

Crafting Future Memories: Reflections on a Female Carpentry Training Project in Lagos

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Myth of gendered labour and specifically the masculinisation of certain forms of artisanship are both steeped in Victorian colonial ideals of female respectability that serve to exclude unemployed, educated women from market-relevant, lucrative jobs in carpentry trades, in the city of Lagos, West Africa. These historically situated dynamics of social exclusion expose an increasing number of educated women to poverty in one of Africa's primary economic hubs. Utilising the linguistic devices of rich descriptions and first-person accounts in this reflective paper, and drawing data from culturally-grounded ethnographic research on a female carpentry training project in the city, I examine how the communities which emerged from the project negotiate socio-economic, familial, and historical constraints in an effort to build new, inclusive training pathways and craft alternative future narratives of gendered labour practices in Lagos.

Keywords: gendered practices; cultural memory; lived experience; everyday performance; Lagos.

I: Re-imagining a carpenter's shed

The shed was our most critical experiment at Designs For Life (DFL), the furniture company and social enterprise I established in 2013 to provide free carpentry training to educated yet unemployed women, preparing them for lucrative blue-collar jobs in the port city of Lagos, Nigeria. Visitors to the shed would have encountered a modest structure: a purpose-built, bamboo-screened, outdoor carpenter's workshop buzzing with the sound of tools and machines acting on wood. But a visitor was also bound to encounter an unlikely sonic counterpoint: the chatter and laughter of women constructing furniture. This aural aspect of the shed was important because the space was also DFL's quintessential laboratory for community engagement. Here, we experimented with the

gendered underpinnings of the social norms of artisanship, their limits, and possibilities. It was also in the shed that we put to test the ostensible paradox of “women carpenters” and the importance of new forms of habituation in subverting assumptions about specific forms of female artisanship.

As a lifelong Lagosian and a scholar of gender, everyday performance and Yorùbá cultural heritage, I viewed DFL as the culmination of a set of political and academic interventions. Devising and leading the DFL project created opportunities for developing everyday performance strategies that opened up alternative pathways out of poverty for a growing number of unemployed, educated women in my home city, where gendered poverty has remained endemic¹. The shed, therefore, was like a rehearsal space, both a practice workshop (conceived expansively) and a site for actualising gendered activism. The relatively controlled environment of the shed became my preferred space to question a long-standing myth associated with artisanship in the city: that educated Lagosian women should not train as carpenters. This deeply rooted, highly consequential narrative has sustained itself not only through male hostility but also through the rhetoric of female respectability that permeates everyday Nigerian discourse. The presumed timelessness of cultural practice is emphasised by lively banter and perceptions that women’s formal education constitutes a barrier to interactions with uneducated male artisans. Unquestioned truths, such as this one, are further reinforced through a culture of segregated formal and vocational education, as well as through all-male carpenters’ workshops scattered across the city. Everyday life practices, problematic assumptions, and the visual markers of carpentry reinforce one another to normalise a gendered labour practice, which, this essay shows, is entangled in historical and cultural omissions; in silences that render invisible this society’s involvement with conventions of modern labour practices and its complex web of exclusion. It is in this sense that the DFL shed also becomes as much a rehearsal space for new gendered practices, as much as a space for remembering and for inclusion. The shed intervenes by shaping in the present new

¹In an effort to address the socio-economic challenges posed by feminisation of poverty in the city, the Lagos State government in 2001 created a fully-fledged cabinet office dedicated to Women s Affairs and Poverty Alleviation.

possibilities for the future. In this way, the shed functions as a repository of living memories, and a space to craft future memories.



Figure 1: A trainee at the DFL shed (Image courtesy DFL Foundation Archive)

II: Beyond the text

A Yorùbá philosophy is summarised in the proverb: *A kì í sọ pé ojà-á nígbà; bó bá nígbà, kíńsẹ tí wón tún ńná a?*², which loosely translates as ‘We do not say there is a (fixed) time for transactions (market); if fixed, why then do we renegotiate terms?’ The saying invokes a pressing need to review seemingly ageless traditions in light of new developments. Older generations of Yorùbá market women would cite the proverb in critical arguments for urgent re-evaluation of trading contracts that are no longer fit for purpose, particularly where said contracts compromise profits and create unnecessary hardship for involved parties. The proverb offers a prompt to all stakeholders to keep future transactions viable by considering prevailing economic conditions in adapting the terms of previous contracts. The proverb is also a meaning-making paradigm that privileges dialogue, performance and reciprocity in renegotiating conventions and social

² Note that Owomoyela (Yorùbá Proverbs: 198) provides a literal translation when he writes: ‘One does not say there is a time for the market; if it were so, why would people continuously patronise it?’

behaviours. My decision to curate a carpentry training project for a growing community of unemployed educated women in Lagos is grounded squarely in this Yorùbá worldview.

