

Centre for human development organized a writing competition in 2010 as part of a project designed to assess the contribution of the women's movement to women's empowerment and gender equality and repoliticize civil society. The project was supported by the Ford Foundation as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the organization's debut in Nigeria. The competition was open to the men and women between the age of twenty and forty years, the objective being to develop their skills in writing, designing and creating short plays, essays and poetry and to stimulate their interest in issues regarding the changing roles of women in society, bridge the gender gap and publicize the concern for gender and equality. It was designed to stimulate enquiry into the changing roles of women in society and institute a gender sensitive representation of arts and culture. Hitherto, gender issues have been weakly integrated into the school and college curricula, restricting knowledge while also encouraging discrimination against women to persist. The competition was advertised twice in the Guardian ad called for submissions on "Nigerian Women, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" in form of prose, short play or poetry.



The writing competition attracted about five hundred participants. It was interesting to note that there were more men contestants than women. After a preliminary review of the entries by a committee of assessors chaired by an eminent professor, the submissions were classified into four categories: Essay, Drama Prose and Poetry. The best five entries in each category were listed for presentation at an awards ceremony held at Ikeja Airport Hotel on the 19th of October, 2010. After the welcome address by Professor Simi Afonja, the Executive Director, Centre for Human Development, and an address by the special guest of honour, Professor Adimora Ezeigbo, each short-listed candidate made a short presentation (see Annexe 1);

WINNERS AND RUNNERS-UP IN THE FOUR CATEGORIES				
NAME	DRAMA	ESSAY	POETRY	PROSE
1 st Prize	Albert Oluwatoyin Oluwayinka	Adebayo Ahmed Adebola	Debra Ayis	Eliagwu Ameh
2 nd Prize	<u>Oagbai Uahomon</u>	Okechukwu Charles Ugochukwu	Toyin Adewale Gabriel	Chiaka Ukachukwu Obasi
3 rd Prize	Onyebuchi Nwosu	Ekunno Michelle	Bode Asiyambi	Isaac Attah Ogezi

The first three entries in each category received cash presents and plaques from Professor Adimora Ezeigbo while the two runners-up received plaques. Working with the youth under the Writing Competition was exciting and informative. The assessors were very impressed by the quality of the submissions and the wide range of issues discussed. It was notable also that some of the best entries were from men and their view on women were largely positive and progressive. The winners and runners-up are presented in the table below. CHD has plans to publish the best set of entries in the near future.



Annex1

MY MESSAGE ABOUT NIGERIAN WOMEN, YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

By

FINALISTS OF THE WRITING COMPETITION

TUNJI AJIBADE

Women had played important roles in the society among various ethnic groups in Nigeria in the past. They still do today. My prose, titled 'Suliya', caught a significant angle to the current efforts of women activists who have brought relief to women whom tradition, norms or religion have made to undergo treatments they don't deserve. Such efforts range from deployment of legal instruments to social actions against every inhuman treatment of children, girl-child, women and widows. My story is predicated on the sensitive issue of girl-child marriage. This is a burning national issue that has pitched federal government institutions against the states. This issue is of special interest to women, and it should be, not only because it concerns women most, but because no other person can have as much passion as they do in the effort to combat it. Many women in NGOs, for instance, address the issue of women and girl-child marriage using legal means. This has always been of interest to me, and it is what I captured in 'Suliya'.

Such women in the legal arena will continue to have significant roles to play both today and in the future, and my message to them is: don't rest on your oars until the female folk is liberated from every shackle in whatever form it comes."

