

# Transformative Education in Violent Contexts: Working with Muslim and Christian Youth in Kaduna, Nigeria

Colette Harris

---

**Abstract** This article discusses one approach to producing social change used in a transformative education project carried out in 2007/08 in Kaduna, Nigeria. Its participants were Muslim and Christian youth and the setting one in which, in the wake of recent inter-sectarian riots, the possibility of new outbreaks of community violence is ever present. The project aimed to open up spaces for reflection and citizen action at community level and increase participants' ability to analyse the local political situation, in order to reduce violence in the community. The success of transformative education depends on the ability of the facilitator to use pedagogy to support people to make fundamental changes in their frames of reference. In those instances where the methodology of the project was truly transformative and not merely participatory, it produced changes in thought processes – increased capacity for critical thinking.

---

## 1 Introduction

Our approach to produce social change in a transformative education project was not free from potential impediments, heightened by the violent and complex political context and the possibility of opposition from powerful local interest groups who hoped to benefit from keeping the situation volatile. Moreover, the actual execution of the transformative process itself is not without difficulties.

The project was developed by the author and Professor Steve Abah of Ahmadu Bello University in nearby Zaria in order to investigate whether transformative education methods could provide one answer to the overarching question of the Development Research Centre's (DRC) Violence, Participation and Citizenship Research Group – how to move from violence into citizenship, in the setting of Kaduna, at least. In so doing, we combined the approach used by Abah in his Theatre for Development work (see Abah *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*) with the kinds of transformative education methods I have been using since the mid-1990s, when I established an education project in Tajikistan to help returnees from the civil war rebuild their lives. This project

owed its success in great part to the way we matched Islam with gender issues (Harris 1999).

In Kaduna we also placed Islam at the centre of our work with our Muslim participants, while with all groups we focused on gender identities and particularly masculinity, which I firmly believe to be fundamental to social relations. While it might be seen as inappropriate for me as an outsider to tackle such issues, my position allows me to notice things insiders take for granted and thus to support participants to analyse local sets of gender identities and other aspects of their sociocultural situations for themselves and decide what changes to make.

This article reflects on our work in Kaduna, the methodology used, lessons learned, and the implications for moving forward. It discusses the benefits as well as the difficulties of applying this kind of approach. The article starts by introducing the concept of transformative education before describing the project, analysing the obstacles faced and assessing how far it has led to the communities concerned committing themselves to the production of social change.

## 2 Transformative education: conceptual underpinnings

Transformative education is a variant of what Mezirow has termed transformative learning. He defined this as ‘the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*’ or ‘structure ... of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition’ and ‘are composed of two dimensions: *habits of mind* and a *point of view*’ (Mezirow 1997: 5, emphasis in the original). The former derives from our cultural framework and reflects our overall worldview, while the latter involves a particular issue. The aim of transformative pedagogies is to provide tools that bring students to reflect critically on both and deconstruct them.

This allows one to realise that the superficial view of apparently fixed and unalterable sets of social relationships is merely the tip of an iceberg; what lies beneath the surface is revealed as something totally different. In order to arrive at such a conclusion, careful analysis is needed to break situations down into their component parts. These are then explored through a series of exercises that, when put together, lead participants to a different level of understanding of the issues concerned. A simple example of such an exercise we used in a similar project with farmers in Ecuador is studying the life cycle of weevils in order to realise that larvae develop into adult insects rather than the two being of distinct different species as appears at first sight. Understanding this reveals the laws of nature to be of a different kind than hitherto suspected and what is more important, shows they can be analysed and understood even by those lacking formal education (Harris and Suárez 2007). This transforms people from passive fatalists to active protagonists, as they increase their control over their surroundings, rather than feeling they exist at the mercy of seemingly incomprehensible forces.