To frame this work in the theories and registers legitimised by the research community means not only acknowledging other modes of *knowing* and *doing*; it also offers a way to recalibrate my method of analysis. As a female academic gathering data on educated women in a ‘field’ that is also home, I was both a witness and co-performer with research subjects on this social change project. My lived experience, the participants’ embodied knowledge, and the opportunities and challenges we created or navigated together were inevitable sources of data. To interpret and share insights from these everyday performances in the neutral, (supposedly) objective, distant tone of conservative academic writing seems inadequate. When I write in the jargon-laden, obscure language that is an homage to the academy, what assumptions do I make of the imagined reader? If this imagined reader were a Lagosian woman in a carpentry shed, what sentences, words, imageries, theories and citation practices, might I mobilise to engage them?

It is both ethical and appropriate to write about this research through first person narrative: in a style that comes as close as possible to the manner of speech and articulation of the community who made the project possible. The resulting in-depth account weaves across historical, social-societal and interpersonal contexts, providing readers beyond the research community with tools to imaginatively experience the world described. In the specific context of this special issue, it is an example of how to write qualitatively about gendered labour practices in a West African city.

III. Hidden Figures

Qualitative research in cultural studies boasts a long interdisciplinary history of investigating the processes by which societies transmit cultural memories about labour practices. Yet academic interventions on the challenges faced by Africa’s overwhelming unemployed youth population, and the increasingly gendered nature of this reality, has remained largely confined to the fields of politics, economics and development studies.

It is from these classic social science fields that one finds some illuminating research data on the urgency of the DFL community engagement project. To illustrate, the year before DFL opened its doors to its first cohort of students, I found a report published by an agglomerate of international development agencies in 2012 which shows that about six million young people enter Nigeria's labour market yearly but only 10% secure a job in the country's formal sector and a mere third of these are women (Gender in Nigeria, 2012). Put differently, every year, a surplus of almost three million unemployed educated women confront the unenviable challenge of creating a livelihood in the country's unpredictable and extremely volatile informal job sector, where a beneficial business forecast is near impossible due to minimal infrastructural support, inadequate policy regulations, and a dearth of data on markets. Enfield (2019), identifying underinvestment in women as an important barrier restricting women's entry into the country's labour market, argues that beyond the complex challenges of Nigeria's informal sector, misogyny and patriarchal interpretations of culture compound the country's gendered inequalities. Myths of gendered labour practices and, more specifically, the masculinisation of certain forms of artisanship are good examples of cultural norms that preemptively exclude women from access to market-relevant vocational training required for well-paid jobs in the country's vibrant trade sector.

The impact of this exclusion is perhaps more visible in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital with an estimated population of over 20 million people. Lagos is a federal state – as well as a port city – with the country's most dynamic trade sector and persistently high rates of youth unemployment³. Its population size reflects the presence of a robust market, but the simple economics of a high number of people competing for extremely limited resources makes it near impossible for most to create viable livelihoods in the precarious informal sector. This is a city where growing numbers of unemployed and underemployed educated women are made vulnerable to poverty daily in ways that diminish their capacity to participate in, contribute to and develop meaningful connections with society at large.

³ For more details, see Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Labour Force Survey, Second Quarter 2020.

Lagos suffers from a shortage of skilled artisans, carpenters inclusive, even though the city's construction sector has thrived in the wake of public investment in extensive state-wide projects that also gentrify poor communities. Privately funded residential building projects have also bolstered public investment in construction, with skilled migrant workers recruited from neighbouring countries like Benin and Togo and further afield in China to match labour demand⁴. Although most unemployed graduates in the city acquire some vocational training over the course of their formal education, women tend to oversubscribe to training in female-dominated trades such as tailoring, catering, hairdressing, and in recent times, photography. They are thus disproportionately disadvantaged in the opportunities presented by Nigeria's labour shortage in the construction sector. Casting the problem of gender inequality or poverty in purely economic or policy terms often elides the powerful cultural ideologies that undergird access to sectors in demonstrable need of female talent. A segregation of vocational practice along gender and sometimes class lines takes root in Nigerians' notions of female respectability, but economic frameworks are ill-equipped to show how myths are underpinned by everyday cultural practices or through the material conditions of their production and re-enactment.



