

Nigerian women in the diaspora in pursuit of self-actualization: A case study of three women in Britain, USA and Australia

VICKY OMIFOLAJI

Introduction

This article explores the experiences and the self actualisation of Nigerian women in the diaspora using experiences of three Nigerian women based in Australia, the UK and USA as case studies. I will trace the progress of these women from their pre-diaspora era to their adaptation to the diasporan way of life and their self-actualization. The paper outlines reasons behind their struggle to succeed and aspirations to improve their social status. The paper will describe the challenges these women face and their fortitude in turning these challenges to their advantage.

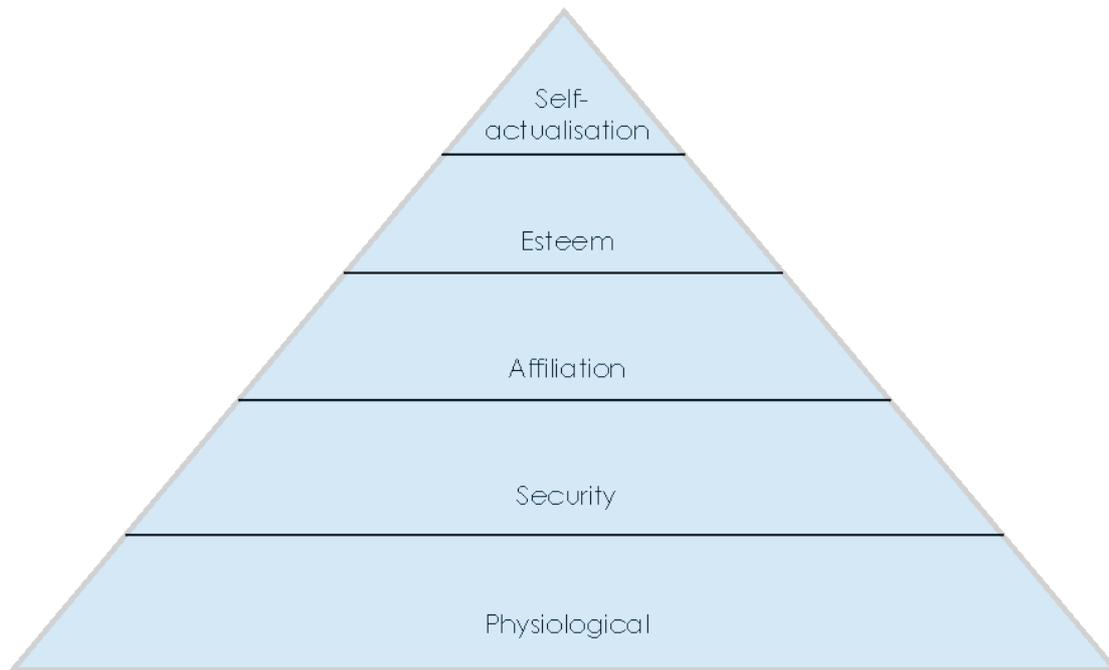
What is self actualization?

Self-actualization refers to developing or achieving one's full potential. According to Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer (2001), self-actualization is the process of striving to actualize one's potential capacity, abilities and talents. It requires the ability and drive to set and achieve goals. It is characterized by being involved in and feeling committed to various interests and pursuits. Self-actualization is a process and to be able to promote it, it requires hard work, patience and commitment. The following steps of the self-actualization process need to be observed, as suggested by Maslow (1971):

- Be willing to change
- Take responsibility
- Examine your motives
- Experience honestly and directly
- Make use of positive experiences
- Be prepared to be different
- Get involved and
- Assess your progress
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Self-actualization is a life-long effort leading to the enrichment of life (Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer 2001). Self actualization is the highest need for human beings. Physiological needs are the needs we all strive to satisfy before the next set of needs which are generally known as security needs, affiliation needs and esteem needs (Hellriegel and Slocum 2007). If all these needs are satisfied, we may still feel restless and discontent unless we are doing what we are suited to. The needs of self-actualization do not become apparent until the needs of physiology, safety, love and esteem are satisfied.

