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## **Nigerian Women Leaders: Journeying Toward Organizational Rebirth Through Midwifery**

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### **Abstract**

Twenty Nigerian women were purposely selected to participate in leadership development sessions because of their reputations as visionaries, cultural pioneers, and socially responsible leaders. They expressed that they sought to make differences in their organizations through greater leadership effectiveness; to change traditional thinking about women's leadership; and to challenge constructively the male organizational and traditional hegemony under which they worked on a daily basis. Together, for three days, these gifted women, my colleague, and I would be leader/learners enriched and instructed by the customs, traditions, and practices of each other.

*Keywords:* women's leadership, international, leadership development

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## **Introduction**

The rooster in the compound sang his song ushering in daybreak as the Imam's Arabic call to prayer reached our ears from the loudspeaker just across the street on the roof of the mosque. So began our first morning in northern Nigeria. Even exhausted after longing for sleep for what seemed like hours in the sweltering equatorial heat, these early morning sounds couldn't help but delight us. What an undertaking! We were in the city of Gusau to immerse ourselves in the lived experiences of 20 Nigerian religious women leaders. They were all members of a women's religious order, all native Nigerians between the ages of 30 and 60, and all eager to expand their leadership understanding. These women had travelled up to 10 hours on crowded, dusty, hot public transport to attend this leadership event. All of the 20 women held mid to executive level leadership positions in social service agencies in Nigeria- clinics, hospitals, schools, rural development and non-governmental organizations. They were purposely selected to participate in our sessions by their community leader because of their reputations as visionaries, cultural pioneers, and socially responsible leaders. They expressed to us that they sought to make differences in their organizations through greater leadership effectiveness; to change traditional thinking about women's leadership; and to challenge constructively the male organizational and traditional hegemony under which they worked on a daily basis. Together, for three days, these gifted women, my colleague, and I would be leader/learners enriched and instructed by the customs, traditions, and practices of each other.

Before sharing with the reader the remarkable insights gleaned from of our three days with the Nigerian women, it might be helpful to explore briefly the historical highlights of the research and theory concerning women and leadership in the Western world as a backdrop.

### **Rehashing the History and Addressing the Void**

The research on women and leadership in the Western world has evolved from the early demographic, descriptive studies (Schmuck, 1975; Adkinson, 1981) to studies through which researchers sought to generate from the experiences of women new theories about how women lead (Berry, 1979; Biklen & Brannigan, 1980; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Later in that decade, research attempted to explain the dearth of women in higher levels of leadership and focused on societal barriers women faced as they attempted to climb the ladder of leadership. One widely respected piece was Shakeshaft's (1989) examination of women school administrators. Shakeshaft suggested reasons why so few women were in positions of school leadership, how more women might attain positions of leadership, and what a female culture of administration might look like. At the time, Shakeshaft questioned whether women should try to fit in the male world of educational leadership or whether that world should change. Since that time, though theorists have legitimized alternative ways of leading (Astin & Leland, 1991; Helgeson, 1995; Reagan & Brooks, 1995), little has been written about women leaders themselves taking responsibility for the transformation, or cultural rebirthing, of their organizations.

Moreover, whether we make our homes and spend our workdays in the United States or in Africa, we cannot help but note the worrisome conditions prevalent in our world today. From decaying economic conditions, unethical business practices, the degradation of the importance of education, premature declarations of war, terrorism, and greed, to the erosion of social services

and health care, we are troubled by the lack of concern for the well being of others that is demonstrated globally. Furthermore, despite an individual's religious or spiritual orientation, there exists in our world that which Lerner (2009) has expressed as "meaning needs." Lerner has written that:

People hunger for loving connection with others and recognition by the other of [their] uniqueness. [They] see the opportunity to manifest [themselves] in creative work and joyous play and a way to connect with a higher meaning for [their] lives than that which is offered by a society that tries to convince us that 'he who has the most toys wins. (¶ 4)

