and more in community level advocacy and work, and sort of community development as well because these were the years after 2000, when we started working in semi-rural communities, and we set up some training programmes for youth, especially. It also marked the beginning of a turn towards youth, realising how youthful the population is, and how important it was to sort of engage people from a much younger age to make this kind of advocacy and empowerment effective. So we worked for several years, long after the ICPD. ICPD was very much the beginning of EMPARC's work. It was set up in 1992. ICPD was in

1994. Beijing was in 1995. And we kept going in terms of advocacy, and work with women's rights, human rights, all through the 90s. They were quite exciting years.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 11:11

And were you involved in Beijing?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 11:13

Yes, I was at Beijing, involved in the organizing before Beijing, even Beijing+5 which was in 2000. We were still very actively involved in that, in community based projects, in doing work on women's health and quality, sort of qualitative issues in women's health. All through those years. Yes.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 11:39

And do you remember anything about the experience in Beijing? Maybe how it is compared to other international organization work that you've done?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 11:48

Um, yes. I found that compared to the way the organising was done in the International Women's Health movement for the ICPD, I think Beijing was more - because it embraced a much larger group of non governmental organisations, very different ones as well, because the subject matter in terms of women was quite different - it was a little less focused, the organising at Beijing, I thought was a little less focused than the ICPD. And therefore, perhaps, I don't want to say not as impactful. At Beijing, a lot of interesting things came out, but you got the sense, I got the sense of a bit more of a jamboree. Lots of women from all over the world came to that meeting, from all different kinds of organisations. They were not necessarily bound together by any particular agreement on particular issues. But in a sense, maybe that was also enriching. It took, you know, more work to arrive at the Beijing platform, so to speak. It was a very different meeting in that sense. You didn't get as much of a sense of it being as focused. Maybe because the organisations, the non-governmental organisations involved in the Cairo meeting, really tried to actively reach some sort of consensus to put women's voice in there. Whereas a meeting that was for women, about women anyway, didn't need the same thing, if you understand what I mean. This [the ICPD] was a meeting more about population, development. And the women wanted an input to make sure that their issues were taken on board the way they wanted them taken on board. Doing that was different. It required a different kind of organising, a different kind of focus than a meeting that was about and for women.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 14:06

Yeah, that makes sense. I had never thought about it that way, but that really makes a lot of sense. There wasn't this kind of clear, not enemy, but something that you were clearly fighting against.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 14:19



Yes, or fighting to get included in, but this was your meeting in a sense. And therefore it showed that there were also many differences amongst women. You can imagine that the Chinese women had their issues they were raising in a different context at that time too, women from all over the world. So you didn't get that sense of advocacy to get included in something. It was their meeting, and so the differences showed up, I think a lot more. Maybe some would consider them enriching. It was an experience, but it definitely wasn't that kind of meeting where you were strategizing to achieve something amid a meeting with a different focus. You see what I mean?

**Nicole Bourbonnais 15:10**

I was wondering whether some of the similar tensions that you saw at ICPD around North-South divisions, but also around secularity came up at Beijing as well, or whether it was different kinds of divisions that you were mentioning?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 15:27**

Right. Not in the same way, Beijing was so broad, meaning it was a meeting that took on so many different aspects of women's lives. No, I didn't get that same sense. And there were a lot more women in terms of representation from all over the world, with the ICPD, a group, different, you know, organisations of women had made the effort to organise and have more women represented, in order to have a strong voice at that meeting. At this meeting, the women were represented anyway. It wasn't as a result of that kind of targeted organising in the same way. Because you recall, Beijing came out of 10 years, the Decade for Women came out of even activities before that. So what came prior to Beijing had been on for a long time. Women from all over the world were represented at that meeting. They were supported by many different organisations to come back. So it was different in that sense.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 16:38**

Okay. Yeah, that's very interesting about Beijing. So after Beijing, you're working in EMPARC and community projects. Anything else you want to talk about, about your work with EMPARC?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 16:54**