Figure 2: Up skilling at the shed (Image courtesy DFL Foundation Archive)

⁴ See for example Ezea, 2017. "Growing Concern as Expatriates Take Over Artisan Jobs in Nigeria"

IV: Building a space for ‘wayward girls’

The early years of DFL’s female training initiative were marked by scepticism on many fronts. DFL administrative staff, whose primary responsibility was to provide logistical support to trainees, quietly expressed concerns about the viability of the project. Professional carpenters commissioned to conduct training sessions were pessimistic about the women’s long-term commitment or readiness to learn carpentry. There were also unsolicited comments from members of the public who considered our effort to reverse gendered labour practices audacious. Phone enquiries to DFL’s administrative office often ended with expressions of disappointment at the fact that we were only interested in working with unemployed educated women. My most memorable conversation on this matter was with a potential client who visited the DFL furniture company to commission some sofas and dining room sets while the DFL project training shed was under construction. The mother of two unemployed educated daughters, she was intrigued by our proposed community engagement project but expressed doubt about trainee recruitment and retention. Convinced we were on the wrong path and determined to put my colleagues and I right, she was unequivocally clear that her daughters would not be seen learning a trade with “local male carpenters in public!” And, if we insisted on running the project we could only hope for success by enrolling “society’s wayward girls”. Implied in the client’s comment, and in the broader public scepticism, is a class and sexual subtext: the assumption that training with ostensibly lower-class male carpenters would also entail sexual relationships with the trainees.

On another level, this client’s classification of waywardness signals the naturalisation of contemporary patriarchy that straddles zones of contested citizenship rights and gender inequality across Africa⁵. The discursive context in which the client’s sentiments were raised is, however, not unconnected to the success of another women-focused vocational training project in Lagos: the Female Mechanic Initiative (FMI). Founded by Sandra Aguebor, FMI provides automobile mechanic training to marginalised women with little

⁵ See Pailey’s “Women, Equality, and Citizenship in Contemporary Africa” for an excellent analysis.

or no formal education. Aguebor's visionary efforts with FMI, particularly in re-integrating sex workers into society as productive, dignified citizens, has been celebrated by local and international media, including the America's Cable News Network (CNN). As it happens, the FMI's chosen demographic, young women at the start of their productive lives labelled 'wayward', for their presumed compromised moral standards by a society fast embracing patriarchy as its dominant culture, is precisely the challenge for sceptics of the DFL project. The rationale here is that if there are women who could and should work in a predominately male space, Sandra's female mechanics were the ideal type. They exist as the antithesis of the respectable (read: educated) woman. It would matter little, then, if we revealed to the proponents of this narrative that when DFL initiated a city-wide campaign for its first cohort of female trainees, it received no single application from the so-called 'wayward type'. It would also not matter if we informed them that only two applicants – of the over 50 applicants shortlisted for the initially available five training positions at DFL – were secondary school graduates. The overwhelming majority had at least one degree and most had been unemployed or underemployed for a minimum of two years post-graduation.

Perhaps DFL sceptics would have been less cynical were they aware that their concept of a respectable woman is in fact a product of past British colonial domestication policy on the African continent. Akyeampong and Fofack (2013), for example, argue that in the face of long-standing traditions of female industry and entrepreneurship, women across the continent were secluded in the domestic domain under the Christian discourse of respectability. In the case of Nigeria, the British domestication project was a carefully crafted, complex social process that involved the colonial state, the church, and their schools. The stakeholders in these institutions united around the belief that the creation of 'civilised' monogamous Christian households required the re-education of African women alongside policing the intimacies of African family life. Ejikeme (2011) documents how the Nigerian colonial government supported Irish nuns in the creation of an elite class of respectable women in Calabar, Onitsha and Kaduna by championing the domestic sciences as the best education for African girls. The situation was further complicated in Lagos where the 'natives' were just as vested in advancing the

domestication project as the colonial authorities⁶. The project, largely successful because it was integrated into existing cultural, religious and political institutions, became recast over time as authentic, traditional cultural practice. Once reengineered as 'tradition' the notion of the respectable woman successfully transformed from a Victorian colonial ideal into part of indigenous, Christian and Islamic African culture, shifting existing gender dynamics in ways that rendered women more vulnerable to poverty and oppression than was previously the case. Arguments to exclusively train the 'wayward type' in lucrative, male-dominated trades ignore these historical facts. They also fail to connect how resulting outdated social and cultural constraints contribute to the lived realities of a growing population of unemployed, educated women who are unable to create sustainable livelihoods in Lagos.