Now, in the year 2010, as women, we recognize that we have "come a long way." We have begun to see a greater number of women execute legitimate power in both public and private organizations. Though still in the minority, women leaders are making their presence known among their male counterparts. Despite these more hopeful current conditions, begging to be addressed is the question, "So what?" Has the presence of women leaders made a noticeable difference in the organizational culture? Are women motivated by personal glory, money, or power; but, rather, as were the early scientists and artists (Csikszentmihalyi, 2001), are they driven by an affinity for humanity, deep concerns for social issues, the world's well-being, and a quest to transform their institutions to places more socially just and responsible. Are women willing and able to rebirth organizational cultures into domains more representative of marginalized others and ringing with voices historically muted? Or, have women, satisfied to have risen to positions of power, simply replaced the men who preceded them and perpetuated a culture not always responsive to its constituencies? These questions are difficult to address since the research on women and leadership is devoid of work that calls attention to the social responsibilities of women once they attain positions of power.

But, typically and historically, organizations have not been places of joy, peace, and generosity. Most organizations in the public sphere have been founded on models of learning and bureaucracy compatible with qualities of self-preservation, self-centeredness, cynicism, competition, rational thought, instrumentalism, and hegemony. The qualities of justice- equity, hope, collation, altruism, caring, and goodness- have been de-emphasized to make room for the materialistic values of selfishness, ambition, and greed. Thus, to address the "meaning needs" of which Lerner (2005) wrote, it would seem that organizational cultures would require transformational rebirth induced by values derived from an "other-centered" perspective (Wilson, 2004, p. 5). These values would be characterized by a tendency toward greater inclusivity, empathy, connectedness up and down hierarchies, and a focus on broader issues of concern and welfare. As Helgeson (1995) so aptly wrote, these values would produce an organization concerned with a larger vision of society, aware of the effect that organizational decisions have on families, education, the environment, social welfare, and even world peace.

However, as we all have experienced, life in organizations generally has not been so. In many situations organizational leadership has succeeded in contributing to inhuman tax structures, environmental disregard, the devaluation of workers, and the breakdown of social welfare systems. Wilson (2004) wrote:

When it comes to women's leadership, [we must acknowledge that] we live in a land of deep resistance, with structural and emotional impediments burned into the cultures of our organizations, into our society, and into the psyches and expectations of both sexes. The problem is layered, as is the solution (p. xiii).

Thus, the number of women in positions of leadership should matter; if that means that more women in positions of power ensure that their experientially-contextualized voices can be heard. However, unfortunately for many others, many women who have achieved levels of power and authority have done so because of their ability to conform to the traditional cultural expectations, norms, and values. As the number of women who assume leadership in our organizations begins to increase, the individual, token woman may be a thing of the past along with her necessity to prove that she is "man enough for the job," complying with traditional notions of leadership. Rather, she will be able to join with other women and like-minded men to moderate the influence of masculinity and shape policy in line with [women's] values" (Wilson, 2004, p. xiii; Rhodes, 2003)- values of justice.

### **Inspiration to Transformation**

Thus, and historically appropriately, much valuable research has highlighted the struggles, barriers, obstacles, and pressures women have historically experienced as they have striven to assume leadership in organizations. More contemporary work has suggested new theories of women's leadership; yet, we have not addressed the responsibility women need to take on if their presence is to mean a transformation of organizations to more socially just and responsible places. Because women bring a difference perspective to the organization in terms of their social relationships, economic activities, relationships to power, interests, and contingencies, they can assume a valuable position to redirect values in the organizations through "critical reflection of what is" and "creative thinking of what might be, ... to "test old assumptions and new ideas" (Meyerson & Ely, 2004, p. 139-140).

I take the position that women have a responsibility to take on the reshaping of the organization with qualities of justice- equity, hope, collaboration, altruism, caring, and goodness. To do so will require leadership and courage to challenge the status quo, promote new ideas, trust in "difference" and in the vision of a different future. However, women must still be concerned with the risks that come with such noncompliance: labeling as a feminist, trouble-maker, or even to this day, a "women's libber;" loss of collegial support and career development opportunities that would provide a power base within organizations and make advocacy for the values and issues important to women effective; and, diminished job security within the organization (Rhodes, 2003). As I found in my work with Nigerian women leaders, the risks that they face are even more formidable.

