

Advocacy and documenting women's research the 'WORDOC way'

Adetoun Adebisi Oyelude

Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

E-mail address: aa.oyelude@ui.edu.ng; toyelude@yahoo.com

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso

Gender Studies Program &

Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC),

Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

E-mail address: sa.omotoso@ui.edu.ng; sharonomotoso@gmail.com



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Abstract:

Women and gender issues have been discussed globally pointing out areas where needs must be met in order to put the marginalized and disadvantaged at an advantage. Some of the biggest challenges to advancing gender equality, health, rights, and wellbeing of girls and women across Africa are (1) poverty, inequality and social exclusion of women and girls from vital decision-making spheres; (2) work overload on female leaders due to failure to identify more capable and willing females, thus hampering the achievement of affirmative action; and (3) failure of the system to design and sustain pro-women succession plans in community leadership across the continent. These and more are being creatively combated via cooperative interaction, symbiotic acquisition of cosmopolitan leadership skills, domesticating global leadership strategies for addressing emerging trends and building all-inclusive development communication by improving access to information (ATI). Amidst these strategies, there is still more to be done, as new challenges emerge and human and capital facilities to surmount the numerous challenges are diminishing. This study is descriptive and exploratory as it presents the work of Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) as case study, hence the 'WORDOC Way'. With the mission to spear-head evidence-based research for impactful community-based project and social development by maintaining a documentation center for the use of scholars, researchers and other interested persons, testimonial exists of her efforts which resulted in the initial creation of Women's Commission in Nigeria and has today evolved into a full-blown Ministry of Women's Affairs. The 'WORDOC way' is outlined as a holistic framework for women's development through conferences, seminars, skill acquisition programmes, media education and library resources. WORDOC's over thirty years' pattern of mentoring and succession planning are also commendable, and the ideas will be shared. Although the 'WORDOC way' has survived uncomplimentary dynamisms across African states, waning interest of committed personnel and donor fatigue are major setbacks. Currently, the documentation activities which develop women's mental capital and augment them with contemporary skills for initiating solution-based researches to

immediate problems in their communities are being run. Plans for expanding the library facilities to that of a resource center, well-equipped and remotely linked globally to similar centers worldwide are equally underway and outlined in this paper. Recommendations are made for using the advocacy methodology and grassroots participatory model in achieving the goals.

Keywords: Advocacy; Documenting; Women's research; 'WORDOC Way'; Special Libraries.

Introduction

In the early 80s, activities of female scholars across Nigeria in collaboration with their colleagues birthed the need to establish a center which would formally harness efforts of researchers, non-governmental bodies, multi-national agencies and grassroots mobilizers for women's development. The Women's Research and Documentation Center (WORDOC) thus received approval for its creation in 1986 and was established in 1987 with the aim of coordinating research and documentation efforts of various women research groups. As an initiative of Professor Bolanle Awe, then Dr. Bolanle Awe, she was closely assisted by colleagues including Nina Mba and La Ray Denzer of the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ibadan. WORDOC today stands as a rallying point for encouraging documentation on women's issues in Nigeria. "The number of NGOs managed by women showed that, contrary to conventional stereotyping, women have remarkable organizational and mobilization capacity, that is yet to be fully exploited by them and other agencies interested in lightening the burden of women for a balanced and sustainable national development" (Arum, 2010).

Sheldon (2005:268) had earlier noted WORDOC's role as an important repository in collecting materials pertaining to women. Affirming that sites for teaching and researching gender and women's studies are variously patterned across Africa, Mama (2005) recognized WORDOC as one of the oldest Women's center on the continent. Similarly, a news article by Falola (2018) confirmed the role of WORDOC as a documentation and advocacy centre. It states that; "WORDOC is a resource centre for research in women's and gender studies, and also serves as an advocacy group on causes that affect women in the Nigerian social and political spheres. WORDOC provides documentation on issues that affect women, creates opportunities, and works to influence state policy to positively affect women. The group is one of the very few research centres available in Nigeria that focuses on women and their causes" (Falola, 2018).

As a result of the advocacy and documentation work of WORDOC, researchers have written on the various aspects of the work the Centre does. Fijabi and Opeke (2001) reported that the library arm of the centre systematically collects documents and disseminates materials on women and women's studies to researchers and the general public. Oyelude (2003) noted WORDOC's use as an International Centre evidenced by the variety of places from which researchers visit the library. This was one of the findings drawn from a study on 10 years of WORDOC's existence at that time.