Looking at the Needs Hierarchy Model (Maslow in Aucoin 2007) a person has five steps of needs: physiological, security, affiliation, esteem and then self actualization.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Aucoin, M. 2007: 62)

Hanley and Abell (2009) note that the interpersonal model of self-actualization emphasizes the importance of relatedness as the substance of individual growth at all levels of psychological development.

As a Nigerian woman who has been living in Victoria, Australia for the past nine years, I had assumed that I was the only Nigerian woman faced with the urge to define myself not just as a wife of a medical practitioner, or a mother of three children, but with my academic achievements and success in my profession. I re-connected with my childhood friends after over 20 years of no contact and apart from my childhood and old school mates, I also linked up with over 65 Nigerian women that now call Australia home. I was able to identify with most of their stories and realise that there are distinctive similarities in all the stories of all these Nigerian women.

The awareness of the way most Nigerian women pursue their goal of self actualization came to me when I was at an interview for a social work position in a local hospital and I was asked about my greatest achievements. I initially thought about it and despite the fact that my interview panel had my resume with them, I informed them with pride of my studying for Masters in Counselling, travelling 160km each way from Melbourne in order to attend classes, and how I completed the program just after I gave birth to my daughter. I also mentioned completing my second masters program while working full time, caring for my three children under eight years of age and being married to a busy local general practitioner and business

man. I remembered during my first Masters program, I would study all night while my children were in bed and would struggle to stay awake for them during the day to care for them. I also remembered all the challenges I faced during my second masters degree program. My being able to successfully complete both programs despite all the challenges, gave me a sense of fulfilment and joy. My reply to a simple question by one of the interview panel reminded me of the responses from my friends, old school mates and new acquaintances, when I asked them what they have been doing since leaving school.

With my personal experience in pursuing my own self actualization and my discussions with some Nigerian women, I decided to explore different experiences of some women in the diaspora, so as to get answers to some of the questions that have been worrying me since the interview. The questions include why are Nigerian women so driven? What impact does Nigerian women's urge and drive to succeed have on the women and their family unit?

I planned to use some questions to guide me while conversing with the three women across three countries – Australia, the USA and the UK. I will touch on some of the reasons that led these women to leave Nigeria, the challenges they were faced with where they live and the challenges they are facing in pursuing their self realisation. I will briefly talk about Nigerian women generally, the life of educated and uneducated women, and how Nigerian women are perceived pre and post colonial era. I hope to give a glimpse and educate readers about how energetically Nigerian women pursue self actualisation, and about the hardships endured by some migrant women as they strive for the attainment of their goals.

Case Studies

(pseudonyms are used throughout)

Victoria Okajiafor – was born in Benin City in 1972. She studied business administration at University of Benin. At the same University, she studied Masters in Business Administration. She met David who was working at the university teaching hospital. They got married and settled in Lagos. They both decided to travel overseas, convinced that they could do better in the western world. David sat for the South African Medical Council examination and passed. He applied to a rural hospital and was offered the Hospital Medical Officer position in South Africa. Victoria and their 2year old son joined David after he settled in Piet Retief, Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Victoria reported that while in South Africa, she couldn't get employment despite responding to over 1000 job advertisements. Victoria and David moved to Australia after her husband secured a position in a hospital in New South Wales. Victoria stated lack of job security for foreigners as their main reason for deciding to move to Australia.

While in New South Wales, Victoria applied to work in the bank through employment agencies but was unsuccessful. She was offered a casual position at McDonald's fast food restaurant but reported that she was rarely called to work; once in two months.

She spoke to other Nigerian women in Australia and she was advised to work towards getting into the medical line. They all shared their experiences of moving into Australia with high dreams and hopes of working with their academic certificates because some were lawyers, teachers, and accountants before moving to Australia. Most of them related similar experiences of their inability to get jobs. They informed her that the only people that were able to get employment with ease were those in medical lines – nurses, radiographers and doctors. She was advised to apply to TAFE College for Cert 111 in Aged Care, a 6 month course. She applied for the course and was admitted.

