

*An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender
Studies (LALIGENS), Ethiopia*
Vol. 4 (2), Serial No 10, May, 2015: 65-77
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i2.5>

Need for Gender Neutrality in Cartooning Scholarship

Otu, John

Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Federal College of Education, Zaria
E-mail: ozovehe@gmail.com
Phone: +2348062214089

Abstract

The person of a woman seems to continue to mean inability, weakness and perhaps, inexistence in especially the field of cartooning. Hypothetically, the cartooning scholarship basically presents cartooning studies with a mere mention of the female cartoonist in a ratio of about 1 to 80 studies done. This article presents a case in point where a female cartoonist had worked in a newspaper along with other male cartoonists and yet scholars mostly present their works as though female cartoonists do not exist. The article describes the depictions and draws comparisons to express that the female cartoonists work may have inspired some of the male cartoonists depictions. Some of the facial parts resemble each other against the backdrop of depictive influences between the works of the female and male cartoonists. Again, the stature of the characters of the first three male cartoonists is as short as those of the female cartoonist.

Key words: stereotype, ignominy and gender exclusion

Introduction

Studies in cartooning in Nigeria have continued to be scholarly thrust of some researchers with most of them in the Visual Arts domain and the Language arts. The topics in the visual arts draw their inspiration from the effects and impact of

cartoons on the nation's politics, while the language arts focus mostly on a variety of use of language. Many authors in the visual arts predominantly exclude the works of female cartoonists and subject the gender to a mere mention as it compares to the languages that presents the work of a female cartoonist within the thrust of the study done. Most cartoonists in Nigeria write their names legibly on the top of the strips while others have theirs written within any of the panels of the strip. The names of the female cartoonists are equally written in block letters yet, what made some male authors not to recognise them might be connected to a stereotype that cartooning is a male specific profession. This ignominy among scholars that excludes the female cartoonists' works from being documented brings to the fore the value judgement that labels the female gender with an artistic inability in the cartooning field.

In America, a cartoonist, Lisa Donnelly in her book titled *Funny Ladies: The New Yorker's Greatest Women Cartoonists and their Cartoons, 2005*, highlights the works of women cartoonists in the newspaper she herself works. Nancy Goldstein's book titled *The First African American Woman Cartoonist, 2012*, which is on Jackie Orman (1911-1986). Her career began in 1937 with characters like *Tochy Brown* in *Dixie to Harlem* in the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper for a year. In 1945 a single panel cartoon titled *Candy* published in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper for four months; depicting an articulate housemaid. *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* was her longest running cartoon produced from 1945 to 1956 in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. She and her husband managed a hotel for African Americans while she made strips that served as a critical voice for mostly African American audiences. She made strips in a period laden with racial and gender discrimination, but her determination to make cartoons equally kept her working. Her marriage to a successful hotelier did not deter her either as it did not get in the way of her career as a cartoonist. Both books are written by women which is an indication of an exclusion of works and ability by many writers on the cartooning field in America.

Modupe M. Alimi's article in the *Studies in African Linguistics, 1991*, titled *A study of the stylistic markers of the language of cartoons in Nigeria*, published one of Folashade Adebare's strips from the *National Concord* newspaper of 1985. The author is a linguistics scholar and therefore would not be concerned about the gender of the creators of the works. However, she used the works of four cartoonists from three newspapers namely the *Daily Sketch*, *National Concord* and the *Punch* newspapers; from 1985 to 1986. The crux of the matter here is that Folashade is a name given to both gender amongst the Yoruba ethnic group and may not have influenced her choice of the female cartoonist's work for the purpose of gender balance or avoidance of gender exclusion in her work. The author is Yoruba and the article assumes that she is aware of the gender of the female cartoonist when she chose to use the female cartoonist's work in her article.

