

## Women's Networks: An Exploration Into Their Use For Empowerment And Social Change

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'networking' has gained the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and business people alike, because network analysis serves to identify how individuals link together to achieve targeted goals, how information is distributed, who are the key people, and how group decisions are made.<sup>1</sup> But much of this valuable research has yet to take culture into explicit account.

This paper will focus on women's networks through a literature review of cross-cultural studies on women as well as an analysis of my field experience with networking among African women university students while I was an exchange student at the University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> The task of reviewing the literature is arduous; it is broad, diverse and often unfocused. Concepts of networking must be gleaned from the studies; there is as yet no generally accepted definition of the term 'network'. The definition is being refined by each new empirical study. Through this review, which predominantly focuses on the United States and the continent of Africa, I hope to derive a composite definition in a way that avoids the common pitfall of cultural blindness.

The focus on women's networks is particularly salient to women researchers because network analysis explores the tools women use to influence their environment or create an environment to recognise their achievements in societies which often ignore that the key are social and political actors within society. These networks are, thus, women created and designed. It is also significant to examine women's networks because they seem to occur universally. Yet, I do not want to imply that this means universal equivalence. Indeed, there exist a variety of network types within any given culture, in different classes.<sup>3</sup>

The central question to be explored here is: if women do define their networks (the participants, the functions and the goals), should we expect that women can or will use those networks in a strategy to effect change in their lives and the larger society? Or, does the environment (the society) which defines women through its policies and ideology serve to limit how women will define themselves and their networks so that networks merely serve to maintain the status quo?

In the United States, the surge of interest in women's networks is often attributed to feminism and the women's liberation movement<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, networking is not a feminist phenomenon; it is not even exclusively a female

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Phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Yet feminist theory and methodology have made networks visible and analytically significant where they had been neglected or deemed trivial by conventional social analysis. A feminist emphasis recognises the need for women to define their reality, with the support of other women.<sup>6</sup> It envisions women helping to empower other women. A feminist analysis does not seek merely to describe women's lives, but to understand in a more coherent fashion the reasons why women choose particular strategies and to analyse the differential success of those strategies. Women's networks reveal one of the critical ways in which "the personal is political." It is a strategy for use by individual women, to politicise their personal experiences and to share awarenesses learned through communicating their shared experience into the broader community. Because women's networks do not occur in a vacuum, but in an environment which influences them and defines them, I will examine networks within the context to the 'public/private' dichotomy.

### NETWORKING IN 'PUBLIC/PRIVATE' SPHERES

The strategies women employ to influence their surroundings reflect how women define their needs and the range of influence they seek within their environment. Thus, networking does not occur in a vacuum. Women are actively choosing strategies to contend with or to change the conditions in which they live. Their environment falls under state control, even in remote areas. How the state defines women, their roles in society, and the value it places on their contribution is critical to women. Such definitions often undervalue women's contributions and increases their oppression. The definitions focus on women's reproductive roles and either ignore or devalue women's productive activities.

The European conquest and creation of various colonial administrations in Africa is particularly illustrative on this point. We know that African women in pre-colonial societies actively participated in society through trade, agricultural production, their roles in kinship networks, and economic contributions to the household. Pre-colonial societies had no strict delineation of political, economic or social institutions. Among Yoruba women, for instance, this meant that they had a political voice through kinship structures and their economic roles; they possessed the ability to levy sanctions.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the colonial period, women used their sanction power to attempt to influence colonial administrators. In the Aba Women's War of 1929, Igbo women used their sanction of "sitting on a man" to change colonial taxation policies. Such policies were instituted to force Igbo men into the wage economy and to make them responsible for paying the tax levied against women who were their wives. Such policies ignored the internal economic divisions of the household, women's financial contributions, and defined women as dependents on the men they were married to. Women were defined in terms of so-called private, domestic roles; politics was defined as public and, therefore, the male domain. The women's actions did not conform to the colonial administrators' notion of politics, and they responded by disregarding the women's protests. This scene was repeated across the continent. While I do not

want to suggest that pre-colonial structures were inherently more beneficial for women, it does illustrate the role colonial administrators played in a shift towards defining women solely in relation to their reproductive roles. The colonial period also represents an alteration of African societies into a greater structural delineation of institutions.

Throughout most of rural Africa today, production continues to be largely subsistence based despite the introduction of large-scale commercial farming. Women play primary roles in food production. Labour continues to be divided by gender and age. Men are often drawn into urban areas in search of wage employment to earn cash to participate in a commoditised economy. Women, the elderly, and children remain behind to farm the marginal land available for subsistence production. Women may rely on the sale of surplus produce to earn cash to meet their financial obligations to the household. Failure to produce a surplus may preclude women's financial contributions from men. Through this process, women's status gained through productive activities diminishes; they lose their independent status as income earners.

Foreign development agencies, working in conjunction with now sovereign state bureaucracies, introduce rural development projects ostensibly to improve rural life and increase agricultural production. This generally has meant the introduction of cash crops or green revolution techniques provided to men, following the western concept of farming as a male activity, completely disregarding the reality of farm labour in Africa. This is often accompanied by land reform measures geared towards privatising landholdings in the name of male 'head of house'. Through such policies, widely documented in the development literature, women's productive roles are ignored. Women farmers are, rather, associated with subsistent, unproductive agriculture. Policies assume that to increase agricultural productivity, men must farm using modern techniques. Women's contributions are devalued. Women's projects, if they exist, are oriented towards health and reproductive programmes.

**Thus, western development agencies in co-operation with African governments play a role in defining the 'public' and 'private' with respect to women.** The 'public' is economically important and is political. It excludes women. The 'private' is the domain of women who are dependent on male household heads; it is outside of politics; women are apolitical. It is evident, however, that the state actively defines 'private' relations and decides when it will intervene, based on state interest. This is clearly influence of the private sphere by the public. Can we not also assume that the domestic sphere (theoretically occupied by women) influences the public sphere? And, can we not also presume that public, political policies which are shaped by men incorporate their 'private' (stereotypic) definition of women into those public policies? Therefore, women and the private or domestic sphere are not apolitical at all. Mechanisms which attempt to fix women into a private sphere wholly ignore the different use of social interaction and resources within different cultural settings where women do indeed influence public decision-making. Several studies cite the ways in which women either seek to influence men or create an environment to celebrate their achievements.