I think one of the most important things in terms of something of a learning curve with EMPARC was seeing more and more [perspectives and issues at the grassroots]. So we started out doing a lot of work on women's health, because of the history of how we came to be, but with a great interest in social justice issues more broadly. And so we tried to do more and more of the linkages between health and social justice. And that got to be very interesting. And I think that is what led us in a sense into doing more community-based work, to ask women and to find out from women, what were their own priorities? It becomes important, and it's an indication of priorities. So I think that's what we learned, and we did more and more community work to try and understand this in order to have a greater and greater impact on women's lives and to encourage them to make that impact themselves, which is what the whole question of empowerment meant to us. It was trying to find out the priorities of women that they were willing to organise around, and therefore improve their lives from that standpoint. I think those were interesting years in that sense, even

while still operating as a kind of think tank and doing some policy work around those same issues of social justice, and the linkages between social justice and the way the economy is run, governance, and ultimately women's representation.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 18:59

And what was your approach to find out what women's priorities were? Was it in research discussion groups, surveys?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 19:08

It was a lot of discussion groups, and in every sort of activity that we had, to listen for it [in] any activity involving women. And so if women indicated that they really felt that markets in a particular area would improve their economic situation, in the process of trying to assist them with advocating for the establishment of markets in ways that would make a difference to their work, we would be consulting with them all along the way. They would be involved in the advocacy. They would be saying what they thought would work, what they thought wouldn't work and why. And so it was a way of organising that constantly tried to involve them. So our role really was to also understand, which I really think is important for policy work, from a macro point of view, why some of the things that they were saying might have limitations. Let me give you a concrete example. In a particular area we worked, I would call perhaps, semi-rural, only because it's in Lagos, it was actually very rural at the time. We were interested in women reviving some of the traditional activities that they have been engaged in, and that were a source of income for them. And looking at the textile industry, they were enthusiastic, they were like, "oh, this is what our foremothers did. We think it would improve the economy, and if we had a market we would trade in these goods." But you could see that the influx of cheap Chinese products and imitations, were not going to make it that easy. It wasn't as simple as we wish we could revive some of these traditional things, we still have the skills. It was more looking at the global economy, looking at the Nigerian government policy that needed to support those kinds of local industries, and understanding the impact it would have on their activities, and communicating that to them. So that was sort of a two way process where we put in that macro input and they understood it perfectly. You know, it's a challenge to us to explain it. And they can see some of the impacts of it in some of the markets that they went to. They themselves said "Oh, yes, we buy shoes for our children and they fall apart in, you know, four weeks, especially in the rainy season. So our shoes, which seem a lot more expensive, made in the eastern part of Nigeria, are actually much sturdier." So they were learning all that through experience, having seen cheap shoes in the market, they are imported, but they could see very soon that the quality wasn't the same. So it was a two way learning process all along, I would say. So we engage them sometimes through focus group discussions, through consultations, but also in the process of trying to set up different projects and trying to engage in advocacy together, we necessarily learned what were their priorities. And, in fact, how we could do our advocacy to have the impact we wanted on their lives, and on all our lives actually.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 22:59

And so was reproductive health still part of this broader sense of empowerment? Or did it kind of vary depending on the project or where you were or women's priorities?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 23:10**

It was still part of it, but defined differently, because we rarely found that the women focused completely on reproductive health. So, they were very interested in having their blood pressure measured. And that's an important part of reproductive health as well. But it's not defined in the same way as it might have been defined in advocacy terms, or by Western women. So this is what I mean when I say that their own priorities and how they would define reproductive health and rights, and what the key issues were taught us quite a lot. So for them, high blood pressure was a reproductive health issue, stress was a reproductive health issue, because it did affect them, even in the reproductive years; stress related to income generation was a reproductive health issue. So you got to meetings when you ask them these things and they would express it. When you engaged in the discussion, you could understand the linkages. But where they started - you know, to go in and try to talk to them, for example, about contraception, about abortion, as identified as "reproductive health issues," - generally didn't work. Entry points were very important. And that we learned. And whichever entry points you took - it was often easier if it was their priority - to get to the reproductive health issues that then mattered. And so in childbirth, they wanted a clinic, they wanted it nearby enough. They were concerned about the costs of having children. And so we were interested in going into advocacy around what sort of free services should exist for women. And ultimately, the government, especially at the primary health care level took on some of these issues of free access for women, especially women who are pregnant, to various kinds of services, having blood pressure measured, having blood sugar measured, and having some of those tests that are key in those reproductive years.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 25:26**