Changing consciousness around social issues is, of course, far more complex, both because of their power implications and the difficulty of altering ingrained relationships and questioning one’s own identity. One approach is to focus on the role of gender identities. It has been shown, for instance, that in many settings, the make-up of masculinity plays a major role in encouraging men to engage in violence (Gilligan 2001). It

can, therefore, be very powerful for participants to deconstruct the definition of masculinities in their own communities in order to make visible ways in which young men in particular become vulnerable to pressures towards violence. The idea is that understanding these can enable students consciously to attempt to transform certain aspects of gender identities in order to reduce their own future chances of being pressured into engaging in violence.<sup>1</sup>

Mezirow points out that for people to open up to transformative learning they often need some kind of ‘disorienting dilemma’ (1981: 7) that unsettles them sufficiently to knock them off balance, preventing them from continuing in their previous routines and thus forcing them to seek new solutions, often along paths they might otherwise have rejected. In Tajikistan, for instance, such a dilemma was produced by the collapse of socialism and the civil war.

Mezirow and his school have been criticised for speaking too lightly of people having the power to negotiate change as individuals when in fact they are embedded in communities and collectives, such as the family, clan, or neighbourhood, in ways that inhibit many kinds of personal change (Archer 2007; Belenky and Stanton 2000; Srinivasan 1992). Other critiques from the global South point out that learning styles are affected by cultural background and gender and that to provide an optimum learning environment these need to be taken into account (Assié-Lumumba 1997, 2001).

Both Abah’s and my own experiences made clear the importance of considering cultural backgrounds and power differentials and particularly of developing methods appropriate for our most marginalised participants, including those without access to formal education. These experiences have also shown us the difficulties of carrying out this kind of project. Besides the usual skills for this type of work, the facilitator must be capable of analysis, able to work without set modules, and knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects; such capacities cannot be acquired overnight. In their absence, sessions may still be participatory but, the transformative element being lacking, their impact will be significantly diminished.

### 3 The project in Kaduna

Both the town and the state of Kaduna<sup>2</sup> in northern Nigeria have roughly equal populations of Muslims and Christians, who have coexisted for generations. However, the town has been the site of major sectarian riots, the worst being the clashes in 2000 over the prospective introduction of *Sharia* into criminal law. Further riots broke out in 2002 when Nigeria was to host the Miss World contest, after a journalist was said to have insulted Islam by suggesting that Prophet Mohammed would have approved of the spectacle (*HRW-News* 2003). These events have given rise to considerable anxiety about the future, which is why local authorities welcomed our proposals to carry out transformative education sessions.

Despite strong suspicion of westerners on the part of many Nigerian Muslims, my presence seems to have been accepted with relative ease. As in Tajikistan, bringing in religion as an explicit part of the educational process proved vital and my identity as an educated white woman enabled me both to be seen as female and to portray characteristics normally attributed to Muslim men, permitting me to work with both sexes.

In June 2007 we started our project in Kaduna with three participant groups. The first was a mixed religion women's group, the members of which were students in a vocational school in central Kaduna. Working through the school facilitated the inclusion of Muslim women, who otherwise would have been unlikely to gain their husbands' permission to attend.

While the women could come together without significant tensions, this was not the case with the men. Our two men's groups therefore, were mono-religious, based in the mainly Muslim Kawo district in Kaduna north, and in the Christian majority district of Romi in Kaduna south. In the former we gained the support of the local *hakimi* (district chief), as well as *imams* and the leader of the local youth association; it was the members of this last who comprised our participants. In the latter, our sponsor was the local Baptist minister, and the group consisted of members of his church. Thus, in both places, religion was integral to the project.

To facilitate this work we trained three people – a Muslim woman, a Christian and a Muslim

man, all with prior experience in community development in transformative education techniques (Harris 2008). Each was then attached to the corresponding participant group.

The women's sessions were integrated into the school curriculum and immediately became popular, mainly because of the opportunities they provided for discussions around womanhood in Kaduna that allowed them to reconceptualise many issues relevant to their daily lives.

Unfortunately, circumstances beyond our control forced this group to disband. In early 2008, a new group was established within the context of another project. This was still going strong some eight months later, with over 50 members and regular weekly attendance of some 25-35 mainly Muslim women.

The men's sessions were not incorporated into a school setting but were held, respectively in a community hall in Kawo and in the Baptist Church in Romi. The Muslim group started with great enthusiasm but the lack of immediate material benefits, such as pay for attendance, was badly received and gradually numbers decreased from the initial 35 plus to some 10-15 regulars, most of whom had completed secondary education; a couple having university diplomas. This group retained their enthusiasm and even continued the sessions on their own after their facilitator had to be withdrawn when the project funds ran out, showing how important this programme was to them. Moreover, they started volunteering in their community to pass on what they were learning.