Nelson argues that, despite sexual segregation in Middle Eastern societies,

women use their influence in basic economic and political institutions where kinship influences public figures<sup>10</sup>. Women use their social resources to negotiate marriage alliances, as controllers of produce or property, in supporting or rejecting male politicians, or in their authority within the family and household. Women's elaborate friendship networks exchange information vital to decision-making; this information is denied to men through segregation practices, but upon which men heavily depend. Middle Eastern women's solidarity groups also oversee women's conduct especially as it relates to sexual misconduct, in other instances, they use supernatural powers as saints, healers, or sorcerers, to exercise power over men.

Nelson's Study brings to the fore the importance of Kinship, and the use of social resources in the political process. While it focuses on women's segregated sphere, it does not thereby assume this sphere is devoid of influence, or apolitical. She argues that the paucity of information on women's ability to influence public action is perpetuated by western male researchers who lack access to women's activities, and since they are 'invisible', they lack value. O'Barr is equally critical of western male definitions of politics and political actors, which rely on the visible activities of men in bureaucratic structures. This bias presumes that the household is private, except for the assumed male head, who connects the private with the public. Because they refuse to examine the interests within the household, male researchers certainly fail to see that women's strategies influence their surroundings and political life.

Hirschmann has made an important contribution towards understanding how men's private (often stereotypic) definitions of women become a part of policy.<sup>12</sup> In his study, Hirschmann interviewed 90, predominantly male, civil servants of the Malawi government to gain information regarding government policies on rural women he found:

Many Malawian men - when asked - are more than ready to explain how much they appreciate the role of women in agricultural production; they will acknowledge that women are in many cases responsible for most work related to food production and they are vital to the rural economy. In their view of 'social reality' they appear to see women as fully participative, essential to both home and farm, to reproduction and production. Yet by the time programmes emerge, and are executed, they generally reflect a far more limited evaluation of the role of women, as homemaker, seeming to ignore their productive contributions to the economy<sup>13</sup>.

Malawian government policies towards women centre on their reproductive function because of 'biological vulnerability'. Other policies seek to reserve places in secondary education for young women. Aside from these two examples, women are referred to as 'homemakers' or 'farmers wives'.

Few women hold positions of power in planning or policymaking within the Malawian government. There is no section in any planning agency to prepare projects on women or to evaluate projects in terms of their impact on women. Women in senior positions are in small, 'soft' ministries of community

development, social welfare and health.

Hirschmann identifies several types of attitudes prevalent among male Malawian bureaucrats in their approaches to women's issues:

1. Men are superior to women; the reasons are attributed to tradition, nature, or Christianity. Public policy should not interfere with "established patterns of behavior in the private sphere."
2. Men think little about women in development issues because, in Malawi, there is no sex discrimination; you cannot segregate farming into men and women.
3. To the extent that women are disadvantaged, it is their own fault, and they should do something to rectify it.
4. The emphasis on women's issues is something the west is trying to foist on African governments. Women's "emancipation must come slowly and carefully or else there will be confusion"; and
5. There is an evolutionary process at work. Because the west is now developed, it can bother about the exploitation and subordination of women. There are still too many problems in the developing world to worry about women too much<sup>14</sup>.

In sum, the deeply gendered policies instituted by European colonial administrators which one sought separate definitions of production, reproduction, politics, social relations and the family, and two overlaid those with a belief in a sexual division of labour, were handed to many African governments at independence. The power transferred from European men to African men heading local bureaucracies was bolstered by delineated, male-defined institutions to assist in maintaining or establishing a comparative advantage over African women. Men are capable of using their roles as policymakers, utilising their private (stereotypic) views of women, through the process of bureaucratisation, to emerge with policies that certainly do not conform to their actual knowledge about women's productive roles but serve to create and perpetuate unequal advantage. It is my assertion that male-defined, male-controlled institutions dichotomise through ideology and policy 'public' and 'private' spheres which in fact are nonexistent.

Within this context, then, and rather than belabouring how oppressed women around the globe really are, I prefer to explore the strategies women employ to influence their surroundings and improve their positions. To contend with daily routine, women often organise informal networks; to expand their sphere of influence, women sometimes turn to formal networks. I will first turn to the informal networks.

### INFORMAL NETWORKS

Informal networks are characterised by a lack of legal (i.e. jural-political) recognition; they have a diffuse structure, a fluid hierarchy; they are multi-purpose and flexible.<sup>15</sup> Informal networks function without specifically-identified leaders, meetings or agenda. They may sponsor specific events to celebrate holidays or rites of passage, but these activities are peripheral to the group's overall focus, which often revolves around sharing daily tasks, companionship, child care exchange, co-operative marketing, or work groups. To cohere, the informal network must meet the needs of the members as they

themselves define them. The goals and functions of informal networks change according to the needs of the members, and may be multifaceted. Their authority is expressed by their ability to impose sanctions on network members or beyond. Sanctions may take the form of gossip, expulsion, or exerting influence on political circles which might be male dominated.

The participants of informal networks are generally kin, fictive kin, neighbours, friends, and sometimes co-workers. Groups are variously referred to as 'informal networks', informal social networks', mutual aid groups', mutual support groups', or reciprocal exchange networks'.<sup>16</sup> Informal networks assist in socialisation, transition through rites of passage, as well as deep, abiding friendships.<sup>17</sup> Neighbours play a vital role in performing day-to-day activities.<sup>18</sup> For poor women and women from ethnic and racial groups marginalised in a society, networks of friends, neighbours and kin are used to survive a harsh social climate. Several studies discuss similar networks among Afro-American women.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the types of economic exchange discussed earlier, activities may surround gaining access to public means of support, such as social security or welfare payments.<sup>20</sup> For middle-class women, neighbourhood networks may be used to enhance their children's educational opportunities or to protect their privileged lifestyle.<sup>21</sup> These networks concentrate on women's roles as mothers and wives.

Networks often assist women through transitional phases in their lives when women move to an urban area, go away to school, or migrate to a new country. Several studies explore these circumstances. Smith-Rosenberg examines the informal networks of women in mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century America.<sup>22</sup> At that time, young women were integrated especially into the networks of their mothers. As young women left home to attend school, their mothers' extended networks assisted in their adjustment to school. Meanwhile, new networks were established among classmates. Through the use of extended networks, the socialisation of appropriate norms and values continued. Seller identifies a similar process for European immigrant women to the United States whose contacts within the United States established them in ethnic communities through housing, jobs, churches, friendship and marriage. Seller also explores the informal networks of immigrant Latina women through United States government immigration procedures and in job counseling. The networks of these immigrant women in the home country cared for the migrants' children.<sup>23</sup>

Do informal networks play a greater or lesser role for women's transition and socialisation when they choose alternative lifestyles? It becomes a more conscious decision on their part to seek others who share a common condition and values. Women who choose alternative lifestyles may either reject or be rejected by kin. In a study on rural-urban migration in Botswana, researchers discovered that attitudes of villagers towards male migrants were respectful whereas female migrants were viewed with suspicion. Migrant women in this study were single, widowed or divorced. They migrated to gain greater freedom from familial responsibilities, and responded in interviews that they would not return to their villages.<sup>24</sup>

Living in an environment which stresses adherence to narrowly-construed

roles can be difficult for women. Within a rural Africa context, where a woman may not have access to adequate support for herself and the means to communicate with others sharing a similar situation, the difficulty of establishing a replacement network constrains her ability to migrate. If she does move to the city, she may seek informal networks with women who live in close proximity to her.