Moreover, Jimoh (2010: 24) asserts that “Dotun Gboyega and Boye Gbenro left *The Punch* for *National Concord* where they have since been joined by Osazuwa Osagie and the only known female cartoonist, Folashade Adebare”. This is another example of a scholarly work that presents the name of a female cartoonist with an overt impression that there has only been one female cartoonist since Adebare. In an interview with the author via email on the 16th of August 2011, he explained that he cannot readily confirm that she is a woman, but was told that Adebare had worked in the *National Concord*. His MA thesis basically focuses on three male cartoonists yet, the reason for the mention is not clear, though positive in the light of scholarship that mentions female cartoonists or their works. There has been other female cartoonists after Adebare, namely, Ronke Adesanya; *Daily Sketch*, *Nigerian Tribune* and *Vanguard*, Adaora Onele; *The Sun* newspaper, Ijeoma Nwogu; *Nigerian Tribune*, Emilia Oniegbu; *Sunday Punch*, Gloria Joboson; *The Guardian*. It is important to point out that all these have left the cartooning profession leaving no female cartoonist practising the art form. Suleiman Alhaji obtained both first and second degrees in Art History in 1983 and 1994 respectively. He teaches Art History at the Federal College of Education, Okene. His BA thesis titled “Cartoonist as a Socio-political Critic in Nigeria (1980-1983): A case study of Boye Gbenro of *National Concord* and Chris Nworji of *Punch* (1983)” did not mention the works of female cartoonists. Despite this, Folashade Adebare worked with Gbenro in the period he studied. He however holds that the political cartoons of Gbenro and Nworji prompted his study albeit his love for the newspapers they worked. He explained further in an interview of 16th November 2012 that he was not aware of any works done by any female cartoonists. He only went into the library and from some of the copies of the newspapers he had collected the strips and studied without visiting the media houses to meet the cartoonists to discuss their.

In Wudiri Yakubu Gworgwor’s Master of Art (Art History) thesis titled *Art and Political Enlightenment: A study of selected cartoons in some Nigerian newspapers (2004-2007)*, he collected strips from two news magazines of *Tell* and *Analysis*, and ten newspapers namely *Daily Trust*, *Daily Sun*, *The Triumph*, *The Standard*, *New Nigerian*, *Vanguard*, *National Interest*, *Nigerian Tribune* and *Weekly Scope*. In the interview held on the 16th June 2012, he explained that he did not come across the works of any female cartoonists in the period he chose for his study. Moreover, the *Nigerian Tribune* had Ijeoma Nwogu, while *The Sun* had Adaora Onele in the period he subjected his study to. Wudiri however added that he had heard of the works of Maryanne and Elizabeth Shultz in *Newswatch* magazine that made strips in the 1980s. He went ahead to present the illustration made by Mary-Anne in the undergraduate thesis titled ‘*The Emergence and Development of Christian Art in Nigeria*’, 1986. The names of the female cartoonists in this study are mostly written in block letters yet, what made these two authors not to see them

might be connected to a stereotype that cartooning is a male specific profession that women cannot practise. This ignominy among scholars that excludes the female cartoonists' works from being documented brings to the fore the value judgement that labels the female gender with an artistic inability in the cartooning field.

This is an opinion held by Sobowale in Awosiyan (2009) that

Unfortunately for Segun and for us Nigerians, the typical Nigerian politician is heartless irrespective of whether he occupies the highest or the lowest political office and few in any political party really give a damn about the masses. Does that mean that Segun and other cartoonist labour in vain? Far from it, at least cartoonists like him leave behind them for posterity the record that some people did care during an era that historians of the future would remark for the callousness of its political leader both in military uniform and in mufti (p. 3).

The query above is one that decries the blind eye turned to editorial cartoons by politicians as the works go unattended to either by law suits or comments from the political subjects. This article brings this to bear for the female cartoonists too as scholars continue to exclude the works of female cartoonists from their studies. In an interview with Professor John Agberia on the 16th March, 2013 who had published an article on cartooning in 2001, he explained that since the number of female cartoonists is 'infinitesimal their works are not worth a PhD study'. He was however surprised when the first author gave him a list of five female cartoonists; though he explained he is aware of the works of Ronke Adesanya, yet 'does not consider her works study since she did not study the graphic arts'.

Surprisingly, England rather has a history of attention and patronage of the editorial cartoonists' work. Baker (1995) further explains that

Michael Cummings, the contemporary cartoonist is as bricks to a builder- 'Without Prime Ministers we'd all be redundant.' It was so from the very start. Similarly, politicians need cartoonists, for to be caricatured is a sign that they have arrived. It is not surprising that Prime Minister have liked to be depicted in a favourable light and they can be very resentful if they are presented as figures of ridicule. Several of them collect cartoons of themselves...As a general rule Prime Ministers have received more criticism than praise from cartoonists (p. 17).