V: The shed: recoding gender

Although questions about respectability and the respectable woman persisted in the planning phase of the DFL project, the historical picture and how it continues to shape the socio-economic realities of women in Lagos was not my pressing concern. I was preoccupied more with addressing what I identified as the two salient factors that played a defining role in excluding educated women from carpenter's workshops across the city: the duration of apprenticeship and the unregulated structure of the pursuit. Taken at face value, both factors appear to be gender-neutral constraints; in practice, however, they contribute immensely to the reproduction of gender (dis)advantage in the workshop. At many of the workshops I visited while conducting project reconnaissance, I observed that although apprentices learnt through practice, instruction on elements of carpentry was based solely on available customer-commissioned work⁷. And because neither the type nor availability of work could be guaranteed, trainees tend to spend extended periods in the day, of between four to six years (sometimes longer), shadowing master artisans. The sporadic work completed during this period allows the apprentice to accumulate a required minimum number of hours of practice on different aspects of the trade, but the

⁶See, for example, the story of Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa-Blaize in George's *Making of Modern Girls*.

⁷ It is important to underline that gender bias manifests at the commission stage, specifically in the misguided conflation of masculinity with superior expertise.

informal mode of teaching could prove especially challenging to anyone accustomed to formal educational practices. Similarly, the flexibility and open-endedness of the carpentry apprenticeship provide the critical skills to succeed in a trade marked by unpredictable demand, but this open-endedness also presents a potential problem. There is a high potential for abuse in an unregulated system where trainees not only provide free labour, but also might be asked to perform tasks wholly unrelated to honing carpentry skills. This dynamic could readily produce disempowering gendered consequences for young women learning the ropes in a male-dominated industry.

The ambience and condition of the workspaces themselves constitute a source of gendered exclusion⁸. Eighteen of the twenty carpenter's workshops I visited across Lagos were badly lit and in need of better ventilation. Fourteen of these workshops were located on dusty, un-tarred roads with heavy traffic, with the remaining six located within open markets dedicated to the carpentry trade. Only one of the 20 had a toilet that provided any privacy for men or women. These workshops, however, shared a striking denominator: they all housed an array of sweaty, shirtless men crammed together in small, overcrowded, dusty workspaces. They shared these spaces with their tools, personal belongings, and furniture built for sale. Whatever one thought of the 'respectable woman' or how she came to be, these workshops were certainly no place for her, or indeed for any kind of woman, or man, for that matter. The carpentry shed, across Lagos, is not only extremely uncomfortable, but also a potentially hostile environment to visit for even a short period. It is patently uncondusive to structured learning over a prolonged time, especially for women.

These challenges moulded our imagination of what would be the shed. Creating a safe and inclusive space for female carpenters demanded more than inviting them into sheds as they were, and hoping that they would somehow thrive. DFL needed to reimagine the work environment if it were to stand any chance of attracting its chosen demographic: educated women. Therefore, armed with a humble budget and a lot of support from family

⁸See Massey's (1994) still topical argument that space is not empty but produced culturally by social relations.

and friends, some with architectural and construction skills, I converted a derelict tool house on the same premises as the DFL furniture company into a suitable workshop for female carpenters. We elevated the roof and ceiling of the building for improved lighting and ventilation and constructed a side wall of bamboo slates to provide some privacy from suppliers and clients visiting the furniture company. A couple of carpenter's benches found in the old tool house were repurposed; we installed a chalkboard for instructors; and ensured access to reliable electricity for power tools. The shed was completed with essential indoor and outdoor storage areas, toilets, a shower, and a changing room. Because DFL was equally invested in bridging the theory-practice nexus of carpentry, we had to consider how the newly designed architecture could foster for students a continuous reflection of the principles that undergirded the craft of carpentry. We achieved this by creating an indoor air-conditioned classroom where a tutor on contract from the city's foremost technical college prepared our trainees for relevant national certification examinations by teaching the theoretical aspects of carpentry with entrepreneurial skills. To secure these training spaces as well as to improve the overall ambience, we fenced and gated the carpenter's workshop off from street traffic. The administrative offices of the existing DFL furniture company provide logistics and material procurement support. The task of envisioning inclusive infrastructure became a critical basis for the work ahead.