CHIAKA UKACHUKWU

My work, **Breaking the Silence** shows what many Nigerian women passed through situations in the past which some of them are still subjected to today and the roles played by women themselves as well as the efforts some of them have made as shown in the character of Ada, to fight against the forces that oppose their right to live without suppression from the men. Nigerian women of yesteryears as portrayed in Ada's mother and Nmaji, her late husband's aunt were not expected to complain about what they passed through in the society. Of course she was not empowered to cater for the family when her husband died. Her in-laws took away everything. Unfortunately some women (such as Nmaji who joined in accusing Ada of killing her husband, Goddy) contributed and still contribute today, to the traumatic experiences their fellow women face. Even today, a widow (like Ada) is still forced to observe some obnoxious cultural and widowhood practices to prove she is innocent and does not have a hand in her husband's death. These are issues of the past (some of which still linger today) that Ada decided to deal with. She had made up her mind even before Goddy's death that she would no longer keep quiet like her mother but speak for herself and her fellow women. To her, the parliament provides a good forum to raise such issues. This will help secure a better future for women and the girl-child. Of course while many Nigerian women still suffer from suppressions similar to those addressed in **Breaking the Silence**, some of them like Ada are educated and are activists, lawyers, politicians, parliamentarians, speaking for the women for a better tomorrow. It is expected that these women activists should intensify their efforts to give the silent and ignorant woman a voice.

TEMITAYO OLOFINLUA

"The King's Lady" is the story of a young girl, Halima, who decides to make her life count despite all that's hurled at her: rape, prostitution and poverty. It's the story of resilience against all odds. It is the story of many Nigerian girls.

ADEGUNLE TIMOTHY

Nigerian women have come a long way to a position equidistant with men on the ladder of success. Yesterday, they lapped up all the rites of the fiendish and barbaric customs and tradition in their second fiddle status. Today, they are gallant warriors and conquerors like men in all spheres of life giving direction to the path to modern life. Definitely, tomorrow holds the much anticipated future bliss of the new world order if the moon in the world of Nigerian women is allowed to further reflect the light of the sun. Therefore as substrates to homes and the society, women must be seen and heard, given opportunities as men. Sexual difference is basically a distinction made of God for procreation and companionship and not a mark of male superiority or dominance. Women have and exhibit the same potentials as men except those that are peculiar to the masculine anatomy. Yet, their best surely lies ahead if egalitarian principles are applied on females and males.

ONYEBUCHI NWOSU

Over the years, Nigerian women have been the unacknowledged vanguards of development in Nigeria. From the ancient times through the present, they have been systematically sidelined and exploited. Nature, man and they themselves have been responsible for fanning these embers of enslavement and subjugation. But time has come for these forces of ingratitude and oppression to be uprooted and totally destroyed. Time has come for Nigerian women to tactically employ persuasion rather than coercion, time has come for them to bond-together rather than work at cross-purposes; time has come for them to push aside fear and disunity. Time has come for them to strive towards holding leadership positions so that they can change traditions, stereotypes and legislations which downgrade and degrade them. This is the time to demolish all the numerous roadblocks standing on their way to progress and good life. This is the time to break the cycle!

OAGBAI UAHOMON

The work shows a woman and her daughter who suddenly are awake to their low status and low public perception of them during's day celebration. They stand against the decision of their husband and father in quest of their dreams, education, socio-economic space and self-worth. Failing to lure or force the teenage girl into early marriage, the man unleashes violence on both his wife and daughter, a situation only saved by the arrival of the police. The author loads the play with symbols, dreams, poetry and suspense resonant with the themes, scenes or tension, with the moods or beliefs of the characters; and subtly urges man to appeal more to his better nature rather than to his macho instinct or male force and gender prejudices or stereotypes that undermine women's status and development.

ADEBAYO AHMED

The position of women incorners of the globe is usually over-looked, under-rated or simply neglected. The same trend goes for Nigeria. In spite of these challenges, Nigerian women have contributed immensely to the growth and development of the nation. This they have achieved in various spheres of life - arts, law, education, health, journalism, politics etc. All these contributions notwithstanding, Nigerian women are yet to reach their full potentialities as they are hampered by ignorance, illiteracy, low political participation, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, gender discrimination etc. It is hoped that with the eradication of these obstacles, Nigerian women will contribute far more to the growth and development of the nation.