Because of the greater stress placed on schooling, Christians in Kaduna tend to be better educated than Muslims, many of whose parents are opposed to secular education. This was reflected in the fact that the members of our Christian group were generally of a higher educational level than our Muslim group, several having bachelor degrees, and it turned out that despite all our disclaimers, their expectations had been that we would provide jobs and/or scholarships to overseas universities. When it was clear neither were forthcoming, most of the participants stopped coming and the few remaining were insufficient to sustain the group.

Analysing, in-depth, the differing attitudes of the three groups, it became apparent that another

significant factor that influenced participants' levels of enthusiasm was the intersection between the topics addressed with each group and their own particular needs, as will be explained below. Although our aim was to focus on issues around violence, the subjects tackled in the sessions were chosen by the participants themselves based on their identification of their everyday problems. It was a sense of relief at gaining tools to help them tackle some of these that encouraged the Muslim participants in particular to commit themselves to our project.

In addition to being the most socially marginalised, the Muslim women were the least educated of our participants – many were illiterate with no formal schooling. The project gave them for the first time a forum in which they could interact in a group and address questions of the status of women as well as gain tools to help them tackle social, political and health-related issues, and they found this immensely rewarding. In a review session held in August 2008, all 25 women present claimed the project had transformed their lives. They had improved their health and that of their families, managed to convince their husbands to send both sons and daughters to school, and radically revised their approach to raising their children, in particular encouraging the boys to eschew violence and keep away from rowdier peers.

The Muslim men directed most of their attention to analysing issues of social interaction within their own community, concentrating mainly on what it meant to be a man in this setting and the ways in which this affected their actions. For instance, their analyses of real men as polygynous, secluding wives, and refusing to educate daughters showed how this frequently increased poverty and thus also the potential for violence. The popular concept that the male characteristic of bravery is best performed through violence and/or aggression was countered by proposing a more Gandhi-like approach that participants believed would demand even greater bravery and thus in one sense be even manlier, while achieving the aims of reducing rather than encouraging violence. All this led participants to question whether it made sense to maintain the generally accepted images of masculinity, and to resolve not only to lead their own lives differently from their forefathers but also to raise these issues with the larger community.

The Christian group concentrated chiefly on political issues. They spent several sessions analysing the *Sharia* riots, and debating whether or not it was useful to conceptualise the main social divides in Kaduna along religious lines. This helped them realise that neither Muslims nor Christians gained from conceptualising each other as enemies and that far from the Muslim masses being the beneficiaries of special political favours as the group members had previously believed, adherents of both religions suffered from similar problems. However, while such reflections might reduce the potential for future violence, they did not help participants improve their current situations. This may partially explain why this group felt the educational process was offering them too little of substance and decided to abandon it.

An important part of the project was addressing issues of citizenship. Here we looked both at formal citizenship, mainly focusing on electoral politics, and at substantive citizenship. By this last, following the work of Gaventa (2006), we meant people undertaking citizen action to improve conditions within their own communities without government or other outside support. We started our sessions on citizenship by exploring with our participants the supposed function of elected officials in a democratic state as the defenders of their constituents' interests. However, it quickly became clear that the current political climate in Nigeria made it impossible for the men in particular to believe that elected officials would ever be willing to listen to or collaborate constructively with (poor) constituency members. This led us to switch our attention to ways in which participants could become substantive citizens by taking on responsibility within their own communities. About three quarters of the women's group claimed they did this by systematically passing on what they learned to family, friends and neighbours. The young Muslim men took this up more formally by carrying out voluntary work in which they passed on what they had learned with us to other youngsters in their community, within semi-formal institutions like youth clubs, as well as during informal discussions.

Moreover, after the group leader went to Kaduna South with Abah's theatre organisation, a noticeable change took place in regard to the

attitudes of the Muslim men participants towards Christians (Abah *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). The young man used his position to bring the other group members to reflect on this and the latter did the same with community members with whom they worked. In this way, one man's experience positively affected quite a number of others.

Thus, even if the project could not be said to be wholly successful it was also not a total failure; despite its shortcomings, a clear, if limited, impact can be noted.