Karunwi (2004) developed a classificatory scheme through which NGOs can be appropriately viewed. According to her, NGOs in Nigeria can be categorized into four groups: professional groups, activist women's group, research driven groups and women's religious groups. The professional groups focus on the struggle to empower women in their respective professions, while the activist women's groups are concerned with the total emancipation of women and

the eradication of any form of class inequality and oppression. Research-driven groups, for their part, deal with the research and documentation of activities of women in gender-related fields, and women's religious groups concern themselves with the eradication of harmful traditional practices against women. Although WORDOC primarily falls into the category of research-driven groups, the Center has combined involvement in popular education and outreach work with academic education.

Pereira (2004) observed that although several universities in Nigeria tried to establish gender studies centres way back in the early 80s, they all struggled from "lack of funding, insufficient institutional support and lack of autonomy in decision-making". The Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) since 1987 was the centre that organized seminars, workshops, conferences and public lectures on women and gender issues. The great work done by WORDOC in peace brokerage in particular is commended by Omotayo (2005) in her study on WORDOC. The documentation centre is described as one that "disseminates information by preparing accessions lists, compilation of bibliographies; display of current periodicals; selective dissemination of information (SDI) and related activities. It also organizes public lectures for women, sometimes in local languages to reach the grassroots women. Information is transmitted via a variety of channels such as newspapers, mail, magazines, pamphlets, books, electronic and telecommunication media of television, radio and telephone."

With regards to documentation of women, it was argued that "one of the major reasons for the paucity of data on women and a highly prejudiced view about their contributions in the informal and formal sectors is because much of the earlier studies has been conducted by men who tended to view their subjects from a male perspective" (WORDOC Newsletter, 1987: editorial page). It is in the spirit of building linkages with scholars and providing a more balanced picture of women's role in the society that the WORDOC library was opened. The WORDOC library commenced operation in 1989 to provide rare intellectual resources gathered from all over the country about women. With a collection of over 6,000 books; numerous seminar and conference papers; journals, magazines and newsletters, journals, newspaper cuttings and articles focusing on women locally and globally, WORDOC has remained a go-to for researchers within and outside the university. Other materials such as photographs of prominent Nigerian women in various fields, bibliographies, audio and audio-visual materials and dissertations and theses of students and researchers who have used the library are also part of her resources (Odejide, 2002).

The following section presents an overview of WORDOC's activities in the last three decades.

WORDOC'S Impact in the Society

WORDOC has remained a force in areas of research, advocacy, networking and social policy.

- "Our efforts at ensuring that women's issues come on the front burner in national discourse and policy intervention have gone a long way in shaping the ongoing history of Nigeria. In this area, we have had to sustain the strategies for bringing research to bear on society and governance. As far back as 1985, a national seminar was held in our Institute on the theme of 'Nigerian Women and National Development' (June 20-21, 1985). This was the springboard from which a campaign was launched calling for a 'permanent commission on women's affairs responsible to the Head of State'.

- One of WORDOC's first releases was a communiqué which demanded an 'independent National Commission on Women that would be responsible to the President to promote Women's Studies and to initiate reforms in the social, economic, legal and political structure so as to improve the general welfare of women'. In response to this, the National Commission on Women was established by the Federal Government in 1988, and today, there is a Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, which is replicated at the state level.
- Selected members were sent to participate in the summer courses at the Institute in International Development on Gender and Development held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 1988. Most of those who participated in the course have reached the peak of their careers and have served at different times as Special Advisers and Chief Executive Officers of Federal Government Agencies in Nigeria.
- WORDOC and Women Caucus of the African Studies Association co-sponsored a panel "Nigerian women and the colonial encounter" in 1988 at Chicago. The programme was chaired by one of WORDOC's members Prof. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, a poet and Women's Coordinator for the organization called Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (MAMSER).
- Workshop organized by WORDOC in conjunction with Social Science Research Council New York in 1989 with the purpose of providing a platform for researchers to discuss past and current research on women in business and agribusiness, to develop Africa, especially Nigeria and also provide a learning experience for the participants, particularly graduate students who are just embarking on their research in the area of agriculture.
- Seminar on Nigerian Women and National Development held November 1989 at the IAS under the auspices of WORDOC.
- A joint national workshop sponsored by WORDOC and Canadian university Services, Overseas (CUSO) was held in 1991 on the topic 'Women and the Media in Nigeria'.
- WORDOC presented a case study at the International Workshop on Women Household and Development titled; "Building a Database" at the University of Illinois, Urbana- Champaign, USA.
- WORDOC and Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) jointly sponsored a workshop on women and popular participation in 1992 with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).
- A workshop was held in 1992 in collaboration with WORDOC at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan on the topic "Women and Human Right Abuse in Nigeria".
- A jointly organized workshop with the Library and Educational Technology Consults held in 1992 on the topic "Enhancing the Implementation of Women Development Programmes through Provision and Use of Requisite Information".