TOYIN ADEWALE GABRIEL

My poem "Sister Cry" is a celebration of the history of Nigerian women. It is about the 'sheroes' who have gone before us, their impact, their sacrifice, their joys, as well as their heart aches. We are a short memoried people. In our schools hardly Amina of Zazzau or Moremi of Ife, not even Margaret Ekpo of recent memory. It is important to salvage the history of the women effort in the Nigerian experience, to say we too, as women have always been proudly Nigerian. This is the heart beat of Sister Cry.

ALBERT OLUWATOYIN

In the beginning we were leaders, home builders, financially empowered and the backbone of our societies. However, with the dictates of colonization we were relegated to the background. In modern times we fight hard to take our place in the society not only as we were in the beginning but polished and refined to face the realities of our times. Yet more women are marginalized because the knowledge of our past and the present live in the hands of few women. We need to spread the light to the suffering women in the villages, the young girls and women who are faced with the challenges of this present age. They need to know that their difficult situations should be seen as mere distractions of life. We need to be strong, courageous, focused and forge ahead irrespective of our challenges to give birth to a greater tomorrow. For women are the strength of life, the cradle and pillar of Nigeria. Keep walking, keep moving, for the sky is the limit.

BODE ASIYANBI

Heroes most times are forged in gold in the blinding fire of glitz. Their names ring glittering bells in our ears very accustomed to worshipping feats beyond us. So when I sat to write a yesterday, today and tomorrow trajectory of Nigerian women, I was quick with the illustrious names. Then I stopped. I stopped not because I could list no more or their feats were less deserving of mention but because I remembered. I remembered that heroes are not just those who touch the stars but also those whose simple lives humble, inspire and motivate us. I remembered my mother. I saw her in everything I am and will ever be. True, father was the captain of the ship, mother was the rudder. She gave us direction, she gave us purpose, she was the unheralded administrator; just like millions of other women. They shoulder the burden of the nation. Their inner strength and insurmountable will make them excel when given the chance at tasks men stumble to fulfill. The rhythm from the drums of my work reads simple. Yesterday has proven the mettle of Nigerian women whether acknowledged or not; today is the time of awareness, of consciousness, of awakening; to step out of the long shadows as the unheralded shapers of a nation into the foreground and head into that blinding light of tomorrow- the tomorrow of equality, the tomorrow of everyday heroes, a tomorrow where taboos of discrimination are trampled under nimble feet. And that tomorrow begins today- that tomorrow is now.

DEBRA AYIS

My entry in the competition is a poem titled 'CHANGING TIMES: THE NIGERIAN WOMAN'. The poem addresses the changes that the status quo of women in this nation has experienced. It looks into the past, present and future of women and their perception in terms of gender equality in Nigeria.

ELIAGWU AMEH

Vagina Protest takes the reader through the existential condition of three fistula-burdened girls—a condition characterized by the thorns of rejection, isolation, depression and self-hate. However, rather than simply lament the plight of these rural girls by portraying them as mere passive victims, the story shows that these girls (and women in general) are also effective change agents and repositories of valuable knowledge that could engender societal development. By painting a picture of the multifaceted vulnerabilities of women in our society, this story does not aim to reinforce binary oppositions between men and women, but rather seeks to entrench in every heart the pertinence of the symbiotic relationship that should exist between both sexes—a relationship that has our shared humanity as its common denominator. It is a relationship that reinforces the fast-eroding spirit of African communitarianism, whereby the pains and joys of our neighbors are also ours, irrespective of our neighbor's sex, age, or class. This story criticizes the covert or overt practice of reducing women to machines of procreation and objects for sexual recreation. Particularly, it frowns at forced or early marriage practices, since they do not only deprive underage girls of a significant portion of their childhood or adolescence but also thrusts upon them burdens of adulthood that they are not physically and psychologically prepared to bear. This story is apt for the Nigerian society today, as we can no longer afford to have gender-blind policy statements

concerning women's rights issues such as early marriage, maternal health, girl-child education etc. This is particularly true if we consider, for instance, the 1998 World Health Organization's research that estimates that at least two million girls and women the world over grapple with fistula and that between 50,000 and 100,000 new cases are reported each year. A good number of these fistula-burdened women reside within the shores of our country.