The possible relevance that may be earned in any profession no matter how lenient or stringent its practising style, rules and ethics may be, there stands specific aspects that earns its practitioners pride of place in the society. This makes the worthy

to bring this to bear on the female cartoonists that the major absence of many of the female cartoonists from practising editorial cartooning has made it difficult for scholars to by chance choose their strips for study. The reason for women's poor participatory role in politics, hence editorial cartooning is inferred from Ojoh (2012) who observes that "I've come across Nigerian women who do not like politics, and who do not support that women should vie for any political positions. They believe that politics is a man's world, and a man's thing" (p. 10). This is not a far cry from why female cartoonists do not make editorial cartoons in Nigeria such that it has led to their exclusion from cartooning scholarship. This also to a large extent spells doom to their continuous practise of the art form due to the notion accepted within the profession that gives greater appeal to editorial cartooning.

Donnelly (2013) urged that "...the world needs to hear from cartoonists who are oppressed, particularly women. There are very few women in political cartooning, and I believe what women can bring to the art form is a perspective that is sorely needed" (p. 1). This culminates with Ojoh's position to orientate women generally to begin to contribute and support women in politics through all forms of involvement. Perhaps, the general problem faced by the world now is the general maleness in the ideology that characterise the situation that seems not to have an end in sight. A different opinion, female, might better improve on the situation gearing it towards lasting peace.

The Works

In an interview on 14th March 2013 with Gabriel Erapa a cartoonist in The Sun newspaper confirmed that Folashade Adebare worked in the National Concord newspaper. She obtained a Higher National Diploma from the Yaba College of Technology, Lagos. She was active since 1985 and left practice in 1991 in the now rested National Concord before she left for the United States of America after she got married. Her themes varied from editorial cartoons to socio-cultural issues in Nigeria and the world at large. This strip below berates the culpable attitude of both some uniformed men and some members of the public as they engage in the ignoble act of giving and taking bribe.

It is important to add that she holds firmly that the main cause of the act of asking for gratification in the instead of punishing the offender is hinged on the pay cut met of the two units of the armed forces. She further asserts through the strip that it is a more common practice that transcends pay cuts as seen in the conversation coming from the driver that has been arrested by the uniformed men. The depiction seems to be a cross pollination of influence of her colleagues' namely Boye Gbenro, Dotun Adegboyega and Osazuwa Osagie's mannerism of depicting figures. The next strip below differs in depiction from the one above except for the evident puffy nose type.