- WORDOC participated at the finalization workshop on National Policy on Women in 1993.
- WORDOC is a member of International Meeting of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN).
- WORDOC library is a globally recognized resource for scholars and researchers in women's and gender studies.
- The Lady Bank-Anthony Hall donated to WORDOC and located next to the WORDOC Library, remains a rallying point for all of WORDOC's events within the University of Ibadan.
- WORDOC marked her 30th Anniversary in 2017 with a well-attended conference themed "30 years on: What do Women Want, What Should Women Want?"
- WORDOC has maintained her monthly seminar in partnership with allied organizations such as: Institute for French Research in Nigeria (IFRA-Nigeria), Center for Applied Ethics and Political Communication in Africa (CAEPOCOM AFRICA), Zion Care Life and Family Impact Foundation (ZIONCLIFF) which currently attracts globally acclaimed scholars and activists.
- An annual Village Square Meeting established since 2017, brings stakeholders from the grassroots to assess progress made, challenges and way forward.
- An annual summit for girls aged 10-18 has been put in place since 2017 to catch girls young on women and gender issues across cultures."

In a report on an event titled "*Pragmatic Inclusion in the Press for Progress*", in celebration of the International Women's Day (IWD) 2018, Omotoso (2018) observed that in line with WORDOC's focus on research, enlightenment and dissemination of information of benefit to women and policy makers, WORDOC in the year 2017 towards 2018 focused on getting more women into politics, especially for the 2019 general elections (<https://newspeakonline.com/nigerian-women-psyched-dominate-2019-election-ballots-voting/>). To this end, a radio education programme was created to sensitize women on social and political issues as well as mobilize them for holistic development. The WORDOC website - <https://ias-ibadan.org/african-studies-at-ibadan/programmes-and-centers/women-s-research-and-documentation-centre> - is one of the ways in which the work of WORDOC is disseminated and made known to the whole world. The information connection is important in making women's concerns and solutions to it aired freely, and providing a space for interaction with stakeholders and others with gender concerns. In the same vein, WORDOC maintains her bi-annual newsletter, providing updates on local and global women issues. Indeed, WORDOC has been "a voice in this regard since 1987 and the center currently runs public enlightenment and advocacy programmes on politics and sustainable development issues in selected media across Nigeria" (Omotoso, 2018).

Collaboration with Other Stakeholders

WORDOC collaborates with other stakeholders in the development axis. For example collaboration between WORDOC and the French Research Institute (IFRA) produced an

IFRA/WORDOC Art Performance: "Hear Word! Naija Women Talk True". This performance took place on Wednesday 12th of July 2017. This innovative performance addressed real-life issues experienced by Nigerian women. The performance, inspired by the famous *Vagina Monologues*, examined an array of cultural and societal norms oppressing women in Nigeria through comic and tragic situations that constantly shifted the audience from laughter to tears. It incorporated dancing and singing into scenes of intense and thought-provoking monologues and managed to deal elegantly with sensitive topics like physical and psychological domestic violence and female economic independence and leadership (<https://www.ifra-nigeria.org/scientific-events/exhibitions-screenings-performances/205-ifra-wordoc-art-performance-hear-word-naija-women-talk-true>). This is the type of advocacy that the Women's Research and Documentation Centre does. The popular culture method of connecting with the public is used to advantage by incorporating drama, role play, music and dance in what is termed "edutainment" to get advocacy messages across to support women's activities.

The Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan, has teamed up with popular radio stations to encourage women's participation in politics. A live Yoruba public enlightenment programme on Splash FM tagged "Gbogbo wa la lo'selu" (Politics is for all), is the product of such partnerships aimed at giving women a louder voice in politics and governance. The programme, which started on January 16, 2019, is aired live every Wednesday between 11am – 12pm. Members of the public phone in to ask the guests on the programme questions on the various topics presented on women and politics. This is one of the advocacy programmes of WORDOC as reported by Olowoyeye (2019).

The Documentation arm of WORDOC is the one that has the library set up and stocked with books, journals, magazines and non-book resources about women, written mainly by women, for women and men. The Centre welcomes researchers to use the library facilities and requests that copies of the outcome of research on women and gender studies be donated to the library after the completion of the research. This is following the 'give back to the community' pattern of disseminating research results. Oladejo (2018) noted how WORDOC library has provided resources on history of women, documenting women in Nigeria, Africa and beyond. The WORDOC library and its staff are involved in not only the library aspect, but also in facilitating workshops and seminars organized by the Centre. Materials for these programmes are provided and displayed at the venue of the programmes. The collections of Women's history are made available in the library.