### 2010: Nigerian Notions of Women and Leadership

Aside from the somewhat humorous directives that all “good” Nigerian women must follow, such as *Women must never wear knickers!*, the women leaders we worked with described explicitly the culturally-imposed notions of womanhood and leadership that they carried from young womanhood to their lives as organizational leaders. Just a few of those included:

- Women should only speak when spoken to.
- Women are temptresses.
- Women do not possess good reasoning.
- Women can’t make decisions.
- Women are baby machines.
- Women are meant to be *just* mothers.
- Women must always submit to men.
- Women must get married.
- Women are weak.
- Women must not compete with men.
- Women should not be involved with politics.
- A woman’s education is a waste.
- Women are meant only for certain professions.
- Women must never challenge men or authority.
- Women are the property of men and need their protection.

As our days with the Nigerian women leaders ensued and we were more and more deeply how deep and strong the cultural and traditional weights they struggled with and against actually were. The sexism in the society was tangible, malevolent. In their own words they told stories of *personal discouragement*,” of dealing with *pretense and insincerity*, and of their feelings of *powerlessness*. They were wearied by the injustices to the marginalized, the *unreachable*, and with their superiors’ lack of appreciation for their work. They spoke of bureaucratic *run-around*, broken promises, and exclusion from professions and government. They dealt daily with *big men*, men in authority and of privilege *who imposed, subordinated, excluded, intimidated, and dominated*. They were censored, restricted, penalized, and often fired for expressing their thoughts and opinions. Yet, they were able to identify their strengths and articulate how they used them to circumvent male-made cultural and hierarchical attitudes, rules, and regulations to the advantage of their organizational purposes. In summation:

- These women leaders were driven by an affinity for humanity, deep concerns for social issues, and a quest to transform their institutions to places of higher moral and ethical being.
- These women recognized that significant changes needed to be made in their organizational cultures.
- These women recognized that these changes required rebirth their organizational cultures into what had not been experienced traditionally and historically.

We found them to be prophetic leaders, vehemently courageous, and willing to take on the status quo. They were determined to destroy the myths that had burdened them through their maturation to adulthood and create a newer wave of cultural awareness for their younger sisters.

During our leadership sessions when we transitioned into discussion of effective leadership as a result of transformational change and cultural rebirthing for the betterment of all, the women participants realized that the messages that they send to their younger sisters, their successors, must be ones of liberation, social justice, meeting resistance with courage, and personal power. They authored a very powerful *Women's Bill of Rights*, which included, but was not limited to the following components of the Bill.

Young woman you have the right to:

- Believe in your own strengths.
- Speak or preach and not shy away.
- Speak in public to build a better society.
- Participate in politics to build a better government.
- Have your thoughts, feelings, and work respected.
- Choose your future.
- Work in any professional you are qualified for.
- Attain the highest level of education you choose.
- To make decisions and be part of decision-making.

### **The Story of Midwifery**

Fortuitously, (and exciting to me as one who in recent years has been exploring leadership through the metaphor of midwifery) among our Nigerian women leader-participants were four nurse-midwives, who also managed clinics and women's hospitals. To bring the sessions toward closure we asked these four women to describe for the rest of the group the duties and role of a midwife. But, before introducing that rich discussion, I will provide some background on midwifery purposely to elevate the common, more marginalized notion of midwife and to justify my use of midwifery as a metaphor for leadership illuminated by the feminist ethic.

The metaphor of midwifery is one that lends itself to suggest a leader's role in organizational transformation and cultural rebirth. Midwifery is as old as time. References to midwifery appear in ancient documents such as the Old Testament (Genesis 35:17) in the story of Rachel's birthing of Benjamin. Other cultures have referred to the midwife as the *wise woman*, the *sage-femme*, and the *weise frau*. Midwives have possessed technical, manual, and often magical, mystical abilities. Throughout history they have been revered as leaders of society; yet, at other times, feared, tortured, and killed as witches.