Right. So it's starting from this point of social justice rather than any one issue.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 25:31**

Yes, starting from the point of the issues that concern them in their day-to-day lives. So you know, it wasn't - abortion was not an issue all by itself that they focused on, neither was contraception. It was related to maybe income generation related to "Okay, I just had a child, I might not be ready for another one". You couldn't come at those issues as issues in and of themselves like that, if you see what I mean. Yeah.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 26:04**

Yeah, very much. That's a really interesting way to put it.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 26:08**

Entry points are critical in community work. Otherwise, they create all kinds of misunderstandings and impressions. They look at "why are these people coming to talk about our sexuality?" I mean, it is just so strange, even to me, I must tell you. You know, it's like a kind of

voyeurism, because the entry point is not smooth, the entry point just doesn't flow with everyday life.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 26:37**

And are there kind of taboos around talking about that, especially with people from outside of the community?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 26:44**

It could be, but I really think that beyond the taboos -- because we discovered it was actually not taboo. I mean, some of the work related and some of the partners we had in terms of the community-based work they did, especially in the Ibadan area. I remember a particular partner organisation we had and one of the founders was on the EMPARC board. It was interesting, because I'm a lawyer, but I don't often go to customary courts. And she was like, the issues that some of these women raised at the customary court level, and the way it's expressed, shows you that the taboos we think, actually don't exist. It's the middle class women that might have more inhibitions around those issues. And so she, I remember she at that time gave an example and since then I have verified it in some of the customary court issues that I've come across. A woman who went to customary court and her suit was basically about: he wants to turn me into a prostitute, he's not sleeping with me. She wasn't shy. So the idea that somehow - oh they're so inhibited, these things are taboos culturally - it's not true. They're much less inhibited than the middle class women, and much more practical and down to earth. So I think we had a lot to learn about that. And as I said, it's more about entry points, and what is a priority at that point in their life? It's understanding that, rather than going with preconceived notions of what should be an advocacy issue, if you see what I mean, that was formulated perhaps in a different context, so they may be the same issues eventually, but the way in which you approach and come to them can sometimes be quite different.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 28:41**

Right. And so, EMPARC, you mentioned that you kind of continued, I guess over a decade.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 28:52**

Oh, yeah.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 28:52**

I see 15 years or something like that? And then where did you go from there?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 28:59**

Well, I took a break in 1999. I had a fellowship. And the dream was to write up and review the whole experience of EMPARC and some of my activities in reproductive health and how they linked with social justice. That was the dream, I must say, I never fully did it the way I wanted to, but after that break, I came back. And I guess at that point in time, because of partly funding difficulties and just a kind of exhaustion concerning how to run a nonprofit advocacy and policy

centre in the climate that I was living in at the time, and looking for partners and looking for people who would take it on...because the original concept of EMPARC was a rotating, executive directorship. I didn't get that, and today of course, I understand it was a very important learning experience, I would do it differently in terms of how we structure the vehicles through which we work. I think it was a very important learning experience. And as I move forward in my work, I think it's very important to address that from the beginning. How do you structure the vehicle through which you work? And how do you prepare for transition? You know, how do you prepare the next generation of leaders to take over? How do you build stronger institutions? How do these organisations keep going for a longer time? And how do they feed into movements? I think that is extremely important. To some extent, because of modern technology, we have seen more and more of that happening, even if at the level of social media rather than actual institution building, if that makes sense.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 31:09