Nelson illustrates the transitional role that informal networks play for urban migrant women residing in the shantytown of Mathare Valley, outside Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>25</sup> This study looks at *buzaa* (beer) brewers who share a common condition through their illegal economic activity. Women entering the community are adopted into a woman's house, taught a stage in the brewing process, as well as how to survive in the valley. When police raids occur, women help one another hide the beer and brewing equipment. If women are arrested, their informal network will bail them from jail, help to pay fines, and then re-establish her trade.

The women's solidarity is heightened by the hostility directed towards them from the outside community. They are viewed as prostitutes and ridiculed by their families. But while relations with kin may be strained, this does not prevent the children of Mathare Valley women from spending periods of time in the home villages of their mothers. In this circumstance, the primary informal networks, developed through shared economic activities as well as physical proximity, provided the strongest bonds among these migrant women; yet, the networks tend to be fluid because of the mobility of individual members. Contact with village kin networks is minimal.

Other studies describe the isolation confronted by some migrant women, especially when they accompany men who are their husbands. Strange discusses the isolation of women in Malay towns.<sup>26</sup> Through a man's education and contacts, he may get a job in the city, and brings the woman to whom he is married. She lacks employment opportunities in the city, and is further cut off from her informal network who would assist in her daily household duties. Women in such a situation are forced into greater economic dependence and reliance upon their husbands. While it would seem likely that women sharing such a situation would form a neighbourhood network, this is not discussed by Strange. Oppong, Okali and Houghton investigate a similar phenomenon among Ghanaian women who resettle with their husbands in established cocoa communities. Again, women lack access to kin networks, agricultural land and wage labor, although they may be employed on plots allotted to their husbands.<sup>27</sup>

Coupled with their isolation, women in such circumstances face role conflict over their roles as wives and mothers. This is particularly true among elites<sup>28</sup> in urban areas where western ideology is more prevalent. Women are encouraged to define themselves as wives and mothers and accept economic dependence on men who are their husbands.

This section has explored the participants and functions of informal networks. Kin, fictive kin, neighbours and friends are active in daily networks. Neighbours and local community members predominate where women might be separated from kin through physical distance or lifestyle. The functions of

informal networks are many and varied. They operate as a source of companionship, assistance in day-to-day life, easing the transition to new surroundings, and in attaining employment or public assistance. Women who are isolated from their support networks and income-earning opportunities face a growing dependence on male contributions to the household. This may occur as a result of inadequate opportunities to network with female peers or to achieve status derived from an increased reliance on their husbands.

Networking may be altered when women perceive that their relations with men are advantageous to their status. They may be isolated from other women and solely responsible for domestic tasks (unless they hire domestic help); otherwise, they may participate in networks which seek to solidify class position. Thus, it appears that changing circumstances, particularly regarding economic activities or social status, will either lead women to form new networks based on their new needs, or promote isolation.

### Informal Networking: Ife Experience

The following discussion is a subjective report, a personal account of my initiation and absorption into the University of Ife (Unife) community as accomplished through my networks with women students. My experience is vastly different from many researchers in Africa, partly because my primary objective was not as a researcher but as a student. As such, it is not a theoretical discussion; it is descriptive. It nonetheless shares my impressions of interactions with women who are embarking on lives as adult women in Nigeria. They are in transition in many ways. They are seeking alternatives to their mothers' lives, and are torn between customary values and the influences of Euro-American ideology. It is a continuation of the historic struggle for African identity to survive western domination.

*Background.* Unife is located in rural southwestern Nigeria approximately three kilometers from the historic Yoruba town of Ile-Ife. Unife is one of the oldest of 19 universities in the country. It offers both liberal arts and science degrees in both graduate and undergraduate programmes.

Statistical records of student enrollment are generally unreliable. The Office of Planning recorded 9,489 students enrolled during the 1981–1982 school term; unofficially, that number rose to approximately 14,000.<sup>29</sup> Gender specific data is equally difficult to obtain, partly because enrollment figures have only recently been kept reflecting gender. Figures pertaining to women's enrollment can be gleaned from the housing records, although, this is also an inadequate measure. Because of an acute housing shortage on the Unife campus during the 1981–1982 academic year, friends would share their rooms with others who did not officially receive accommodations. This practice was referred to as 'pirating'. It was more acute in men's residence halls than women's, but both fail to accurately count hall residents. Nonetheless, 2,472 women were reported on housing records. Women students represent approximately 18–20% of the undergraduate population and 4–13% of the graduate student population.<sup>30</sup>

*Unife Women Students.* It is a difficult task to portray the 'typical' Unife

woman student without adequate statistics, yet I believe it is important to provide some background. Treading lightly, based on conversations and my impressions, I provide the following information:

The average Unife woman student during my stay was roughly between the ages of 18—23. Some older, married students also studied at Unife, relying on kinship networks to care for their children at home. Most of the women students were from the Yoruba ethnic group which predominates in southwestern Nigeria. She may have grown up in either Lagos or Ibadan, large urban centres in southwestern Nigeria. She was more likely to be Christian than Muslim. She was also likely to be studying in education or the social sciences, although law had become a popular field of study.

Young Nigerian women would hold many household responsibilities even if the family had household help, either hired or young extended family members from rural areas. Common duties would include marketing, meal preparation, cleaning, and watching younger brothers and sisters. Such tasks are time consuming and demanding. As a result, many women sought to study away from home. This would free time to devote to studies. It would also help to evade parental restrictions, particularly those imposed by mothers concerning social activities, dating, or riding in cars. Several students stated that their mothers expected them to be content to remain homebound except for special occasions. This caused considerable strain between the older and younger women. Mothers would strive to provide for the material well-being of their families through their income-earning capabilities, while providing a religious environment in the household. But the younger women were desirous of testing their wings.