TORSABO DAVID TERPASE

My work is in form of prose, called 'The Valkyrie.' A Valkyrie in Norse mythology is one of a host of female figures who decide who will die in battle. They are also described as daughters of royalty and warrior women. It is precisely on this last description that I base my story. It is a story of a young woman Mimi, who was raised by her single mother, Aza. Aza is a widow who decides to raise her only daughter with the most unlikely of jobs, as a professional mourner. She constantly humiliates herself, crying hysterically, and portraying intense grief at burials, though a very beautiful woman. Aza is the Nigerian woman of yesterday, who was not empowered, grossly unskilled, and only good enough to play marginal and undignified roles in the society. Mimi constantly feels embarrassed about her mom's profession and she grows up determined to cry less in her life. She excels in sports and academics, wins scholarships to further her education above the level expected of the youths, especially the female children. She goes on to become the first female S.U.G president of any Nigerian University by defeating Mars, a spoilt, proud and over exposed male chauvinist. Mars is humbled and becomes reclusive, but his unexpected friendship with Mimi changes him to a better Man. He falls in love with her and they get married in a well celebrated occasion. Mimi is retained in the university as a junior lecturer since she is the best graduating student. Her achievement earns her the name, the Valkyrie: a strong and purposeful woman and a portrait of the modern Nigerian woman who is determined to succeed in a male dominated World, with a more secured tomorrow for herself and the Nation.

CHARLES OKECHUKWU

The Nigerian Women's development effort in the Nigerian polity was relegated to the background during the period covering the pre-colonial days until towards the end of the twentieth century, despite their contributions in agriculture, trade, health, spiritual matters, sports, politics and science and technology. The reason was that, little attention was paid to their status traditionally and encouraging them to be educated during the colonial and post-colonial era was done minimally. But today, they have improved tremendously in all facets of life, providing requisite skills and education for themselves to meet the challenges of their position and attracting more recognition. Tomorrow, giving their steady and amazing rise in importance and contributions, complying with the MDGs in developmental strides in Nigeria; they will gradually occupy the centre-stage in Nigeria's political scene and other areas of human endeavours, as well as in the international scene, and their emancipation totally from the men- dominated world will be realisable.

ISAAC OGEZI

In this story, I have tried to examine the introduction of Sharia in some parts of Northern Nigeria vis-à-vis the rights of women there. It is principally centred on forced child marriages, VVF, domestic violence against women and the legal status of women under Sharia. Withdrawn from school to marry a man old enough to be her father, 13-year-old Hafsat develops VVF during childbirth. While she struggles for a way out, her husband dies. Armed with her share of the inheritance, she vows to take her destiny in her hands, to continue with her truncated education. But she has reckoned without the introduction of Sharia in the state, where pregnancy without wedlock is frowned at. My message in this story is that the woman today is not better off than she was yesterday. It is a passionate plea for a more drastic action to be taken to change the ugly situation especially in states where Sharia is practiced.

ANTHONY ITODO

Till Death Do Us Part is a play that x-rays the pains women experience in the event of the demise of their husbands. It exposes some of the harsh practices of many cultures in Nigeria that suppress widows. The play also shows how the legal system can be used as a tool in addressing some of these age-long suppressing attitudes towards women in our contemporary times. As depicted in the play, Nigerian women need to take a stand and fight for what is theirs. The legal system is always a powerful tool in this regard.

Picturama



Executive Director, CHD, Professor Simi Afonja and the MC, Mrs Abie Ani



*Executive Director, CHD, Professor Simi Afonja and
guest of honour, Professor Adimora Ezeigbo*



Executive Director, CHD, Professor Simi Afonja delivering a welcome address



Professor Adimora Ezeigbo delivering an address



Members of the assessment committee



Members of the assessment committee and Executive Director, CHD



Short-listed candidates at the Award Ceremony



Short-listed candidates at the Award Ceremony



Short-listed candidates at the Award Ceremony



Short-listed contestants at the Award Ceremony



Presentations by contestants



Presentations by contestants



The Assessors



The MC

The Awards