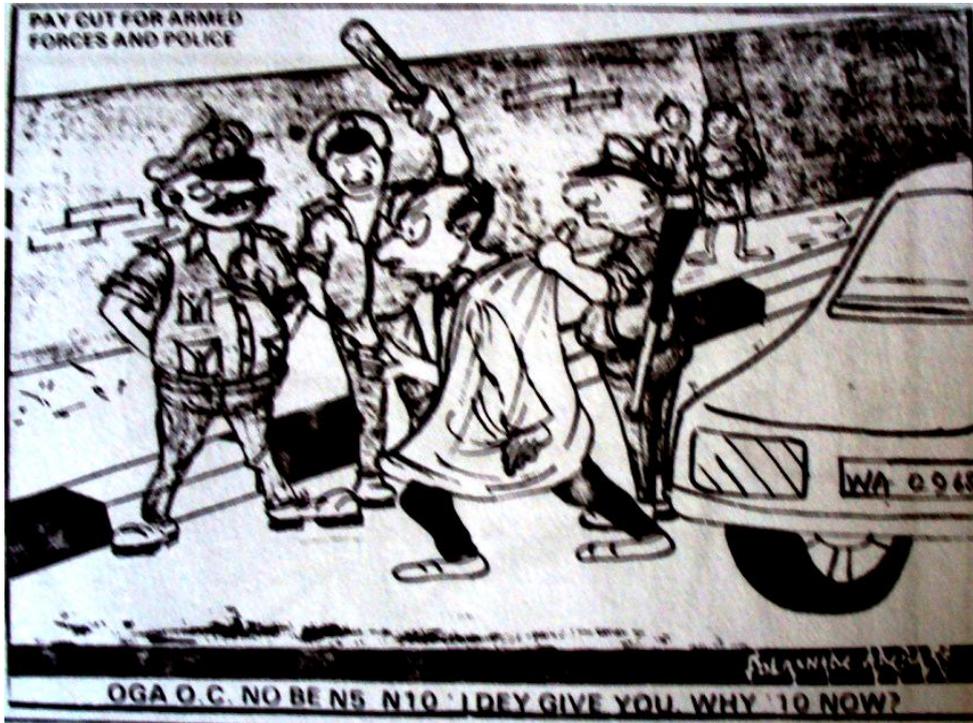


Plate 1 National Concord newspaper, November 12, 1985

Again, the dwarf-like stature of the figures is also similar to those of Gbenro's figures. This informs an inherent influence from Adebare's cartoons which makes this study to saliently oppose a theory on males being more visual-spatial than females. The term visual-spatial refers to a person that has the ability to respond to form in space, which includes the ability to manipulate objects and includes the creation of objects within all kinds of spaces. Silverman and Eals in Golon (2007, p.2) assert that 'Historically, boys and men have long excelled in spatial ability tests over girls and women. Some have proposed a hunter-gatherer theory, predicting that men excel in spatial abilities such as navigation, map reading and mental rotations because survival depended on the ability to hunt, hurl a spear through space at a moving target and find one's way home. Women, on the other hand required better spatial location memory in their work as gatherers.' Moreover, it is evident that Adebare depicts images adequately on a two dimensional space as shown in the strips presented. The trained ability to manipulate objects cognitively on two dimensional

surfaces has further aid her been able to surmount depictive challenge during the training she garnered in school.



Plate 2 National Concord newspaper, January 19, 1987

Golon (ibid) avers that “I have long been plagued with the question, thought, is this a teaching problem? Take no offence teachers, as I am a classroom teacher as well, but my work with educators in classrooms all over the world has convinced me it’s the later...because I strongly believe in the value of spatial awareness including reading maps, communicating directions, playing and building with construction toys (K’NEX, blocks and LEGOs)...etc”. This position also gives credence to an observation made by this article as to why some male students during drawing, sculpting and painting classes lend a helping hand to many female students that clearly display inabilities in any or all of the three practical fields. This assistance rendered are often on the female students’ work instead of giving examples outside the work to prevent the work from showing the male student’s style or rendering technique when the work is finished. The next three strips are those of the male cartoonists that she had worked with in the National Concord, namely Boye Gbenro, Dotun Adegboyega, and Osazuwa Osagie.

It is worthyof note that Adebare’s use of male figures in expressing her thoughts is evident of the male dominated nature of the work place at the time in the country. This might have been done unconsciously; perhaps, it bore on her mind to use male figures with the aim of making an impression on her colleagues and management, such that scholars are not aware of the strips as one done by a woman. In the strip in plate 1, she aptly depicts a female figure standing by a man both standing as onlookers as the driver is arrested. This she does to further express the helpless situation the citizens in the country find themselves, in the face of the attendant aggressive manner that characterise policing if they decide to interfere.

In plate 2, the man in a flowing gown could have been depicted as a female figure without losing the thrust of the message. However, the early 1980s was a time when women were just gradually finding an increasing footing in the civil service. This ordinarily beclouds her enough to depict men her strips more than the frequency at which to depict women. More so, she might have done this to also maintain her place in the eye of the male dominated profession vis-a-vis the almost inexistent place of women in the print media when she started in the National Concord newspaper.