The women students at Unife were often pre-occupied with western fashions, cosmetics, skin lighteners, hair straighteners, high heels, hats and romance novels. Their appearance was outwardly sophisticated. They were caught between two worlds. The lure of western life promised glamour but often conflicted with the customs and culture of Nigerian life. The conflict became particularly acute as the women looked forward to college graduation and life beyond.

I rarely encountered women students who did not expect to be married by their mid - to late—20s. Even more rarely did women expect to remain unmarried; that was not a viable option. There was a strong emphasis on bearing and rearing children. Several respondents expressed the desire to have from 2 to 4 children. They likely came from larger families.

Divorce, or separation, was not uncommon in the early 1980s in Nigeria. Many women students did not look forward to marriage because of an abiding distrust of men. Women realised that they had to rely on their own capabilities to provide for themselves and did not want to become too dependent on men. Nonetheless, they idealised Christian marriage as offering a way to success and happiness. Like their mothers, this younger generation expected to juggle family and career during their marriage to provide for the well-being of the household.

There was a tacit understanding that the best jobs would go to men, so women students did not appear to outwardly compete with male students. One woman told me that for a woman student to attempt to publish an article for the student law journal would be frivolous. Male students, she argued, would

comander reading materials making them unavailable for others. Travel to law libraries and contact with individuals who could assist students in their task was easier for male students. In the end, the woman did not envision that rewards for such an effort would equally accrue to her. She expressed that she would be judged, particularly by her future husband's family, on her attention to the home. Therefore, her identity was not to lie in what kind of lawyer she was, but rather what kind of homemaker and mother.

*Informal Networking.* Networking began for me prior to my arrival at the Unife campus. The IRSEP programme provided administrative contacts for me, but more importantly, with the named of friends of previous exchangees who would help in my settling in.

My initial network of friends were close friends of each other, or were related (sisters or cousins). They were friends from secondary school, or from their home town, and from the same ethnic group. Occasional adult network members (kin or friends of parents) were employees on campus. They were sometimes consulted on academic concerns, but more frequently for financial assistance.

The foremost task of informal networks at the beginning of the school term was to orient newcomers to the campus. There were few, if any, formal programmes for this purpose. My network helped me to locate professors and classes, assisted me in a foreboding registration process and in interpreting class schedules. My supplemental orientation included where to shop, where to eat, how to find health care, how to speak Yoruba or pidgeon English, how to wear traditional Nigerian dress, and how to cook Nigerian food.

Another formidable task at Unife was to secure housing in one of the campus hostels.<sup>31</sup> Network assistance eased the waiting and room allocation process which was fraught with bargaining, arguing and persuasion along the chain of command to the hall warden. One friend who I will call 'Ayo' had a particularly good relationship with one hall warden. Both assisted me in obtaining a room. Many other students sought Ayo's help in securing a room assignment.

For most of the term, I shared a room with four other women who were roughly ten years my junior. The room (designed for 3) was crowded with its 5 inhabitants and our paraphernalia—fans, lamps, cassette players, luggage, etc. Most women preferred to cook their meals rather than eat in the cafeteria. They brought small refrigerators, electric cookers, kerosene stoves, as well as cooking utensils. All items were stored in the room. Heavy appliance use was blamed for frequent power cuts; furthermore, it was a constant source of discord among hall residents. During periodic blackouts, we studied by candlelight in our room, often joined by friends without candles. The relationships among my roommates could best be described as cordial, but not close. Each women had more important networks outside the room, but there was a sharing of cooking utensils, cleaning, fetching water, or marketing tasks.

My informal networks were my primary source of socialisation into the university community. Women tended to spend the majority of their time together; they rarely seemed to spend time alone or with men. They saw my

independence, even my initial wandering around campus alone, as peculiar, if not inappropriate. My feminism caused even greater consternation; we seemed to be struggling with very different ideologies for our futures. Western fashion and romance novels, beauty contests, sexual harassment, and choice of lifestyle were some of the topics of intense debate. On feminist issues, I was frequently alone among the student population, except for Ayo. Therefore, I sought networks with other American or European women on campus.

Explicit directives in the socialisation process involved dealings with men, from faculty and administrators to students. We newcomers were advised not to meet privately with lecturers to avoid harassment. To ward off advances, women met professors in groups. Where advances had already been made, women students might use their networks to resolve the problem, sometimes to report it, but more frequently, it seemed, to seek emotional support. There was little accord between women faculty and women students. Several informants cited that women faculty, who were often married to male faculty, felt threatened by the possibility that women students sought liaisons with their husbands. This served to divide the female population without adequately questioning male involvement.

Informal networks at Unife displayed many of the characteristics outlined earlier in this paper. Participants were a mixture of friends, family, neighbors and classmates. A key element in what I will refer to as 'primary' informal networks were friends, kin and classmates who shared a common ethnic or geographic background. For example, students from other regions and ethnic groups of Nigeria (Igbo, Ibibio or Bendelite, for instance) found themselves in a minority position on campus. Ethnic identity and pride was very important. In their networks, students would celebrate rituals from their local area, including special foods, language, music and dress. They would also share transportation when travelling home or carry messages for one another. I hesitate to stress 'primary' networks; I do not want to create a hierarchy of networks or to say that close networks did not grow out of friendships with classmates from different ethnic groups, because they did. Nonetheless, there was a division. It was evident in the lack of understanding or knowledge of different ethnic groups and regions, which served to perpetuate stereotypic definitions or characterisations of individuals from various groups.

Another element which created close informal networks (and also formal ones, as we shall see), was religious affiliation. Religion for Nigerians is very important, especially for women.<sup>32</sup> Christianity is widely practiced; evangelical unions had a clear presence on the campus. Women who belonged to these unions spent considerable time together in prayer, in bible study, in daily chores and in study.

Ayo had many networks. Her age and experience as a senior student, her outgoing personality, and wide range of contacts from all levels of the hierarchy on campus made her a key person in her networks. She assisted several women in obtaining room assignments, was the key contact for her junior sister and friends, gave emotional support and food to many others. Younger members of her networks would reciprocate by helping with marketing, cooking, cleaning or obtaining books for her. Older members of her network (primarily friends of her

parents or kin) provided financial assistance, an opportunity to retreat from campus on a Sunday afternoon, or contacted her parents when necessary. It often appeared that Ayo channeled much more out to her networks than she received, at least from her peers. But, perhaps she had been assisted in her earlier years on campus, so that in her last year, she was reciprocating to younger members.

In conclusion, from such primary networks, women found emotional strength, friendship, and a sense of personal achievement. Networks create an atmosphere that permitted the release of tension, the exploration of ideas and mutual sharing. New members would be incorporated into a primary network when deeper friendship and mutual obligation developed. Other informal networks would function in less personal ways such as sharing class notes, sitting together in class, or distributing lecturer directives. As new interests would grow, or as ideas would change, networks would also change.