Consistent with our goal of intentional design for equity, we also needed to reimagine the curriculum. Working with DFL's technical college tutor, I devised a carpentry training programme that provided trainees with the technical skills required to acquire carpentry competence within two years. We structured the programme based on four six-month-long, hands-on modules that started with a required introductory carpentry course. While we encouraged trainees to complete all four modules, we designed the first two to provide enough general carpentry knowledge to enable trainees to undertake a variety of tasks within the trade. These tasks ranged from cultivating communication skills with clients and colleagues, through drafting, to learning and applying a variety of wood joinery techniques. By providing four short courses imparting incremental levels of technical competence, we allowed DFL trainees constrained by care or other domestic

responsibilities the flexibility to determine both the duration of training and the degree of technical skill that they could pursue given their circumstances⁹.

VI: Building alliances

The shed could not exist in a cultural bubble. For it to survive, we needed to secure the buy-in of powerful social actors, from individuals with direct authority over our trainees and those who police and benefit from patriarchy to those who shape narratives of gendered labour practices in Nigeria. These included mothers, neighbours, husbands, fathers, pastors and imams. The success of the DFL carpentry project hinged not only on eliciting as little possible resistance from these constituents but also on securing, where possible, their enthusiastic support. We adopted two main strategies in articulating DFL's benefit to these stakeholders. One was to highlight to them the DFL project as an entrepreneurship course where women acquired essential carpentry skills and trained as business owners. This was an outcome that would benefit not only the women but, theoretically, the stakeholders who currently possess decision-making power over their lives. Another strategy was to acknowledge and attend to the balance between the women's carpentry training commitments and the existing demands on their everyday lives. DFL classes officially ran from ten o'clock in the mornings to two o'clock in the afternoons, four days a week, to accommodate childcare and other domestic responsibilities which we recognised as highly gendered. It was for this precise reason that the carpenter's shed opened from eight o'clock in the morning and closed at six o'clock in the evening every day of the week, ensuring that trainees gained flexible access based on their own schedules beyond official opening hours. In addition, we encourage trainees to build furniture pieces required in their own homes for their individual and group projects. For example, one of our trainees built a full set of kitchen cabinets to update her home. This ostensibly simple idea helped to transform family members and even religious institutions into allies. Otherwise resistant male family members encouraged their unemployed or underemployed female relatives to enrol, with most of

⁹DFL project was nominated as a positive and profitable business innovation by students of the Lagos Business School in 2015. Our work and story lives on to the UN Global Goals inspired AIM2Flourish: Business as an Agent of World Benefit programme's platform.

our trainees accompanied on their first visits by a male relative. There was also an unexpectedly high number of applications for the first cohort from members of the Redeemed Christian Churches of God (RCCG), a prominent Pentecostal Christian organisation in Nigeria which has a notable footprint around the globe. A leading female pastor within the organisation had heard of the DFL project, made a general announcement about the project at a regional RCCG women's conference, encouraging members to apply to the programme. Word spread in this community even though no member of the DFL team was associated with the church or its affiliated organisations at the time.

Reflecting on this period and their subsequent achievements on the carpentry project a year later¹⁰, one trainee stated:

I can't believe I am now paid by my neighbours to build furniture pieces. These were the same neighbours who laughed at me when I started this training. They told my husband that he is encouraging me to grow "unwomanly" muscles, which surely makes me less pretty. The funny thing is I feel prettier with these muscles... I have earned their [the neighbours'] respect and [I] bring home money to my family.

A second trainee highlighted the project's flexible time arrangement as the main deciding factor for her family. In her words:

My husband's major concern in supporting my decision was the extra cost of childcare on the family budget...Although I explained how I planned to structure my training around our child's school schedule, he was initially reluctant...These days my carpentry skills are on display in different areas of the house, and he is always the first to call a guest's attention to a table I built or a chair I fixed.

¹⁰ Both quotations are excerpted from a DFL video diary recorded in 2014.