Victoria reported about how hectic her life became when she started studying, coupled with her carrying a three months pregnancy. She said:

How I did it I do not know as it was hectic. My husband, being the only income earner in the household, was spending hundreds of dollars every month on child care for our son, not to talk about other expenses. We were not eligible for any government assistance at that time because my husband came into Australia as a skilled worker. Coming home from TAFE College, I had to perform all my wifely duties including cooking, cleaning the house and settling the kids. My husband sometimes helped, especially with caring for our son. Most nights, I found myself struggling to stay awake to study and work on my assignments. Throughout this period, we were receiving phone calls from our families in Nigeria requesting financial assistance for feeding, housing and medical bills. All our attempts to explain our situation fell on deaf ears. Their feelings were that we did not want to help as they did not know what we were facing then. Despite our tight situation, my husband still managed to send money to our families especially our elderly parents.

I eventually finished the course, and was blessed with a bouncing baby boy only three weeks after I completed my course. I got a job as personal carer in a nursing home. I started working when my son was only two months old. I had my children in a day-care centre.

After my son started prep class, I enrolled at a TAFE College to study Certificate IV in Nursing (Assistant Nursing course) which I did part time. The course took me two years to complete. I got a job as an assistant nurse in the local hospital.

Working three years in the hospital, I enrolled at a local University for Bachelor of Nursing (part time) which I completed with flying colours. I am in the process of completing my Masters degree in nursing. It has been very hectic and difficult for my children, my husband and me but success crowned my labours.

It was not easy for me to change from what I so much loved to a profession I am doing now, in order to be able to help in providing for my immediate and extended family in Nigeria. The drive to achieve came from the years I wasted looking for employment and the fact that I wanted to be seen as Victoria, the nurse and not just Victoria, Dr Okajiafo's wife. Though painfully difficult, I realised that the saying 'no pain, no gain' is totally true in my life.

Olanike Akinyemi – was born in Lagos in 1978 to an international business tycoon. She is the younger of two children. Olanike graduated from University of Lagos where she read medicine.

After graduating, she opened her own private hospital with financial assistance from her father. She reported that even though she had no financial problems, she was finding it increasingly difficult to live in Nigeria because of the general situation of things. She talked about the lack of regular electricity which led to almost every household having a power generator, which is one of the causes of pollution. She reported that the lack of basic amenities including a piped water supply (for clean running water), and most patients not being able to pay for their medical bills, eventually made her sell her practice and move overseas.

Olanike recounted:

It was frustrating running a private hospital in Nigeria where there is no government funded health care system. I found it hard to turn my back if someone could not afford to pay their medical bills. I had the hospital for three years and I made no profit but at the same time, I thought, how many people would I continue to do this for? Is it sustainable? The frustration in me was from all angles. The government refusing to provide for the people, at least basic needs to make life easier for everybody, the rich and the poor. I was also frustrated with the Nigerian public that are acculturated to the way they are being treated by the ruling power.

I got married to my childhood friend; we were in medical school at the same time. We both decided to leave Nigeria because we were tired of the general situation, air pollution, driving hours to work because of bad roads which caused hold-ups or 'go slows' and lack of other basic amenities. Even though we are both from rich families and successful in our own right, we shared in the hardship like any other Nigerians. We used the same terrible roads; we turned on the generator just like others with the air and noise pollution all around. It was indeed a hectic situation.

We moved to North America where we both went back to the University for further studies in order for our certificates to be updated and recognised. We wrote qualifying examinations for some years before we were able to practice as doctors. Though it was stressful and hectic, I was not deterred. I believed we were luckier than most people because our parents provided us with financial assistance through-out. I gave birth to our first child in our third year of being in North America, so I took a year off studying. We employed a live-in nanny so as to continue with my studies. I felt guilty for leaving my son at one year in order to pursue my goal and I still feel the guilt today for not being with him 100%. The guilt was the terrible emotion that nearly consumed me and almost derailed me. I am now a dermatologist in my own private practice in Texas.