### THE TRANSITION FROM INFORMAL TO FORMAL NETWORKS

Silverman suggests that when women's networks expand their vision beyond the personal to broader political concerns, their networks formalize.<sup>33</sup> Her discussion presupposes the public/private dichotomy, is very western in perception, and not necessarily applicable in third world nations. For example, I would agree with her assertion that goals which extend beyond the immediate neighbourhood which seek a broader or more specific audience, are more easily accomplished through a formal structure. However, the idea that people more willingly confront their problems in the framework of a formal organisation does not hold true cross-culturally, as I know from my experience in Nigeria. There, feminist issues were far more easily discussed with colleagues at a conference I attended than in daily interaction with peers, but personal concerns and troubles were discussed in the supportive environment of the primary network.

Ladipo provides an example of the formalization of one rural women's network in Ile-Ife, Nigeria.<sup>34</sup> These women had been marginalised in their income-earning activities by the introduction of yellow maize into the local economy which became a men's cash crop. Women were appreciative of income generated to the community by the maize project; they wanted to be included in income-earning activities from the project. As a result, the Isoya project provided the women with processing and storage techniques. Women gained access to government funds through programmes for co-operative development, improved their literacy and numeracy skills, learned to deal with bankers, and government bureaucracies. To gain that access, they needed to formally organise into groups. Bukh provides another example of rural Ghanaian women's efforts to obtain a local health clinic. They formalised a network and registered with the national women's council.<sup>35</sup>

These Nigerian and Ghanaian women organised themselves into a formal network to gain access to public resources. Governments overall are blind to women's (or men's) small, informal groups; formalising gives public visibility and the opportunity to reach productive resources, in addition to learning skills

which enable them to better cope with their environment.

### FORMAL NETWORKS

Formal networks are distinct from informal ones in that their structure is generally more hierarchical, with a defined leadership and membership, who hold formal meetings at specific times for specific purposes. They may be larger than informal groups with less direct contact among individuals. However, this is not always true because, as noted above, formal networks often stem from informal ones. Formal networks may have names, constitutions (or at least a set of written goals), and they may charge membership dues. The most significant element of formal networks according to March and Taquq is that they are legally recognised by the state's jural-political structure.<sup>36</sup> The most obvious example of this is a group which either incorporates or files for non-profit status, or as in Bukh's study, registers with a national women's council.

A formal network is not synonymous with an association or organisation, however. An association represents the links between individuals (or groups) in a network, while the organisation provides the overall structure within which exchange occurs. 'Networking' on the other hand, is the flow among the links, but also beyond formal boundaries. A network by its very nature is more fluid than the structure of an organisation, and readily extends beyond it. However, the formal structure provides the basis for the shared interest which initially brings the individuals together, and helps to define the type of exchange that will occur. It is also likely that friendships, and informal networks, may grow out of the membership of a formal network. Thus, the boundaries of both types of networks remain in flux.

Given the complexities of today's world, and the greater distinction between institutions, it stands to reason that as 'modernisation' occurs, formal networks might replace informal ones. A formal structure with a name is more visible than an informal one. Informal network members may be isolated from one another, or lack sufficient knowledge to assist in problem solving. An informal network may formalise to reach a wider audience, a specific audience (of people unknown to them), or to gain access to productive resources. In fact, receipt of financial assistance (public or private) may be contingent upon filing registration forms and periodic financial statements.

Small but formally planned support groups have been significant for feminists in the United States who found they needed new networks to share their common concerns. Sometimes they may coalesce with local, national or even international groups. These coalitions attempt to reach a wide, specific audience concerned with a range of women's issues such as reproductive freedom, pay equity issues, sexual preference, special interests in education, employment or the arts. Broad-based coalitions serve to support women's financial and creative endeavours in an environment they define.

Coalition building is certainly more likely to occur in the United States than in Nigeria, for instance. The extent of access to economic resources, mass communication, mobility, leisure time, or infrastructure affects the success of

coalition building. In Nigeria (as elsewhere), poor women lack the time and resources to join formal groups; they are likely to participate in traditionally based savings clubs, market groups, or communal work groups.<sup>37</sup>

In the early 1980s, elite women in Nigeria likewise confronted barriers to organising. Several branches of the International Association of University Women (IAUW) were unable to motivate member participation. Inadequate infrastructure thwarted active participation by members. Travel was difficult, internal telecommunications systems rarely existed, and postal service was unreliable. At Unife, the IAUW branch was heavily dependent upon a committed leader to carry out group functions. Without that leader, the group was inactive. Respondents said the pressure of both academic commitment and household chores prevented their participation. As a result, broad-based networking was severely constrained. Even physical proximity could not always ensure effective formal networks because women faced their double day in isolation.

Formal networks, as represented by voluntary associations, have been profusely studied in West Africa. They function like informal networks as adaptive mechanisms for urban migrants.<sup>38</sup> While there is considerable disagreement among scholars about the precise definition of a voluntary association, it seems generally agreed that it is based on one, common interest and two membership which is entirely voluntary. Yet, it is acknowledged that informal networks (especially kin based) influence an individual's decision to join particular associations.<sup>39</sup> Membership in key associations for young men provides a means to gain political power and prestige denied them in traditional age-grade systems. The groups are short lived; members achieve their narrowly-defined goals, and the group disbands.<sup>40</sup>

This body of mainstream literature on West African voluntary associations largely ignores women or assumes that women's activities are ancillary to those of men to whom they are married.<sup>41</sup> Studies which do examine women's voluntary associations do not indicate that women derive similar power and prestige through their groups as do men. Rather, elite women's groups reinforce their roles as wives and mothers. This has been attributed historically to the types of women's clubs introduced by women married to colonial administrators or missionaries to train emerging elites.<sup>42</sup> Little found that membership in voluntary associations for upwardly-mobile women were basic to achieving a status separate from their husbands. He has emphasized the criteria of political position, occupation, income and education for measuring individual status.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Little, I would argue that elite women achieve more status in the community through their marital affiliation than from their productive roles as educators or businesswomen. They can achieve individual status through education, however. O'Barr notes that the idea that women's professional advances will spill over into political influence cannot be assumed. Women are constrained by cultural identity, self identity, and childbearing.<sup>44</sup>

Caplan has argued that upper and middle-class women's groups fail to exhibit active solidarity because women fail to recognise their dependence on men nor the limited range of options open to them.<sup>45</sup> Elite women, she argues, use group membership to gain or maintain individual status in competition with

other members. Because they are in an advantaged position in comparison to lower-class women, their groups adopt a social welfare focus and direct their efforts towards 'uplifting' lower-class women.<sup>46</sup> Thus, elite women's voluntary associations do not stress mutual obligation and solidarity like informal networks, yet they do share a common condition, and exchange information. It is networking, but in a different form than that previously explored.