And you said funding difficulties, too. So where was the funding coming from? And what were the key challenges in that regard?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 31:17

I think we were too dependent in a sense on foundation funding, not exploring enough of other sources of funding, and having some difficulty at the time tapping into local funding, as well as income generating activities, which I actually believe are very important in running successful organisations. I believe being dependent on funding, whether it's from foundations, whether it's from corporations or other such sources, isn't enough. I think there must be some measure of income generation. When I look at the the nonprofit scene in Nigeria today, you can see that that happened with some of the nonprofits. I think and dare to say that we were probably amongst the earliest, in terms of EMPARC, but we didn't make the most of it. Because towards the end, we did get support for one of our community projects in particular, in a village to build a centre. We owned our own building. So I think I see now looking around many nonprofits trying to own their own buildings, and even trying to share facilities in terms of renting them out. I think these are all important issues of sustainability, trying to have products for which they charge a token, like even legal services. I think these are the ways in which ultimately, these organisations can be sustainable, because we live in a country and an economy where that kind of nonprofit work and structure is not valued, and it's definitely not supported by government. I think in a lot of other countries, government is a big supporter of the nonprofit sector, whether it's an advantage or disadvantage, but at least they do have certain regular streams of income, even though they change if the government changes sometimes. But I think the sustainability of advocacy organisations and even generally movements is important, when they are not huge movements that take a membership fee, because that's the other way - when members donate various facilities and they pay an annual fee. These kinds of nonprofits that came up in the early 90s were not conceived of that way. But I think that we have learned along the way that sustainability and some income generation does not detract at all from the nonprofit kind of ethos. It's income generation so that you can keep some of your activities going, and so that you're sustainable, and

you're not being, in a sense, influenced too much by any one group of people. So I think those were important lessons in how to organise and keep going. They're still very important today, of course, too many nonprofits are still too dependent for large amounts of the funding from foundations. I think we need to diversify significantly.

**Nicole Bourbonnais**

Yeah, I mean, that makes sense. And so after EMPARC, is that when you went back to do your PhD or was there anything in between?

**Adetoun Ilumoka**

It is. So EMPARC continued even when I went to do my PhD because I thought I'd take some time out. But it turned out to be much more than that. It took longer than I thought, and it took a lot more energy than I thought. So after I think 2008, effectively, EMPARC sort of went into a kind of dormancy, let me put it that way, because I couldn't cope with a transnational kind of engagement. It also indicated that that way of working -- because some of the key people who worked with me at EMPARC either joined other nonprofits or established their own. So I think in a sense, the work it started, in some respects, continued in that way, but it meant that the organisation itself didn't necessarily continue easily. Yes. So that was a lesson about transitions and building longer term institutions that I think many nonprofits still have to grapple with.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 36:09**

Right.

**Adetoun Ilumoka 36:10**

I went into teaching law briefly again, you know, I started out teaching law at the University of Jos. Over the years I went more and more into research in social justice and women's health and women's rights. And then, after the PhD, I went more in the direction now, still very focused on social justice, of teaching law. So I taught for a while in law schools, and only really stopped last year. 2020, I think was my last law teaching job year. And who knows, I may still continue my research in that field. But I think it will always be linked to issues of social justice, they are very much my interest: the way in which law raises social justice issues, the way in which law can promote social justice, the way in which it doesn't, and what can be done about it. I think those are all issues that have always fascinated me [more] than looking at law as some sort of fixed thing that we just apply.

**Nicole Bourbonnais 37:34**

And what made you want to do a PhD?