My husband and I are members of a charity organisation founded in Nigeria to help struggling Nigerians. We provide financial assistance to the organisation and we travel to Nigeria where we offer free health checks, health care and medications to people living in rural communities.

Roseline Ogunwemimo – was born in Ondo town, Ondo state of Nigeria in 1964. She studied nursing at Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital Nursing School. Being the first born of her parents, she was responsible for looking after her disabled mother and her five siblings. Her father passed on to eternity when she was about to finish nursing school. He was involved in a motor vehicle accident and died instantly while her mother was rushed to the hospital but her leg was badly crushed and had to be amputated. Despite the tragedy, Roseline managed to complete her studies and graduate top of the class.

She got a job as a nurse in a local hospital. She became the bread winner for her family. At 23 years of age, from her earnings, she was paying school fees for her siblings, buying groceries as well as paying for all their health care needs. She graduated; she married Ade, a University lecturer in Physics. She was contacted by her best friend Bunmi who now resided in United Kingdom. Bunmi informed Roseline of shortage of nurses in UK where she could make far more than what she was currently earning. Bunmi explained the process and gave her contact details for an agency that could help.

Roseline contacted the agency in Britain. She and her husband borrowed money from friends to pay for her application processing. She travelled to Britain where she paid thousands of pounds for a three month bridging nursing program. Her husband sold his car and borrowed cash from the bank for Roseline to be able to pay for the course. She got her nursing position at Birmingham Maternity Hospital. She later processed visas for her husband and her daughter. She completed a Masters in Midwifery and she is now an associate unit manager for the maternity ward.

Roseline still cares for her disabled mother, sends money to her siblings and even her extended families. During my discussions with her stated:

It was becoming so hard being the only one providing for everybody. It got to the stage that my salary was unable to pay for everyone's needs so I had to borrow from the bank to make ends meet. I was living from hand to mouth. I thought it was going to be easier after I got married to Ade but it wasn't. Ade's family, his elderly parents, relied heavily on him for all their financial needs. Whenever the family wanted financial assistance and we could not afford it, his family blamed me and insinuated that I had used 'juju' on him not to take care of them. His family became hostile to me and our relationship was somehow strained.

When the opportunity arrived for me to work overseas, we jumped at it and grabbed it as if our lives depended on it. Actually, our lives did depend on it. We borrowed

money to achieve our hearts desire. We thank God that our aspiration to look for greener pasture was fruitful.

My living in Britain was not all a 'beds of roses'. After paying for my bridging course, I had limited funds to pay for accommodation, food and other needs. There were days that I could afford only one meal a day. I arrived during winter; I could only buy one jacket in a second hand shop. When I started working, I was sending over 80% of my wages after tax in order to pay the bank in Nigeria and still provide for my immediate and extended family members. I was working extra shifts in order to have enough. My health suffered for over using myself. I was having irregular heart beats, insomnia from thinking and stressing about not having enough.

After I finished paying the banks, I was able to apply for visas for my husband and daughter and I also enrolled at a University for a master's degree program. I did not see my daughter or my husband for two years, and I was working and studying for hours a day. The guilt that I felt was indescribable but no matter what I felt, I had to do what I had to do, not just for me alone but for my family. I realised that at work, being one of the few African nurses, I was being constantly challenged by unwarranted comments from colleagues, patients, and their families, even other staff members. I had the urge to continuously develop myself so as to prove that being an African, a Nigerian, does not mean that I am stupid but that I have what it takes to be successful in my profession.

Discussion

In Nigerian culture, especially during pre-colonisation, families tended to focus more on male children, sending them to school while female children were set aside till they were old enough to get married. Nigerian women are principally seen as combining child rearing with working with her husband on the farm, apart from general up-keep of the house. Nigerian women tend to engage in various kinds of trades to supplement the household income.