Plate 3 National Concord newspaper, no date

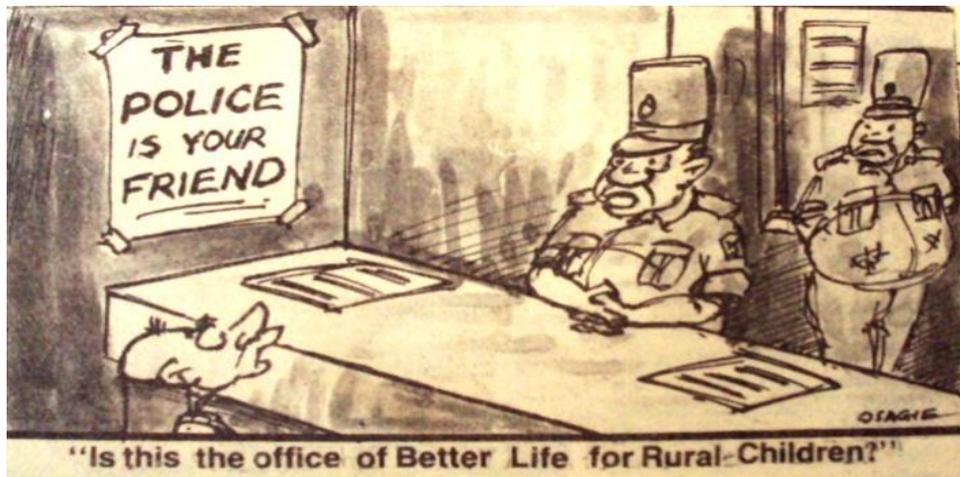


Plate 4 National Concord newspaper, no date

Note the dwarf-like nature of the figures in both strips above and the puffy nose types and that of Dotun Adegboyega in the strip below to be characteristic of most of the cartoonists in the National Concord at the time.



Plate 5 National Concord newspaper, January 19, 1987

However, Jimoh's position that all the other male cartoonists went to join her in the National Concord shows that she had her cartooning skills at her finger tips that exonerates her of the stereotype that makes a woman's work to be assessed by the male typecast judgement.

Issues and Views on Gender Values

The views of people about an individual, food, weather and a city among other subjects vary from one person, family, culture ethnic group or race to another. However, the view of who the woman is tends to be evidently based on the society she is born into and develops from one generation to the other. From the biblical perspective, it states that,

The woman should keep quiet in these church meetings. They are not allowed to speak out but should be under authority, as the Law of Moses says. If there is something they want to know, they should ask their own husbands at home. It is shameful for a woman to speak up like that in the church meeting. God's teaching did not come from you... (I Cor. 14³⁴⁻³⁶)

It has been observed that these three verses have perhaps, been the basis for which some men today find it odd for women to head places in both religious and circular institutions despite females' achievement in other professions. Presently, the church has female missionaries, bishops, pastors and evangelists doing the work that used to be seen as the specific preserve of men. This advancement in Christianity is a case in point that is used to engender concern for the study. A study like this one on the poor representation of female cartoonists in cartooning scholarship might unfortunately be tagged a feminist study. Yet, many authors hold unequivocally that Africa has a peculiar kind of feminism borne out of its socio-cultural difference with links to its matriarchal and patriarchal family systems that the continent diversely has in many of the ethnic groups.

Arndt (1999) posits that:

In public spheres of society, for example, African feminism is concerned with women's equality in monetary issues such as in judgment and the approval of credits. As far as family life is concerned, the African-specificity of feminist criticism comes light with traditionally grown aspects of gender inequality such as polygyny, circumcision, arranged and child marriages, bride price, levirate and other widowhood practices as well as misogynic heritage laws. Motherhood is never questioned, but rather as a rule defended. However, African feminists do insist that women should be able to realise and define themselves beyond wife and woman violence above all the discrimination of daughters-in-law (p. 4).

In this regard, the African has been able to develop a common ground of what to fight against for the woman, and it is not the woman's fight but the man's own too since the economy in Africa has thinned out so much that the role of the woman in a marriage has grown from being encouraged-to-work, to expected-to-work to support her husband irrespective of however little she earns. She also, like the boy-child, has the right to education to the highest level offered at all the tiers of education.

It is important to reiterate the fact that the underrepresentation of female cartoonists is not peculiar to Nigeria. For instance, Gibbons (2005) posits that "As an avid newspaper reader, I am constantly scrutinizing editorial cartoons for a ticklish take on the day's sobering cartoons. Rarely do I see a cartoon drawn by a woman.... Women are less than 4 percent of those same syndicates' editorial cartoons" (p. 1). Among the 4 percent are Signe Wilkinson (*Philadelphia Daily News*), Etta Hulme (*Star-Telegram* newspaper) and Ann Telnaes (*the Tribune Media Services*) whose works compare favourably well with the male cartoonists. Gibbons (ibid) goes further to state that "Just over 6 percent of members of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists are women". This alone is in America. Various concerned individuals

have also made their positions clear about the appalling representation of female in the cartooning profession.