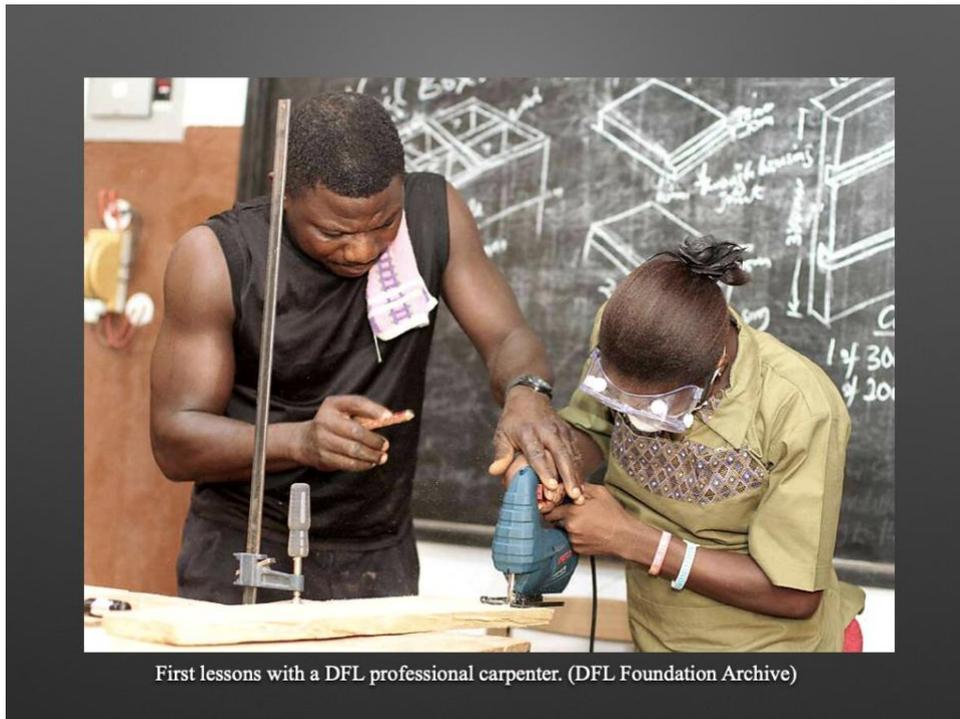


Figure 3: Professional male carpenters became important allies on this project

Support emerged from unlikely sources and convincing clergy and family members turned out to be the easier part. The greater challenge was in persuading male artisans to join our project. They simply refused to work with women, or, should I say, they harboured reservations about working with the stereotypical 'educated type', their main objection being that these women were either too lazy or too weak to engage in the intense labour required to produce good furniture..

This was a gendered trope not totally unconnected from Nigerian notions of female respectability: that physical labour stands at odds with the prevailing ideas of respectable womanhood. Knowledge transfer from male artisans to female apprentices was core to the DFL model. Therefore, a different strategy became necessary to cross this critical hurdle. As DFL is also a furniture company, we invited several experienced artisans to partner on commissioned work on the condition that all furniture pieces must be built at the DFL centre. Once on location, the invited carpenters observed as our trainees built basic furniture pieces while following instructions from their technical school tutor, who

also happened to be a skilled carpenter. In time, a carpenter who had worked with us in building the DFL shed agreed to instruct our trainees. Many months later, another seasoned male artisan who specialises in upholstery decided to join us. It was a small win converting three conservative (sceptical) carpenters to our cause, but it was a win made possible by first curating a different gaze of craft and female embodiment. Witnessing young women applying themselves to carpentry enabled these men to discover a new way of thinking about labour, artisanship, and the female body. This became a subtle but important intervention in the broader mission of re-coding gender in the carpentry workshop.

Although the women did not need to, their daily work thoroughly debunked the myth of the educated woman as lazy and weak. Their hard work, passion and commitment to learning carpentry produced results beyond our expectations. By the end of their first year of training, alongside working on individual projects, these previously unemployed educated women, who had never considered retraining as carpenters, were assisting their teachers and other DFL carpenters on small and large projects. One of the most symbolic tasks that culminated their growth was the full refurbishment of an executive lounge at the Nigerian International Airport in Lagos. Interestingly, almost all DFL applicants indicated an aspiration to migrate outside of Nigeria on their application forms. However, DFL's data on the first cohort show that only 20% migrated after receiving training, while 80% now work within different areas of carpentry in Nigeria, often collaborating on commissioned projects with DFL former instructors. Even as the women are cultivating their skills to be able to compete in the lucrative construction sector, their participation is certainly helping to fill a critical gap in the equally labour-deficient furniture industry. Not only have they gained the respect and admiration of their instructors, but they are also now earning a decent living inside the city's formal sector. The women's higher levels of formal education and their social network complement their carpentry skills in the business world, where they are better able to generate profitable business leads in comparison to their competitors. There is so much about the trajectory of the apprentices that inspires pride, thus offering real encouragement about the prospect of broader social change.