**Adetoun Ilumoka 37:37**

Ah, actually, that's interesting. I wanted to further my research in areas I was really interested in, I wanted to deepen my research, and I wanted to spend time focusing on some of those issues and writing about them. And I just thought that a PhD presented the opportunity to do this. With

hindsight, I think maybe I could have tried it without going to do a PhD. But I think what that gives you, generally the academic world gives you, is the ability and the time to focus on that kind of research. If you try to do it whilst continuing to run a law practice, to run a nonprofit, it's that much more difficult, I think. So that was the thing. At the end of it with all the difficulties I faced, unexpected difficulties, if I can say so, in the PhD, because I really thought I was going to enjoy this PhD. I started a PhD in 1988, actually, whilst I was teaching at the University of Jos, at the University of Lagos, but that didn't work either. I was young, I was probably impatient. The process was awfully slow. They hadn't graduated that many PhDs because of a rather bureaucratic setup at that university. So I abandoned it and I went back to my teaching without it, because we didn't have to have a PhD to teach law. It was many, many years later that it became a requirement in many law faculties in Nigeria that you needed to have a PhD. So that is why I went to do the PhD. That was your question. First, it was just - I got time to focus and write, I thought it would be easier. At the end of it, I must say, I was happy. I didn't wind up doing the PhD in the area I wanted to do it. But it was nonetheless extremely interesting and a great privilege to actually be able to focus research in that depth, read and write. So that was why I went to do a PhD.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 39:54

Right, and then currently what are you working on? You said your last teaching job was in 2020.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 40:02

Yes, and that just has to do with I guess, a combination of things, stage I'm at in my life and in my career, and trying to decide what next. I've always loved teaching. But now teaching for me, it wouldn't be looking for what you would call in the West tenure-track jobs, it would be contract now, at my age. But beyond that, I actually would like to be able to continue my research without necessarily being involved in that much teaching in a university setting. And there are more and more options for that opening up, as I've discovered. So I'm working currently, and I've been for the past few months in a nonprofit that focuses on community based work. And there, I had also hoped to be able to combine my interest in community work with also writing about that experience, and contributing to research on community work, and even social justice issues in the community, like income-stability and health. Interestingly enough, I thought, this job would give me the opportunity to do that. So as I said before, there are many vehicles. So one is looking for a vehicle, but it's really the issues you want to work on, and the things you want to do that matter at the end of the day. I think this is where I am at now, finding the right vehicle that makes it easier, so you don't have to leave stressed in the process of doing that and so you can actually earn a living. It's the challenge, isn't it?

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 41:56

Always that detail, that key detail. Being able to earn a living as well.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 42:02

Yes, doing both at the same time. And I think part of the key to that is doing more partnerships. Working together in better ways with like-minded people.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 42:15

It's so interesting, I think most of the women I've interviewed so far for this project, have a similar kind of desire to be in both worlds, to be involved in communities and to have that research or speak to some of these other larger questions, to kind of straddle those two worlds.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 42:35

Oh, yes, they're critical. Otherwise, your research is kind of, dare I say, sterile? And probably at the beginning, I have always thought - I guess that's why we got the name of EMPARC - that your research must be relevant to the communities in which you live and relevant to the people in that community in terms of the issues being raised, the problems being solved. It comes out of real life, or it should, and should link back to real life. And so I guess that is much of the motivation. How are we going to improve the societies in which we live? How do we intervene? We've been so privileged, in a sense, to have a certain education, to have access to certain forms of power. And how are we going to use this to have an impact on our societies? So I think that's where many of us started out.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 43:36

Well, I think that pretty much sums up nicely, I think, a lot of the perspective and ideas that you've shared over these interviews. I wonder if there's anything else you want to add, any other comments, before we finish?

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 43:51

No, not really. Thank you very much for the opportunity to rethink it. Because sometimes you don't take the time to sit down and think through, and it's interesting when someone else asks you the questions. I think it's something we should do more and more of, even internally, even within Nigeria. So much important and rich work has been done by women leaders, some that they don't even count amongst themselves. And so I look forward to more and more of these kinds of history projects, so we can document some of the intimate aspects of those experiences for generations to come, I think it's important. It's an important part of writing women's history, and in a sense ensuring that in difficult times, we're not actually written out of history, which so often happens.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 44:54

Or we get left with just what was written on paper.

**Adetoun Ilumoka** 44:58

Right, that too.

**Nicole Bourbonnais** 45:01

Which misses a lot. Okay, well thank you so much.