During the influx of immigration during the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, by 1915, 40% of all births were attended by midwives. Of course, as societal indices would suggest, most of those births were to non-white and foreign born mothers. By 1935, however, the rate of births attended by midwives had decreased to 10.7%, again not

surprising that 54% of those were to non-white mothers. Explanations include several societal factors: higher socio-economic status was linked to the use of “modern” medicine, most physicians were male and exercised power of women’s bodies, and public campaigns swayed public sentiment with loaded misinformation about midwifery. Certainly, all of these factors contributed to the marginalization of the work of midwives in the United States (Brucher, 2003).

Yet, during this same period of time, Mary Breckenridge, of Kentucky, who had suffered the loss of two of her own children, studied the British model of midwifery as a desirable alternative to physician-attended hospital births. Convinced that this model would “make an impact on the outcome of pregnancy” (Brucher, 2003), in 1925, she established the Frontier Nursing Service to serve the women of Appalachia. The success of her service, marked by a decrease in childbirth mortality rates, led to the creation of the American Association of Nurse-Midwives in 1928. By the 1930s, The State University of New York Downstate Nurse-Midwifery Program was created to train nurse-midwives in the care of disadvantaged women in New York City. By 1968 the American College of Nurse-Midwifery was established.

Later in the century, in the 1970s, a resurgence of interest in midwifery in the United States was predicated by illustrative articles in *Time* and *Life*. In these publications midwifery was touted as more desirable than the Caesarean-section, drug induced, sterilized hospital births, which were protecting women from the male perceived “pathology” of pregnancy and the “evils of childbirth” (Forthsyth, 2009). Midwife-operated birthing centers, which encouraged more natural, alternative practices, were acknowledged as safe, nurturing places to birth babies. Such centers limited the use of artificial technologies and emphasized the promotion and maintenance of good health, pre and post partum. The articles reported that nurse-midwives were increasingly treating women of varied socio-economic levels and were raising the national standards of practice with their advanced exam-supported certification as Certified Nurse-Midwife.

### **Leadership Graced by Midwifery**

The panel of Nigerian nurse-midwives participants we invited to co-lead the final session as we approached more practical applications of leadership provided us with a comprehensive view of their work as they partnered with their patients and their families, other medical personnel, and social service agencies to create a collective, healthy vision for their futures. They discussed how as midwives they educated their patients about pregnancy, how the changes and discomforts they were experiencing were natural. They instructed the mothers about the need for proper nourishment for themselves and their developing fetuses. They encouraged patience and shared the joys of fetal kicking with the mothers as they anticipated a healthy birth.

As the birth of the baby drew near and labor began, the midwives continued to provide both physical and psychological support for the mother. They concentrated on caring for the mother, easing her pain and anxiety, maintaining the partnership that grew in trust from the early stages of pregnancy. At delivery, the midwives cared for the newborn, acted to prevent infection within mother and baby, and provided any other medical or psychological interventions that were deemed necessary. Post-partum, the work of the midwife continued close with observation of the mother and baby. She nourished the mother physically and psychologically, encouraged patience during the natural healing process, and taught her how to care for her new baby.

Through the partnerships they developed with the mothers they cared for, the midwives were able to lead mothers and their families through a complex process that would change their lives, their family dynamics and their personal responsibilities forever. The midwives' assured their patients that they were not alone, that they were being supported through their journeys by caretakers who genuinely included them in decision-making, affirmed their progress, and validated their worth, and who would be a resource as long as they were needed.

As the non midwife participants reflected on the work of their midwife colleagues, they drew interesting connections from midwifery to leadership. Kate remarked that *a leader goes on a journey with her people*, and must practice patience as she walks with them *hand in hand*. A leader helps others accept change and *tells the truth for good*. As organizational leaders, these women appreciated that it takes time to educate, influence, listen, and respect the members of the organization. They recognized that the *pregnancy* was a time of waiting- waiting for cultural conditions to support the changes that they, in collaboration with their communities, collectively conceived for the good of the individual and the organization. As leaders they knew that great levels of commitment, investment, and perseverance were required of them. They felt an unseverable connection with the *pregnancy*, the product of collective conception of a vision.