In Nigeria, many of the documentation done on Nigerian cartoons and cartoonists have left the female cartoonists' works out. Agberia (2001) asserts that

Cartoons are useful instruments for influencing the government and its policies. It is one of the most effective and safest instruments for interfering with the policies of government, especially in a situation where the press is not given its due freedom as during the defunct Buhari/Idiagbon regime, the Ibrahim Babangida political impasse of June 12, and the (fascist) era of General Sani Abacha. When it is obvious that the press is gagged, cartoons become one of the irrepressible means through which critical opinions are freely expressed. Cartoonists who agitate or advocate tend to be regarded as rabble rousers. By popular conception the cartoonist is an individual watchdog within the society. More often than not, the government takes some of these cartoons in good faith (p. 42).

In his article he did not mention the works of female cartoonists as there were the likes of Folashade Adebare (rested National Concord) and Aderonke Adesanya (Daily Sketch, Nigerian Tribune and Vanguard). Despite the arrests and libel suits that characterise the response to the cartoons that lampoon government and politicians in the past in the country, it is the male cartoonists that are on the receiving end.

Conclusion

Many women suffer saliently an exclusion from practising cartooning in Nigeria. Such women include Gloria Joboson, who was relegated to just one cartoon strip and was not given the chance to practice because her gender ordinarily proves an inability to practise the art form. The management of The Sun newspaper perhaps decided that Onele should leave because her strips are not good enough. Most scholars do not believe women can make cartoons as a result of a stereotype that only men can make strips. All these inferences are drawn from the exclusion of the works of female cartoonists from the cartooning scholarship. (Deepwell 1998: 2) asserts that

One of the central questions for feminist enquiry is how history has produced and reproduced the confirmed marginalisation women artists, when, particularly in the twentieth century, the numbers of women artists have been steadily increasing as formal education became available to large numbers of women, and artists' clubs, groups and societies slowly admitted women artists as professional members.

The state of the female cartoonists is rather the opposite of the above statement as they one after the other get in for a while and leaves the profession not to practice elsewhere again. Though, Ronke Adesanya of all the female cartoonists worked in three different newspapers, and left perhaps, due to the challenge of combining the art form with art history lecturing at the James Madison University in America. Apart from Adebare; that left after getting married, the others had the chance of been motivated by an elevation from being freelance cartoonists to an in-house cartoonist that includes better remuneration. Most scholarship clearly did not raise concerns over the absence of female cartoonists or the intermittent existence of a low number.

References

- Agberia, J. T. (2001). The role of cartoons in the socio-cultural development of Nigeria. *USO: Nigerian Journal of African Art* Vol. 3 No. 1 Lagos.
- Arndt, S. (1999). African perspectives on feminism and African perspective in Women studies. *ANA Review*, Dec 1999.
- Awosiyan, S. (2008). Introduction in Revelations: Nigeria's political history in cartoons. *The Vanguard: 1999-2005*. Lagos : Canal paper converters Limited.
- Baker, K. (1995). *The Prime Ministers: An irreverent history in cartoons*. London : Thames and Hudson.
- Deepwell, K. (1998). Introduction. In Katy Deepwell, Katy (ed.) *Women artists and modernism*. United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.
- Donnelly, L. (2012). *Cartoons By Women Around The World Are A Needed Perspective*. <http://i.forbesimg.com>. Retrieved 21 April 2012
- Gibbons, S. (2005). Almost laughable: Dearth of female cartoonists <http://womensenews.org/article.cfm>. Retrieved 20 December 2008
- Golon, A. S. (2007). Boys vs. Girls: Are Boys More Visual-Spatial Than Girls? Why Gender Matters in Every Classroom. www.visual-learners.com. Retrieved 12 November 2012
- Holy Bible (2006). Easy to read version 1st Corinthians, chapter 14 verses 34 to 36. World Bible Translation Centre. Forth Worth, Texas
- Jimoh, G. A. (2010). *The Role of Editorial Cartoons in the Democratization Process in Nigeria: A Study of Selected Works of Three Nigerian Cartoonists*. An unpublished Master of Arts in Visual Arts degree thesis, Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos.

Ojoh, A. C. (2012). Empowering Nigerian Women in the 21st Century: Measuring the Gap. <http://www.grin.com/en/e-book/192007/empowering-nigerian-women-in-the-21st-century-measuring-the-gap>. Retrieved 23 December 2012

Interviewed persons

- i. Gabriel Erap; Cartoonist in The Sun Newspaper, Apapa, Lagos state
- ii. Prof. J. T. Agberia, lecturer, Depart of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Port, Harcourt, Rivers State
- iii. Jimoh G. A. Lecturer, Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Lagos