#### **4 Transformative education in relation to violence and citizenship in Kaduna**

Our intervention aimed to explore the premise that transformative education was an appropriate instrument for reducing tendencies to violence by increasing people's capacity for critical reflection and thus equipping them to analyse, and potentially resist, future calls to violence. Therefore, we targeted those most likely to be involved – young men between 15 and 30, although most participants were over 20. We also worked with women, since we believe they can play an important part in influencing their menfolk and in some cases may themselves directly participate in violence.

The ferocity of the riots and the fear of recurrence, as well as the socioeconomic marginalisation of our young participants, served as Mezirow's disorienting dilemma. To take advantage of this, we needed appropriate analytical approaches to help uncover what lay beneath the surface and gain an understanding both of the issues involved and of why so many young men came to involve themselves in violence.

To do this required two different kinds of exercises. The first would help uncover things concealed outside the participant group and the second would reveal what might be hidden within the group. The ramifications of both are complex and likely to upset existing power relations and therefore may well be threatening to multiple interest groups, on multiple levels. These include local political elites who see their interests in being able to manipulate poor young men, religious leaders who may feel their authority derives from an ability to sway their constituents in whatever way they choose, and

even community elders who fear losing their authority over their youth.

In relation to the world outside, our main aim was to increase participants' capacities for political analysis to enable them to think through the implications of future calls to violence and whether it was to their benefit to respond. To this end we devised a number of exercises, one of which centred round the use of mapping. Here, we asked participants to chart the most significant divisions within Nigeria, Kaduna State, Kaduna town, and their own neighbourhoods, respectively. When this was carried out with the Romi group, their first attempt highlighted Christian/Muslim and ethnic divides. Further reflection, however, resulted in another set of divisions based on wealth, which they realised were more significant than the first (Harris 2008). In terms of lifestyles and daily experiences they could see far fewer distinctions between poor Christians and Muslims than between rich and poor within each religion. This spoke directly to the issues behind the disturbances, particularly in relation to the *Sharia* riots, during which, according to our participants, the wealthy lost very little, as their persons and property were barely touched, while the poor lost both lives and possessions. This allowed the participants to consider how the poor were manipulated to the benefit of the elite.

The internal analyses focused mainly on deconstructing gender identities. This was particularly salient for the Muslim group, who identified the rigid spatial boundaries between male and female and a number of the most important traits assigned to each as conducive to both poverty and violence. For instance, they were able to analyse how polygyny led to large families and how men's inability to find the resources to support these was additionally hampered by female seclusion – keeping girls out of school and preventing women from taking jobs (Harris 2008).

While carrying out such gender analyses was of interest to the majority of the young men involved, this also at times proved contentious, particularly among casual visitors to the sessions who felt challenged by these analyses and would insist their relationship with Islam made Hausa Muslim gender identities sacrosanct. Once or twice this caused physical fights to break out

between some of the participants. Each time it turned out that those who had started the fighting were older men who apparently did so in order to defend their own positions – for instance, to justify their own polygyny. Thus, it seemed to be strong reactions to discussions of masculinity that caused the fighting. Perhaps these men had more invested in their current versions of masculinity than the youths we mainly worked with. However, the fights were never serious and were quickly stopped.

## 5 Conclusion

While the project had some success, it was not without problems. First, we were unable to identify an organisational basis for our facilitators that would allow them to take over the project and continue it without outside support. Abah and I had little difficulty being accepted as project leaders, largely because of his position as a leading scholar and development agent, but we could not personally sustain such a programme long term. Second, our limited resources made it impossible to provide sufficiently rigorous facilitator training. Since our method depends on direct response to participants we use sets of exercises aimed at moving participants analytically through different stages of the topics concerned rather than providing standardised fully developed modules. This means facilitators need considerable flexibility and the ability to provide a rapid response to participants' comments and questions, something that takes significant experience and knowledge to carry out well, and which we often failed to manage.

Despite this, those participants, both men and women, who remained long-term with the project, insisted they had learned a great deal from it and that it had appreciably changed their lives. Thus, imperfections notwithstanding, the project made a real impact. How far this has equipped participants to analyse political situations and make conscious decisions not to engage in violence in the future is impossible to say. In order to achieve our full aim, considerably more time and more sophisticated facilitation would be needed.