Bene spoke of a leader *birthing the gifts in others*, being available, observing, and recognizing possible needs for intervention. Ann reflected that as a midwife, one *works to make sure that all come out of labor alive*. So too must a leader *confront the confusion* and move the organization from *cloudy to clear*. As another woman declared, *From the pain comes deep and lasting joy*.

Though dealing daily with resistance to cultural and organizational change, impatience with ambiguity, and misunderstandings of the complexities in the organization, these women expressed the necessity of guiding, supporting, and *providing safety nets* for the members of the organization as they all dealt with the figurative pangs of labor. They held the integrity of the organization, and of themselves, in utmost regard. Though they realized that as leader-midwives they would have to endure the pains of *pushing, pulling, and struggling*, they maintained their eagerness to see the transformational future of their organizations unfold.

*As at delivery, hearing the cry of the new baby makes everyone happy*; the positive effects of good leadership, achieving the common good, is too a time to *rejoice* (Bene and Ann). Some transformational efforts result in deliveries where the organizational *products just pop* out. Other deliveries are much more difficult. However, as the labor and delivery of organizational transformations was pursued, these women leaders were willing to keep their eyes on the purpose of their work. They wanted to be involved in birthing new organizational cultures centered on the values of justice. They spoke of *relying on the hope that there is goodness in the world*, and *never abdicating their responsibilities* as transformational leaders. They affirmed each other by proclaiming that they must never *lose the tradition of care* for their organizational communities, outside others, and for themselves. These are women who became intent on building generous communities: encouraging organizational members to pull together, support each other, build healthy relationships, and *insulate* each other from harm and toxicity. One stated, *We're 'on the knee'* [a reference to the novel *The Red Tent*]. *We provide support for each*



*other. We don't enable, we support. We'll show the way and massage each other through the hard times.*

Very importantly, these women transformational leaders were not afraid to challenge prevailing thought and status quo. They were the self-proclaimed consciences of their organizations, and, as they remarked, regularly *held up mirrors to themselves and the organization*. Before us, these women were developing an *organizational curiosity* intent on questioning, challenging, stretching, and growing themselves and their organization through collective inquiry and problem solving.

Just as a woman is transformed through the act of giving birth, these women leaders were finding themselves changed by the notions of cultural rebirthing. In some cases they found that they needed to redefine themselves, their relationships with others, and their dispositions toward leadership. As one of the women noted, *We cannot continue to act the same old way. We must now 'stand up' and educate others to do the same. We must push a little further, but always be ready to catch!*

### **Looking Toward the Future**

We concluded our three-day session of leadership with these gifted Nigerian women leaders by leaving them with questions for future thought and consideration:

- How will you “midwife” cultural changes in your organization?
- How will you unleash the power everyone has within?
- How will you evoke leadership in others? Support your partners in transformation?
- Using your gifts, strengths, inner resources, how will you meet resistance inside and outside of your organization?

### **More Thoughts on Organizational Change for Re-Enculturation**

Organizational change, especially transformational change for the good of people and the organization, must naturally undergo a gestation period, labor pains, delivery, and a post-partum period. To explain this phenomenon, theories of change have evolved from the early 1950's linear models introduced by Lewin (1951). Lewin understood change as a process of three parts: unfreezing the equilibrium, or status quo, undergoing movement, and then re-freezing a new equilibrium. Though this theory shed light on the process of change, it did not integrate the notion of continuous change in response to an unpredictable, ever evolving life inside and outside of an organization.

Later, in 1958, Lippitt, Watson, and Westley acknowledged the role of the leader as integral to change in the organization. They recommended leaders be cheerleaders, facilitators, and experts who could guide change among their employees. But, it wasn't until 1978, that Burns introduced the transformational leader whose role it would be to elevate the organization for the common good. Then, in 1992, Schein attributed the cultures of organizations as determiners of the capacity for change and development. His three-layered analysis of culture, composed of artifacts- that which can be experienced by the senses; espoused values- often

expressed in mission statements; and underlying assumptions- shared world views and basic attitudes- led to greater understanding of the complexity of organizations and their resistance to change.