The post independence era finds more Nigerian women receiving western education but this has not helped to liberate women from struggle. Polygamy, which is well practised in Nigeria, seems to be one of the factors pushing Nigerian women at home and abroad. In Nigeria, traditionally there is no limit to the number of wives permitted for a man. According to Entwisle and Coles (1990) polygamy is a social practice that continues to affect Nigerian women. Because women realize that their husbands may take additional wives without their knowledge or permission, they seek to maintain financial independence. They cannot rely on their husband's earnings for the upkeep of their family as the funds may be shared with others. Polygamy accounts for the reasons why Nigerian women in the past work so hard to provide for their children without waiting for their husbands to supply the funds needed (Rives and Yousefi 1997). It is rare for Nigerian women to pool their income with their husbands because of polygamy and inheritance law (Fapohunda 1987) which discriminates against Nigerian women. With the inheritance law, Nigerian women generally do not inherit

from their husbands; though they may inherit from their own families (Freeman, 1994).

As noted by Rives and Yousefi (1997), it is considered a disgrace for Yoruba women not to work due to their income being essential to the household, since traditionally men are not expected to support their wives and children. In watching our mothers, grandmothers and aunts struggling to provide for their children, it has now become part of us to be industrious, hardworking and a pillar of strength for our husbands and children.

There are different reasons why Nigerian women emigrate. Some of the reasons can be deduced from the three case studies in this article. According to Akhtar (1995) immigration from one country to another is a complex psycho-social process with lasting effects on an individual's identity. Reynolds (2006) states that some African professional women make decisions to emigrate based on gaining the ability to fulfill cultural expectations in the financial maintenance of the household. Many women within African states, including the upper echelon of women from highly educated, wealthy, and influential families, find that cultural expectations for financial management of their households are difficult to fulfill under changing economic systems in states like Nigeria (Reynolds, 2006).

Some Nigerian women emigrate because of the social and economic situation in Nigeria. Poverty and its socio-economic constraints are major causes of population movements (Komolafe, 2002). Previous research has shown that debt has a detrimental effect on government educational and health programs for women and children. The body of research also concludes that the Structural Adjustment Program, a program that government implemented to redress the government debt, produces negative effects, especially on women by adding more pressure on them to provide for the household. Ekong (2006) asserts that women are the real engine driving the Nigerian economy, and are the keys to development, and therefore crucial to the goal of sustainable development. Agbola (1990) confirmed that women are the operators of the economy and constitute a major arm of the labour force, and that Nigerian women are dynamic, industrious and resourceful.

The lack of a government funded social welfare system accounts for one of the reasons why some women decide to emigrate in order to provide for their families, both extended and immediate. With lack of government funded social welfare services, working families are mandated to provide for their immediate and extended family members. In pre-colonial Nigerian societies, it was normal for an individual to receive economic assistance from members of his or her extended family--including paternal and maternal uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins. The practice of expecting assistance from family members (Okafor 2004), grew out of the understanding that the basis of family wealth derived from land and labour, both inherited from common ancestors. Even as an individual sought help from extended family members, he was in turn required to fulfil certain responsibilities, such as contributing labour and financial provision when needed, or participating in activities

associated with rites of passage of family members. Today, the same system of welfare assistance is still practised in Nigeria.

The search for greener pastures and a better standard of living is another reason why some women decide to emigrate. Okpewho et al (1999), states that economic survival through labour is a predominant reason for families migrating.

Nigeria has been home to the largest number of the world's extremely poor: 55.5 million people according to Komolafe (2002). Nigerians living on over \$2 per day represent just 30% of the population; the wealthiest 2% possessed incomes equivalent to the total income of the poorest 17% in 1970 and the poorest 55% in 2000 (Komolafe 2002). Duze, Mohammed, and Kiyawa (2008) warn that Africa in 2030 will be home to a larger proportion of the world's poorest people than it is today.

Integration and its challenges

Getting employment becomes important to Nigerian women in the diaspora in order to be able to integrate into the system where they find themselves. In finding employment, the assurance of being able to earn enough to cater for immediate and extended families is there. Reynolds (2006) notes that the burden to support a household according to local cultural expectations is illogical for many professional women which has led to many women deciding to migrate to Western countries. In Western countries, women can find legal and structural guarantees of the right to financial privacy, control of their own earnings, and the ability to use earnings to support children (Reynolds, 2006). They have a sense of fulfillment in their ability to contribute to the new communities they find themselves in and at the same time, are able to contribute to the Nigerian economy.