This raises an issue that is part of an ongoing debate in the United States feminist community. The phenomenon of 'corporate feminism' relies on gains women have achieved in education, business and the professions through collaboration with other women.<sup>47</sup> Networking, when used as a means for the individual to get ahead is criticised as being a vehicle for the advancement of elites. Its model is the 'old boy's network'. It does not primarily focus on empowering other women; in fact, feminism may be a burden.<sup>48</sup> I mention it here mainly to draw attention to the argument.

From the literature on African formal networks, it appears that for rural women, formal networks become necessary to gain access to economic resources. For elite women, formal networks are oriented towards achieving status through social welfare programs. We will now turn to the Unife material to examine women's formal networks.

### Formal Networks/Ife Experience

I undertook to study women's formal networks during my stay at Unife. As I inquired into the existence of women's groups, I was frequently told by both men and women, "they don't do anything". Indeed, there were few formal groups; most were inactive. I suspect, however, that the remark reflected a value judgment on the peripheral nature of women's activities.

Table I details the groups chosen for my study. Of the 6, 3 groups (NAUW, Unife Women's Group and Harmony 77) were for staff and faculty members (although students were invited to join Unife Women's Group); 1 group (WCF) had both staff and student members; 1 group (The Ritz Club) was an all-women student group, and 1 (the Law Students Association) had both female and male members. I chose the Law Students Association to explore women's roles within that group.

Barnes and Peil note that in Nigeria, it is common for women to belong to more than one formal organisation.<sup>49</sup> Many informants belonged to more than one organisation. However, inactivity was equally common. Groups on the Unife campus are constrained by the lack of time members have to spend on group activities because of work, study and family commitments. Yet, it is also probable that little value is placed on group activities. As noted in our earlier discussion, the coherence of a network depends on its value to its members.

In short, many of the groups functioned as benevolent social organisations. Their fundraising projects were to benefit handicapped or elderly people. The Unife Women's Group, however, was raising money to open a day-care centre for women who lived and worked in the Unife community. All had a defined leadership body, charged dues, and held specific meetings at specific times to

meet the stated goals of the organisation. Unlike the rural women's co-operatives, these group efforts were not integral to daily survival and income generation. They were not, therefore, as highly valued. It was peripheral and represented an additional burden on already busy women.

It may be that group programmes did not meet the needs of members. The Unife Women's Group focused on cookery, handicrafts, and book clubs. NAUW offered programs dealing with women and taxation, or women in education, but neither was successful. Fundraising programmes to benefit handicapped children were said to be the most successful; yet, financial donations came more readily than did contributions of time. It may be that since the membership of these two groups were married women, they had little available time for group programmes.

Among the students, the Ritz Club sponsored a well-attended programme combining a discussion on "Divorce and the Educated Woman," with entertainment and a fashion show. They restricted group membership through a lengthy application process and fined members who missed meetings. Nonetheless, few members outside the executive committee were active. The Law Students Association sponsored "Law Week" with moot court trials, guest speakers, and a dinner. Women members of the Law Week Committee were responsible for contacting patrons for donations, arranging the dinner, and hostessing.<sup>50</sup> There was a gender division of labor within this group.

WCF was the only group which boasted a large, active membership. It was religiously based, following a creed that women's impact on society came through their roles in the family. WCF sponsored weekly support groups where women were encouraged to discuss personal problems. Yet, informants were often unwilling to discuss familial troubles in support groups in order to save face in the community.

Another means to explain the low status of women's group on the Unife campus is to explore how men, particularly husbands, reacted to the women's groups. Given that these were elite families where a woman's status was equated with that of her husband rather than her own productive activities, we can surmise that male reactions mattered. At Unife in the early 1980s, divorce was not socially acceptable; separation was less disdained. Infidelity among husbands or the taking of additional wives seemed common. Yet, through religious doctrine, women were to be the moral backbone of the family. Newspaper articles, radio and television programmes chastised women who caused trouble in their families over husbands' infidelity. They were to turn the other cheek. Feminism, or mere independence, were equally derided. Elite women were particularly vulnerable to accusations of misconduct. Although elite women earned a separate income, they were heavily dependent on their husbands to maintain their status and lifestyle. Thus, accusations on the Unife campus that women's groups were prostitution centres or fostered a feminist ideology were effective social controls to limit women's participation.

Married faculty and staff women at Unife were effectively isolated from informal kin networks and female peers. Even women's friendship networks were targets for uncomplimentary remarks. Among the student population, social pressure was exerted on women students to conform, although the



response was not always visible. Although religious devotion appeared to me to be a survival strategy for some Unife women, it was a hostile environment for women.

To summarise, the major functions of women's formal networks at Unife overlapped somewhat with informal ones. The formal organisation offered structured activities, educational programmes, standards of conduct, a place to make new friends and socialise, to achieve status within the community (however that may be defined by the participants), and opportunities to develop leadership skills through committee and executive board posts. Overall, the groups tried to provide the means to cope with an increasingly complex socio-economic condition and a forum to discuss issues of concern. Nonetheless, whatever benefits women in formal organisations at Unife derive were tempered by the peripheral nature of their organisations and the difficulty in maintaining active members. Jobs, school, family and societal pressures forced women to curtail personal involvement in groups, or to tread lightly so as to avoid inflaming the male community.

### CONCLUSION

Networks are a tool used by women to contend with daily life or to create an environment to celebrate their achievements. The functions of a network change depending on the targeted goals, as defined by the group and individual members. Strategies include the exchange of information, influence, economic resources, or work. For elite women, networks may be used to protect and raise status. Networks may be informal or formal in structure, but the exchange among network members may extend beyond structural boundaries.

If networks are women defined, will they be used to change the lives of individual members and the community at large? Or, does the environment (the society) limit how women define themselves so that networks serve to maintain the status quo? Can 'the personal is political' philosophy be meaningful beyond individual networks?

In Africa today, the combination of male-dominated western development agencies and state policies marginalise women's access to economic resources. Their poverty increases along with an increasing dependence on male cash contributions to the household, provided such a male exists. Rural and urban poor women share what resources they have through informal reciprocal exchange networks. Sometimes, in response to an opportunity to gain access to public economic resources, women formalise their networks. They are using the means at their disposal to improve their lives; furthermore, as Bukh points out, women may seek projects which improve the community at large. It seems that access to such resources is not widespread; more research is needed to explore the extent to which women are successful in creating change.