Most currently relevant in support of the leader as midwife- aside from the work of Burns (1978) - is the work of educational theorist, Michael Fullan (2008). Fullan's notion of the transformational leader is characterized as one who recognizes the need for relationships, capacity building, and shared values. The leader, who is able to develop deep and meaningful relationships with members of the organization, is able to build the organizational capacity to ask critical questions, to challenge existing assumptions, and to deal with ambiguity, unpredictability, inconsistencies, and complexity more successfully guides an organization through transformational change and brings about a re-enculturation of the organization for the good of those invested and involved in its success and well as for the organization. Fullan describes such leaders as those who strive to increase their patience yet decrease their deliberateness. They listen attentively to understand the intricacies of their situations; they genuinely honor those in their organizations and nourish connection with them; and, they encourage synergy to maximize the contributions of all concerned. Leaders as midwives.

### **Using Difference to Make a Difference**

Culturally situated differently than their male counterparts, the Nigerian women with whom we worked, as well as many Western women, view themselves as *resources* to the organization- *resources* that illuminate different interests and contingencies, hold different dispositions toward social relations, practice different approaches to power hierarchies, and emphasize different kinds of economic activity. They are compelled to use these illuminations to nudge tradition in order to challenge prevailing practice, and, most importantly, to question an established belief system. In doing so, they consciously critically examine *what was and is* and creatively explore *what might be*.

As midwives of the organization, if women are expecting to make a difference based on their differences, they must realize that the future, transformed organizational life after birth, must be conceived collectively and nurtured with acceptance, perseverance, patience, and commitment. Just as each new parent knows, the newly birthed son or daughter is not always what had been imagined or expected but often a surprise: "Wow, Madeline has my grandmother's eyes!" "His tiny nose looks just like my brother's!" Or, "Hmmm, it seems like Uncle John's ears are showing up again! Oh dear!" Guided by a vigilance of critical reflection, the *different* leader-midwife must establish an organizational culture of inquiry critical inquiry, institutionalizing "mechanisms by which people come to challenge old ideas and ways of doing things and generate newness" (Meyerson & Ely, 2004, p. 140). Such a culture would demonstrate openness to constructive change influenced by the richness of collective purposing and visioning.

Paralleling her organizational leadership efforts, the leader-midwife must also accept a personal invitation for *becoming*, as Bartky (1990) referred to the journey of developing feminist consciousness. The leader-midwife must undergo a transformation herself. She must change her "behavior: ...make new friends; respond differently to people and events; change her habits of

consumption; and, sometimes alter. . . her whole style of life.” Often “facts” turn into “contradictions” or become “out of phase with one another from the vantage point of a radical project of transformation” (p. 11-12). Thus, transformed and transformational leader-midwives begin to see *what is* illuminated by *what is not yet*.

Leader-midwives, committed to transformation of organizations to just communities of caring and generosity, offer themselves as natural resources of the organization who promote ongoing inquiry, learning, change, and renewal. In doing so, they are able to organizationally redefine leadership- regardless of who is assuming the role- and reconstruct the organization without oppressive structures. They will bring to the forefront the concerns of those historically and traditionally dismissed and discounted: peace, policy in line with just values, inclusion, equity, connectedness, empathy, and a de-emphasis of the influence of masculinity. As leader-midwives they will need to practice what Coles (2001) referred to as a “stubborn apartness” (p. 165).

As the midwife is committed to the promotion of health, well being, and safety of mother and child, so is the leader-midwife committed to the individuals and collective purposes of the organization she leads. As the midwife nurtures those in her care with education, continuity of care, and emotional support, so also must the woman leader nurture those in her organization. And, as Csikszentmihalyi (2001) noted, just as was the work of early scientists and artists, the work of the leader-midwife must be compelled by her values: a deep concern for issues of social justice, a quest for the world’s well-being, an affinity for humanity, and a desire to bring about goodness through transformation. Only then will the presence of women in leadership experientially make a difference for those in organizations and mean more than the mere *replacement* of men.

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**Biography**

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