In those instances where the methodology used in the sessions was truly transformative and not merely participatory, it produced changes in

thought processes, increased capacity for critical thinking, and even the incitement to citizen action discussed above. These were particularly noticeable in the Muslim men's group, who went from taking for granted many characteristics of masculinity to critiquing them, especially in relation to the current material situation (Harris 2008). These critiques mainly focused on issues directly relevant to their own lives and ways in which to improve them, using the tools they had learned through the project to do so. Women's weaker power position, particularly among the Muslims whose mobility is so highly constrained, limited their ability to make the same level of change as their male peers.

We were unable within the limits of this programme to address in-depth issues of power relations within the communities or to examine how vested interests could put obstacles in the way of making change. Rather, we concentrated on exploring how political interests had manipulated people's religious identities for their own ends to pressure young men to engage in violence, looking at how elements of masculinity were misused in doing this. We then worked through with participants how such elements could be transformed so as to proceed in a different direction.

The success of transformative education depends on the ability of the facilitator to use pedagogy to support people to make fundamental changes in their frames of reference. In our variant, the deconstruction of gender identities and most especially of masculinities, is the central pivot of analysis and, thus, of decisions to take action to produce change. The realisation that gender is socially constructed and often in a way that is a hindrance not only to women but to men also, acts as a catalyst for behaviour modification, although at times limited by strong countervailing social pressures. However, even a small change in the performance of masculinity and a limited commitment to local citizen action changed the lives of our participants and their communities for the better. It would require a further outbreak of serious conflict in Kaduna for us to confirm whether the project has generated a significant ability to resist being incorporated into the violence on the part of the male participants and those community members with whom they have been working.

## Notes

- 1 For details of how similar changes were achieved in another project, see Harris (2006).

## References

- Archer, David (2007) 'Seeds of Success are Seeds for Potential Failure: Learning from the Evolution of Reflect', in Karen Brock and Jethro Pettit (eds), *Springs of Participation: Creating and Evolving Methods for Participatory Development*, London: Practical Action Publishing
- Assié-Lumumba, N'Dri Thérèse (2001) 'Gender, Access to Learning and the Production of Knowledge in Africa', in *Visions of Gender Theories and Social Development in Africa: Harnessing Knowledge for Social Justice and Equality*, AAWORD, [www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/ndri.html](http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/ndri.html) (accessed 5 July 2008)
- Assié-Lumumba, N'Dri Thérèse (1997) 'Educating Africa's Girls and Women: A Conceptual and Historical Analysis of Gender Inequality', in Ayesha M. Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (eds), *Engendering African Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA; 297–316
- Belenky, Mary Field and Stanton, Ann V. (2000) 'Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing', in Jack Mezirow (ed.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Gaventa, John (2006) 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis', *IDS Bulletin* 37.6: 23–33
- Gilligan, James (2001) *Preventing Violence*, New York: Thames and Hudson
- Harris, Colette (2008) 'VPC – Kaduna, Nigeria', unpublished end of year report
- Harris, Colette (2006) 'Managing Masculinity in Ecuador', *ID21 Insights* 64
- Harris, Colette (1999) 'Health Education for Women as Liberatory Process? An Example from Tajikistan', in Haleh Afshar and Stephanie Barrientos (eds), *Globalisation and Fragmentation*, London: Macmillan
- Harris, Colette and Suárez, Carmen (2007) 'A Transformative Approach to Extension', in Margaret Najjingo Mangheni (ed.), *Experiences, Innovations and Issues in Agricultural Extension in Uganda: Lessons and Prospects*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers
- HRW-News (2003, 15: 13) 'Nigeria, The "Miss World Riots": Continued Impunity for Killings in Kaduna', [www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/07/22/miss-world-riots](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/07/22/miss-world-riots) (accessed 24 December 2008)
- Mezirow, Jack (1997) 'Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice', *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 74: 5–12
- Mezirow, Jack (1981) 'A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education', *Adult Education* 32.1: 3–24
- Srinivasan, Lyra (1992) *Options for Educators: A Monograph for Decision Makers on Alternative Participatory Strategies*, New York: Publications/Communications Development Service

- 2 See Abah *et al.* in this *IDS Bulletin*, for more information on this setting.