The following section provides insight into strategies for WORDOC's success story in the last three decades.

The WORDOC Way

Odejide (2002) describes WORDOC's incorporation into an existing institutional structure with multi-disciplinary orientation and flexibility as an advantage. She equally applauds the Center's administration as an autonomous unit, which allowed her to pursue distinct political and intellectual goals, aiding her to operate like a civil society organization, rather than as a typical academic unit, thus making it easy to adopt an activist stance in responding to national and international issues.

The ‘WORDOC way’ is deliberate, strategic and development-focused which has sustained the Center, enriched her goodwill and rendered her relevant over the last three decades. Some of the strategies are discussed below:

1. Team- and ally-building: The leadership of WORDOC in the early years maintained a multi-disciplinary approach which did not restrict participation within the academia, but carefully sought out relevant stakeholders and built a database of their contacts, areas of expertise and relevant projects. Having maintained close working relationships with International bodies including the Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Canadian International Development Agency and in countries including Germany, Australia, Malaysia, China among others, ally-building across continents remains core to her activities.

2. Mentorship and succession planning: WORDOC has sustained strong impact across generations by raising mentees on a continual basis. Mentees are passed on to be mentored by senior members who in turn mentor other upcoming mentees. This has made cross-generational impacts possible in WORDOC’s leadership and membership. It has also afforded stakeholders to retain and work towards achieving the Center’s objectives which over the years have been reviewed to meet new societal challenges.

3. Creativity and versatility: WORDOC has creatively reached out to girls and women across ages, class and spheres. By this, she has produced national and international figures in public and private sectors, locally and internationally. WORDOC has retained active participation in the annual University of Ibadan Research and Development Fair where research finding and innovations are displayed and shared with the general public to draw stakeholders’ attention to possible collaborative outlets.

4. Value-driven activities: As current challenges were addressed and new challenges emerged, WORDOC has in the last three decades retained her values, providing salient research materials, developing research areas, speaking truth to power, advocacy and grassroots development. Recent research pointed at the need for placemaking (a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces), for women in South Africa and Nigeria. To this end, two researchers, Adetoun Oyelude (in March 2019) and Myriam Houssay (in April 2019), presented papers at WORDOC’s Monthly seminar, putting out a call to action in South Africa and Nigeria.

5. Integrity of leadership and accountability: All activities of WORDOC in the last three decades are fully documented and details made available for interested persons or organizations. This is much different from prevalent trends among organizations in Nigeria where finances and other internal activities are not fully documented.

6. Media engagement: Having recognized media power, WORDOC engages continually with the media (local, national and global) to disseminate information about her activities, to cultivate public perception on prevalent girls’ and women’s issues and to present her positions on such (Omotoso, 2019).

7. Appraisal and re-appraisal of projects: Every conference, outreach, advocacy, workshops or policy documents which have emerged from WORDOC are frequently subjected to appraisal to ensure that the objectives for which such projects were floated are achieved. Where lapses have been found, WORDOC has always sought partnerships and collaborations to re-visit the issues and ensure that things are done properly.

8. Providing Access to Information: In a bid to provide solutions to contemporary issues affecting women and girls, WORDOC remains a crucial point of access to information for women, girls, and researchers on women and gender issues. The library and documentation centre is a reference point and information node. Small as the space housing it is, very valuable knowledge is stored in it, and through information and communication technology, access to global information is provided for users of WORDOC Library. Plans are underway for lateral expansion of WORDOC space to sit more than the 20 persons it currently sits, and to make its scope broader as proposed by scholars (Fijabi & Opeke, 2001; Oyelude, 2003).

It is envisaged that the expansion will include the extension of the opening hours, the provision of more ICT facilities and inclusion of space for meetings, formal and informal activities of WORDOC and her collaborators. It could as well provide space to accommodate a blend of activities that can conveniently offer placemaking use that spans generations of females especially from the cradle to old age.

Conclusion

For advocacy and documentation to have the necessary impact on women's issues, it is imperative that goals should be properly set and those to implement the goals identified and appropriately empowered. Partnerships need to be established and sustained, with mentorship relationships forged. Seemingly unlike research areas or interests can be harnessed. Women must be mentored for productive and harmonious collaborations. The 'give back to the community' grassroots participatory approach to development used by WORDOC for its advocacy work and the deliberate, strategic and development-focused agenda which has sustained the Center are worth emulating. The Documentation work of WORDOC is a continuous work in progress which constantly calls for global support. With advocacy, documentation and more support, additional successes can be recorded to produce sets of united people advocating for and documenting women.

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