The informal networks of elite women as evidenced by the Unife students, assist in the transition and socialisation to university life, for friendship and emotional support. They help to create an atmosphere of trust and sharing for personal achievement not valued in the broader community dominated by

patriarchal definitions of women and status. Sometimes, the informal networks become formal; but sometimes, women join formal associations looking for friendship. For married women isolated from kin, overwhelmed by the double day, and a status to maintain, seeking new friends may be a political act to be constrained by male sanctions.

The formal networks of rural women in this study have grown out of informal structures to meet the economic needs of the members. More research regarding formalised networks in rural areas is needed. In contrast, the formal networks of elite women are peripheral to daily living and income generation, particularly in the Unife case. They sponsor social welfare programmes but the overall intent is to protect class status, rather than using economic resources to influence social change. Potentially, elite women could recognise their oppression as women compared to men of their class; they are largely dependent on men for their status. The likelihood of such an occurrence appears remote, particularly as women in powerful positions do not challenge male-defined policies and ideology.

Both types of networks can be salient to women in transition to adapt to their new circumstances. It may be that the networks women establish in transitional phases of their lives, particularly as they choose to define their environment, that may be the most significant for social change. It is this phase in which the philosophy of 'the personal is political' becomes most pertinent. 'The personal is political' necessitates communicating personal experiences to gain support, and with that support challenge existing structures. A network may be the critical element for women to politicise their personal experiences in joint efforts with other women to effect social change across diverse environments.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Light, D. and S. Keller 1982 *Sociology* Knopf: New York.
2. My opportunity to study in Nigeria was provided by a scholarship from the International Reciprocal Student Exchange Programme (IRSEP) of the University of Minnesota during the academic year September 1981 — June 1982.
3. I use the term 'class' to denote variations in lifestyle based on criteria such as education level, occupation and income.
4. Kleiman, C. 1980 *Women's Networks* Lippincott & Crowell: New York Steinem G 1982 "How to Survive Burn-out, Reagan, and Daily Life: Create Psychic Turf" *Ms X* No. 8 February pp 95—96, 98.
5. I have chosen to focus especially on women's networks. Some reference is made to men's networks, however. Suffice it to say that men's networks likely have more 'value' in society's eyes, through their 'public' roles. Informal networks are likely to occur through work, sports and recreation, communal work groups, cultural celebrations, or politics.
6. Hunter College Women's Studies Collective 1983 *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* Oxford University Press: New York.
7. While I believe the concepts of 'public' and 'private' spheres represent a false dichotomy, I use these terms to clarify my argument. For this discussion, I consulted the following articles:  
Lamphere, L. 1977 "Review Essay: Anthropology" *Signs* 2 No 3 Spring pp 612—627.  
Nelson, C. 1974 "Public and Private Politics: Women in the Middle Eastern World" *American Ethnologist* 1 No 3 August pp 551—563.  
Rapp, R. 1979 "Review Essay: Anthropology" *Signs* 4 No 3 spring pp 497—513.  
Rosaldo, M.Z. "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding" *Signs* 5 No 3 Spring pp 389—417.  
Siltanen, J. and M. Stanworth (n.d.) "The Politics of Publics Man and Private Woman" Unpublished Paper.
8. Afonja, S. 1981 "Changing Modes of Production and the Sexual Division of Labor Among the Yoruba" *Signs* 7 No 2 Winter pp 299—313.
9. See Rogers, B. 1980 *The Nesting of Women* Tavistock: New York for an overall discussion of this issue. Also, Zenebeworke Tadesse 1980 "The Impact of Land Reform on Women: The Case of Ethiopia" in Beneria, L. (ed) *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies* Praeger: New York pp 203—222.
10. Nelson 1974 *op cit*
11. O'Barr, J.F. 1975 "Making the Invisible Visible: African Women in Politics and Policy" *African Studies Review* XVIII No 3 Dec pp 19—27.
12. Hirschmann, D. 1983 "Bureaucracy and Rural Women: Illustrations from Malawi" Paper presented at the African Studies Association meeting 6—10 Dec 1983 Boston.
13. *Ibid*
14. *Ibid*
15. March, K.S. and R. Taquu 1982 *Women's Informal Associations and The Organizational Capacity for Development* Centre for International Studies, Rural Development Committee Cornell University: Ithaca.
16. Hammond D and A Jablow 1976 *Women in Cultures of the World*. Cummings: California  
Kantor, R. 1979 *Men and Women of the Corporation* Basic Books: New York.  
Kleiman 1980 *op cit*  
Mueller, E. 1983 "Measuring Women's Poverty in Developing Countries" in Buvinic, M. M.A. Lycette and W.P. McGreevey (eds) *Women and Poverty in the*