One testimonial by an outstanding DFL trainee stood out for me. She is paying forward her free carpentry training by providing other unemployed and underemployed women with similar opportunities at her very own carpenter's shed in Abuja, Nigeria's federal capital, where she and her family currently reside. Her words are worth citing in full here:

I found my voice at DFL. I became a professional with skills that gave me choices I never imagined existed. After the initial two years of carpentry training, DFL assisted in connecting me with a successful female entrepreneur for a six-month business management internship. I got my first job as a carpenter-upholsterer afterwards, where I worked for two more years before setting up my very own workshop as a social enterprise as well... I had to give back! I am living proof of what happens when an educated woman is empowered as a carpenter. All I am doing now is sharing what I know with other women.¹¹

Having women crafting beautiful furniture in the masculine-coded space of a carpenter's shed is DFL's most important intervention into everyday behaviour, and insights on the project's real-world impact are best deduced from participants' individual experiences and stories. These human stories demonstrate how an innovative research project drives social change from within. They show that it is possible to challenge and reshape deeply entrenched myths of gendered labour practices, with life-changing results.

¹¹ In DFL correspondence with her for testimonials in 2019

VII: Crafting future memories - from the shed to classrooms across Lagos



Figure. 4: Lagos State Government secondary school girls at a DFL introduction to carpentry workshop. (Image courtesy DFL Foundation Archive)

The success of the shed inspired a desire to scale up the project. The experience gained with DFL female trainees had proven the efficacy of everyday actions in shifting perspectives on social norms, but it also signalled the urgent need for early intervention in secondary schools, well before students make crucial career choices. This is an urgency further heightened for educated teenage girls in economically deprived and marginalised communities in Lagos, where scarce financial resources threaten academic and life aspirations. The decision to extend elements of DFL's training programme from the shed to a younger socio-economic group was informed in part by feedback from our first cohort of trainees. Their conversations while at work in the shed offered crucial insights about the Nigerian education system and the myriad ways it socialises women into gendered occupations.

Current Lagos State education policy, across all levels of education, and specifically from primary to secondary, mirrors a broader Nigerian system that segregates vocational education from mainstream academic curriculum – and often along gender

lines. This gendering of vocational training in Lagos is an enduring legacy of the historical role educational institutions played in normalising notions of Victorian female respectability. It has persisted as an education system that excludes educated girls from acquiring market-relevant skills with the potential of creating sustainable income streams. Extending DFL training from a small carpenter's shed to classrooms across Lagos furthered the project's core mission of revising everyday gendered labour practices in Lagos.

Scaling up, however, required a strategic allocation of scarce resources as well as a reenergised capacity to engage with Lagos State Government officials with their penchant for bureaucracy. From this perspective, scaling up became an opportunity to develop a network of community allies – as important social capital – within the Lagos State school system and a strategy to motivate community participation for sustainable cultural change.

To facilitate this scale-up process as well as to establish the DFL project as an initiative of a non-governmental and a not-for-profit legal entity, I registered *Designs for Life Foundation* in Nigeria in 2015. A year later, I launched the Foundation's pilot project to provide free, hands-on, traditional upholstery training to girls in public secondary schools across Lagos. DFL's small-scale furniture company funded this initiative with pre-tax profits spread over two financial years. This was a modest grant but it covered the cost of tuition, training materials, and refreshments for four weeks of training at each participating school. It was particularly important that we allocated some money for refreshments on the project's budget because our beneficiaries were from communities where children sometimes attend school without breakfast or an allowance for lunch. By providing a drink and a light snack before training commenced, my team and I ensured that none of the girls we worked with sat through lengthy training sessions hungry. The sad reality was that there were many more who required access to both the training and refreshments than we could cater for, and we often increased the number of beneficiaries at those schools where the need was particularly high. In three academic years, and in spite of these challenges, DFL provided free introductory training to over 1000 girls

across Lagos, at 48 different secondary schools managed by Lagos State government's Yaba and Ikoyi District Education Boards (EDBs).

