

CANADIAN-NIGERIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS ENGAGEMENTS: NATURE, ATTAINMENTS, PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS

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Tell us about your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

I received my Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 2013, got called to the Nigerian Bar in 2014, and obtained my Master of Laws from the University of Lagos in 2017. My Master's thesis studied the role of United Nations peacekeepers in perpetuating sexual violence during African conflicts and consequent peacekeeping missions.

After my master's degree, I worked full-time as an associate legal counsel at a reputable law firm in Lagos for a few years. I had always wanted to further my legal education, so I was glad when I was admitted to York University for my Ph.D. in 2019.

Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My thesis examines the bilateral relationship between Canada and Nigeria from 1999 to 2024. I analyze the ways that the heads of State and representatives of these countries have promoted the rights of women in their international engagements with each other.

Although the relationships have fluctuated owing to the policies and political orientations of individual leaders, I have identified considerable women's rights interactions between Canada and Nigeria dating back to the early after Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule. These interactions have typically been embedded within Canada's broader international assistance initiatives to Global South countries. It is vital to understand how these initiatives relate with those countries. The discussion becomes particularly relevant from Prime Minister Trudeau's tenure onward, with Canada's adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). The Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), an aspect of Canada's FFP, serves as a key framework through which Canada supports its women's rights initiatives in Nigeria, and has helped shape present-day Canada-Nigeria relations.

What inspired you to do this work?

Personal experiences as a Nigerian woman, and stories of other Nigerian women in my life, have inspired my work on women's rights. This advocacy began during my undergraduate studies where I examined the various ways that

domestic violence affects women, men and children, finding unsurprisingly that domestic violence affects women predominantly.

My master's thesis expanded on this, when I examined select African countries and highlighted the ways that armed conflicts expose women to sexual violence, especially by peacekeeping officers meant to protect them. The dissertation revealed how gender intersects with other critical matters such as conflict and international intervention, in creating challenges for women.

My doctoral research is therefore a compound effect of my previous research and lived experience as a woman in Nigeria, a country which has remained persistently patriarchal. The patriarchy manifests in many ways: in women's marginalization in political governance, strong oppositions to female leadership, and societal expectations and norms that confine and limit women to so-called "feminine" roles such as caregiving, petty trading, teaching, and domestic work.

I continually advocate that women's rights should take a core position in foreign relations, alongside traditional priorities like trade and security. FFPs, such as Canada's, provide an interesting background to review how foreign policy implemented through gendered lenses can benefit women without diminishing other foreign policy goals.

What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. National interests influence states' bilateral relationships. A plethora of studies show the inconsistency of Canadian engagements with African states, and this is largely attributed to ideological differences between state leaders and policy frameworks of dominant political parties. While national interests expectedly

expectedly guide foreign policy priorities, certain subject matters particularly human rights and gender equality, should transcend political calculations.

2. Somewhat related to the above, the Nigerian proverb "*life be like standing fan; e blow you small, e go blow your neighbour small*" speaks to the globalized nature of the world. What affects one affects all, as has been seen in recent global challenges and trends such as pandemics and unpredictable economic conditions. The ambivalence that shows up in the continued "othering" of certain parts of the world, namely the Global South, is problematic. International solidarity is an imperative and not merely benevolence.

3. Women's rights continue to matter. While certain countries have reached significant heights in promoting gender equality, data shows that no country has reached full equality. Existing research also tells us that this goal is decades away from realization. Drawing from aforementioned points, no country can fully enjoy undisrupted rights until all others do. Collective efforts on all levels of society is required in ensuring that women and men experience equality, and that no factors – gender, class, age, race and other intersecting qualities – detract from them.

4. Development studies continue to detail appropriate ways of conducting development, with experts advising that aid beneficiaries be lead agents in their development processes. In the case of Canada and Nigeria, foreign programs for the furtherance of women's rights must meaningfully and actively involve Nigerians and Nigerian institutions for sustainability and real impact. This approach is essential in ensuring that partnerships do not result in a misalignment of interests.

Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

The nature of my research entails that I collect data from key stakeholders in Nigeria and in Canada. Data collection can be cumbersome, more so when it is of a transnational and intercontinental nature. It has thus been additionally demanding to coordinate interviews with governmental and NGO/CSO officials across time zones and locations. Accommodating each respondent's preferences for communication (in-person meetings, virtual calls, phone interviews.) has been both time-consuming and resource-intensive.

I have also had challenges in accessing comprehensive, documented data as I trace information that dates back decades. The tendency for new governments to expunge or archive governmental data as new regimes come into power has made obtaining certain historical data difficult. Regrettably, the situation is often more challenging in Nigeria which struggles with inadequate documentation processes.

Tell us what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

My research deals with real, past and present experiences and the interactions of actors in Canada and Nigeria. It also predicts prospects for future navigations. It is rewarding to discover hitherto unknown information that sheds light on why things are the way they are or to see how this information has contributed to present outcomes. I have also enjoyed conducting research that corrects erroneous assumptions and conclusions, and interrogating processes previously accepted as commonplace in Canadian-Nigerian relations.

Through my comparative analysis of the relationship between Nigeria and Canada, several differences between the two countries also spring to light. In particular the fact that one is categorised as an industrialised, G7 member with significant international influence, while the other is categorised as a developing country, plagued with cumbersome vestiges of postcolonialism. These insights enrich my understanding of how power dynamics and historical experiences not only shape lives but influence international law and relations.

More importantly, the overall goal of contributing to the advancement of women's rights, particularly in Nigeria makes my work meaningful and gratifying.

What advice, lessons, or tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?

1. Create a support system: family, friends, faith, whatever it is that gives you hope and cheer. Keep them close and gratefully welcome their help whether they offer it or you demand it!
2. Your PhD is an aspect of your life; do not neglect all the other equally important parts. Do not lose yourself in this little bit. Enrich your life as much as possible whilst doing the work. The experiences/hobbies will come in helpful when you're PhD-exhausted.
3. Refuse to wallow in disappointment when things don't go as planned, as they often will. Be forgiving and gracious to yourself. Learning is a continuous process. No one truly knows it all. Do not forget to also stay humble when pride creeps in.
4. Ensure that you have an accountability system: people that prod you on, so you do not lose track of your goals. Stay in constant

contact with folks who can sharpen or critically interrogate the quality of your work.

5. Let your research be on subjects that interest you. While contributing to knowledge gaps is essential as a guide to choosing a research area, be sure the entirety of your work is one that does not leave you overly beleaguered.

6. Academic work, especially a PhD, can be a slow process. Painfully so, sometimes, even when you are doing all you know to do. Refuse to be intimidated when others race past you. Be patient with the work. Be gentle on your mind. Be proud of yourself.

What are the next steps in your research?

My immediate focus is to complete my dissertation and take a necessary academic rest period. Thereafter, I plan to translate research findings into policy recommendations and pursue further research to expand my scholarly work.