- Third World* John Hopkins Press: Baltimore.
- Smith-Rosenberg C 1975 "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Between Women in Nineteenth Century America" *Signs* 1 No. 1 Autumn pp 1—29.
17. The literature does not suggest a qualitative difference between an informal network and a friendship. In terms of degree, a friendship likely involves an increased level of trust and sharing of intimacies which may be absent from an informal network, and reserved for special individuals.
18. Genovese R.G. 1980 "A Women's Self-help Network as a Response to Service Needs in the Suburbs" *Signs* 5 No 3 suppl pp 248—256.  
Lomnitz, L.A. 1977 *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* Academic Press: New York.  
Bolles, A.L. 1981 "household Economic Strategies in Kingston, Jamaica" in Black N and A.B. Cottrell (eds) *Women and World Change* Sage: Beverley Hills March and Taquu 1982 *op cit*.
19. Ladner J.A. 1971 *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* Doubleday: New York.  
Lerner, G. (ed) 1972 *Black Women in White America* Pantheon: New York  
Stack C.B. 1974 *All Our Kin* Harper & Row: New York  
Stack, C.B. 1974 "Sex Roles and Survival Strategies in an Urban Black Community" in Rosaldo, M.Z. and L. Lamphere (eds) *Women, Culture & Society* Stanford University Press: Stanford.
20. Mueller 1983 *op cit*
21. Cohen, G. 1970 "Women's Solidarity and the Preservation of Privilege" in Caplan P. and J.M. Bujra (eds) *Women United, Women Divided* Indiana University Press: Bloomington pp 129 — 156.
22. Smith-Rosenberg 1975 *op cit*
23. Seller, M.S. (ed) 1981 *Immigrant Women* Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
24. Bryant, C.B. Stephens and S. MacLiver 1978 "Rural to Urban Migration: Some Data from Botswana" *African Studies Review* XXI No 2 Sept pp 85 — 99.
25. Nelson, N. 1979 "Women Must Help Each Other" in Caplan and Bujra *op cit*
26. Strange, H. 1981 *Rural Malay Women in Tradition and Transition* Praeger: New York
27. Oppong, C.C. Okali and B. Houghton 1975 "Women Power: Retrograde Steps in Ghana" *African Studies Review* XVIII No 3 Dec pp 71—84.
28. Here, I use the definition propounded by Kenneth Little to include senior administrators, party leaders, top civil servants, professionals in law, education and medicine, holders of important traditional titles, top Christian clergy. Education is the single most important defining characteristic, accompanied by high status occupations, modern homes, cars, amenities and a more nuclear family structure. See, Little K 1972 "Voluntary Associations and Social Mobility Among West African Women" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* VI pp 275—288.
29. Statistics provided by the Office of Planning, University of Iife.
30. Statistics provided by the Office of Planning, University of Iife.
31. In 1981—82, there were eight student residence halls; three halls housed women students. Moremi Hall was reserved for juniors, seniors and graduate students; Mozambique Hall housed freshmen and sophomores; an additional hall was constructed and opened to house athletes and to handle overflow from the other two halls.
32. Barnes, S.T. and M. Peil 1977 "Voluntary Association Membership in Five West African Cities" *Urban Anthropology* 6 No 1 Spring pp 83—106.
33. Silverman, P.R. 1980 *Mutual Help Groups, Organisation and Development* Sage: Beverly Hills.
34. Ladipo, P. 1981 "Developing Women's Co-operatives: An Experiment in Rural Nigeria" in Nelson N (ed) *African Women in the Development Process* Cass: London.

35. Bukh, J. 1979 *The Village Woman in Ghana* SIAS: Uppsala
36. March and Taqqu 1982 *op cit*
37. Krapf-Askari E 1969 *Yoruba Cities and Towns* Clarendon: Oxford
38. See Kerri, J.N. 1976 "Studying Voluntary Associations as Adaptive Mechanisms: A Review of Anthropological Perspectives" *Current Anthropologist* 27 March pp 23—47 for a full review of this debate.
39. Koehn, P. and S.R. Waldron 1978 *Afocha: A Link Between Community and Administration in Harar, Ethiopia* Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs; Syracuse.
40. Barnes and Peil 1977 *op cit*
- Hale, S. 1972 "Nubians in the Urban Milieu: Greater Khartoum" in El-Bushra, El Sayed (ed) *Urbanisation in the Sudan* Proceedings of the 17th Annual Conference of the Philosophical Society of the Sudan - Khartoum 2 — 4 August 1972.
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41. Hale 1972 *op cit*
- Kerri 1976 *op cit*
- Koehn and Waldron 1978 *op cit*
- See, Steinberg L S 1980 'The Role of Women's Social Networks in the Adoption of Innovations at the Grassroots Level' *Signs* 5 No 3 suppl pp 257 — 260, regarding the lack informal networks in the United States.
42. Man, K. 1983 'The Dangers of Dependence: Christian Marriage Among Elite Women in Lagos Colony, 1880 — 1915' *Journal of African History* 24 pp 37—56.
43. Little 1972 *op cit*
44. O'Barr 1975 *op cit*
45. Although Caplan's study focuses on elites in India, there are similarities with African elites. See, Caplan P / "Women's Organizations in Madras City, India" in Caplan and Bujra *op cit*. Also, Cohen 1979 *op cit*;
- Hood, E.J. 1983 "Black Women, White Women: Separate Paths to Liberation" *The Black Scholar* Sept — Oct pp 26—36.
46. Caplan 1979 *op cit*
47. Some articles concerning this subject are:
- Gordon S 1983 'The New Corporate Feminism' *The Nation* 5 February 1983 pp 143—147
- Kantor 1979 *op cit*
- Kleiman, C. 1981 "Does Sisterhood Stop at the Top?" *Ms* IX No 11 March p 100
- Kleiman 1980 *op cit*
- Shalala, D. 1982 "Women in Power: An Agenda for the '80s'" *Ms* X No 11 May pp 96—101
- Sims, N. 1982 *All About Success for the Black Woman* Doubleday: Garden City
48. Shalala 1982 *op cit*
49. Barnes and Peil 1977 *op cit*
50. It was the consensus among male Law Week Committee members that it was more advantageous that women do fund-raising activities. They expected that male patrons would donate more money to women students than men students. While the women were not pleased with this portrayal, they did lead the fundraising drive.

## Working Women And Care of The Young Child In Western Nigeria

*E.B. Wilson\**

### INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the labour force is hardly a new phenomena in Africa. In Western Nigeria<sup>1</sup> among the Yoruba the importance of a woman having her own economic base has been long recognized.<sup>2</sup> A women's earning power may provide feelings of economic independence and individual self worth but, more importantly, it may be directly related to the material quality of life of her children. Many women, particularly those in polygamous homes use large portions of their income to provide clothing, books, food and medicine for their children.

What is new and also problematic is the shift from more traditional forms of employment, e.g. farming, petty trading or crafts where it has been assumed that children could safely and easily accompany their mothers, to modern sector labour activities, where the presence of the child has been deemed unacceptable because it interferes with production, or is hazardous to the child's physical safety and detrimental to its socio-emotional and intellectual development. Interest in child care, particularly care provided outside the home is a recent phenomenon generated by the desire to release women from the burdens of child rearing so that they might effectively participate in modern sectors of the economy. Emphasis is placed on the importance of child care provision in the reduction of psychological stress experienced by the mother and in the enhancement of employee productivity. Unfortunately, the developmental needs of the child have remained a secondary consideration in such discussions.

The argument suggests that mothers experience considerable role conflict and stress managing the roles of production, reproduction and child rearing. This stress is exacerbated when working women feel their children may not be properly cared for in their absence. Such high levels of stress, besides being health hazards for the individual woman, may negatively affect family interaction and contribute to child neglect, mental health or marital problems in the family. Secondly, mothers with child care problems are likely to be mentally distracted and physically absent from work thus reducing their effectiveness as producers.

This paper is concerned with child care in Western Nigeria, particularly as it is experienced by mothers in the modern employment sector. Furthermore, it will examine the relationship between current child care provision, the developmental needs of the child, and the need for adequate policy and practice in the area of child care service delivery. The author's decision to focus on women in modern sector employment does not imply acceptance of the

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