It is critical to not lose sight of the conditions that necessitated the DFL project to begin with. Gender disparities in economic opportunities and access to good jobs remain an immediate existential challenge for educated women in Lagos. For this reason, we only recruited either unemployed or underemployed educated women as DFL instructors on the schools' project. Our exceptional team consists of ten instructors, one project coordinator, and a logistics and support administrator. The administrator role is office-based while the instructors are mobile, teaching in teams of two on a pre-scheduled duty rotation basis at different locations across the city. The project coordinator, who supervises these five teams of instructors and the administrator, visits all participating schools and organises monthly team meetings at the DFL shed for evaluation, feedback, and socialising. All members of the team were employed on part-time contracts of five days' commitment per month. Four days were dedicated to conducting training workshops at participating schools and one day was for evaluation and feedback at the DFL carpenter's shed. Structured part-time work of this nature is rare in Lagos, where there is also a vibrant university community of undergraduate and research students. This made the DFL instructor's post a very attractive work option for those within and outside of the University of Lagos community. That DFL paid a competitive daily wage and provided free basic-level upholstery-carpentry training made it an especially compelling project to join. The staffing approach at DFL was, like everything else, geared toward fostering effective collaboration, opportunity, and a sense of community among women.

In June 2019, the summer before the global COVID-19 pandemic kept students out of Lagos State Government schools for almost a full academic year, we paused the DFL schools project marking the event with a free, two-day carpentry training workshop. One hundred beneficiaries from the top ten of our 48 schools participated, improving their traditional upholstery skills while learning new carpentry techniques. Also in attendance were teachers and representatives from Ikoyi and Yaba EDBs, as were local and international mainstream media - including the Yorùbá service of the British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). A festive atmosphere marked with food and drinks was heightened by the excited voices of a hundred girls learning new skills as they engaged in friendly competition for accolades and prizes. When the BBC correspondent asked one of the girls why train as a carpenter? She looked straight into the camera and confidently responded in Yorùbá:

Ati mò wìpè ikan tí okùnrin lè se obìrin lè se jùbeelo... Isé kafínta yíi le je kí awon obìrin tí o wa ní adugbo ní ita mò pè àwa obìrin naa tí n gbáradí pé nnkan tí okùnrin lè se obìrin lè se jùbeelo nínú isé kafínta. (We already know that what a man can do a woman can do better... Our carpentry training/work is particularly helpful for women in this community to understand that we (as girls) are preparing to out-perform our male colleagues in carpentry.)¹²

Indeed, there was a lot to celebrate and a lot to be optimistic about for the future. Collectively, we had demonstrated the possibilities of renegotiating the terms of existing gendered labour practices in the field of carpentry and created a project that provides a real pathway out of poverty for an increasing number of educated women and girls in my home city of Lagos. The project also showed what could be achieved by a committed few to affect even modest social change of an inequitable order. The lessons from the shed and DFL classrooms are instructive of the possibility of creating more just circumstances for women. On a personal note, I had worked with an exceptional team of women and men and found incredible allies along the way to build a simple, scalable, replicable project that engaged members of my community in the work of social change.

VIII: “Writing off the beaten track”

The DFL project, like the continuous negotiations of outdated contracts in market spaces earlier described, is a process of remaking cultural memories: an effort to create what could be from what was. It is a collaborative, qualitative research project designed to produce new cultural narratives of gendered vocational practices in Lagos. The objective

¹² Interview provided to BBC Yorùbá language service in 2019.

was not to tear down ‘traditions’ but to use them to understand how to build healthier and more equitable realities that are context specific.

A similar ethic of intentional revision informed my approach to write a reflective essay on the research in vivid, personal narratives that are based on first-hand experience and witness accounts. Writing in the first-person meant I could deeply reflect on my experience conceptualising and implementing an innovative project that produced a culturally sensitive, demonstrable impact. I could also examine the critical role played by my research community in our attempts at normalising the image of educated women in a carpenter’s shed. In addition, this genre of writing offers opportunities to explore how the participants and I navigated complex socio-historical, economic, and political constraints to demonstrate change through everyday performances.

In contrast, the formal tone of conventional academic language with its requisite organising arguments and supporting citations resist this human engagement. In this textual paradigm, “knowledge means rising above intimacy” (Conquergood, 2013: 48). But the luxury of emotional distance or detachment is hardly available to those who bear the brunt of gendered exclusions and inequalities in employment placements. The resulting economic hardship neatly documented in statistics and colourful graphs are in themselves a critique of the absence of emotional depth in conventional academic work based on lived experience. Academic writing does not need to be boring or unengaging, when it could well flourish through insightful, first person accounts and performative narratives.

This post-academic writing is for and about the DFL research community: it is for the women and men whose commitment in time and resources made this social change project a success.

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