Women and migrants generally are crucial to another development strategy (Sassen, 2003). The remittances migrant workers send home are a major source of hard-currency reserves for the migrant's home country. With regards to the uses of remittances, Nwajiuba (2005) reports that remittances are put to household and community uses which impact on livelihoods.

Assimilating into the new community is never as easy as expected. The three women that I interviewed spoke of the challenges they faced. All three women, just like most educated African women, emigrated with qualifications and work experiences which were not recognized in their new environment. Many female immigrants find themselves excluded from integration programs in the destination country both as a result of their dependant status and in some case their families (Omelaniuk, 2005). Moussa (1993) notes that though employment is a key factor in the social integration of newcomers in most societies, most African immigrants especially women, face severe systemic discrimination in the labor force due to their race and gender.

In order to be able to feel part of the community, some immigrant women made choices to go back to college to start all over again, or updating their certificates so as

to obtain sustainable employment. Okpewho et al (1999), while writing about immigrants in Canada, state that many immigrants who are qualified as physicians, nurses or teachers in their home countries may not be granted a license to practice their professions abroad. Okpewho et al (1999) further notes that many immigrants with extensive qualifications and experiences are underemployed in jobs that use their expertise but underpay their market worth. There were financial concerns, psychological challenges and family disruptions that these women faced in order to achieve their goals of self-actualization.

The benefits and drawbacks in pursuing self actualization

There is a sense of fulfillment in the women achieving success in their chosen careers, and education can be identified as one of the benefits. Nigerian women are also contributing to the Nigerian economy, especially through their remittances to families in Nigeria. In being able to integrate, Nigerian women in the diaspora gain additional qualifications and knowledge and exposure to a 'better' way of life which aids their striving for self-actualization.

The drawbacks in achieving self-actualization include discrimination, which accounts predominantly for their drive to prove themselves and their struggle to achieve. According to Misztal (1991) Non English Speaking Background migrant women tend to be employed in much lower level, lower status and lower paying occupations than Australian born women. Okpewho, Davies and Mazrui (1999), in writing about immigrant women in Canada, conclude that immigrant women, in spite of their high educational backgrounds, are forced to engage in low-paying jobs under difficult working conditions. Okpewho et al (1999) report that immigrant women, specifically blacks, were stigmatized as unassimilable and undesirable for permanent settlement in Canada, and that they faced discrimination in employment, education, housing and immigration.

The individual's striving for self-actualization can cause relationship breakdown between partners. As commented by Buijs (1996), 'remaking of self was often a traumatic experience with serious repercussions on the migrant women's relationship with their men folk'. There is also the risk of relationship breakdown between children and their mothers, especially with some of the women not being available most of the time. Asis (2001) state that women are referred to as the 'servants of globalization' because many go abroad to serve families of a higher social status while they pass their own family caring role to other family. The women talked about the guilt they felt associated with working for long hours and not being there for their children, and the guilt of watching their husbands work so hard to provide for the family and their inability to help initially. Some had health concerns due to the stress of studying or working for long hours.

In conclusion, the Nigerian women in the diaspora have to continuously struggle for economic and social status. Their emigrating from Nigeria to other countries in order to run away from the social, political and economic problems in Nigeria has been

identified. A lack of a government funded social welfare system accounts for why most women emigrate, and it is still an ongoing battle for most Nigerians. Some of the women followed their husbands while some left first in search of greener pastures, but on getting to their destinations, were faced with new challenges in order to fulfill their dreams. Some of them had to change their careers in order to fit into new occupational structures. Strong determination to succeed proves to be a driving force behind some Nigerian women's constant battle of the will. Looking at the needs of self actualization, some Nigerian women refuse to settle for anything less than achieving their full potential.

Appendix

Questionnaire that guided my interviews with Victoria, Rosaline and Olanike

- 1) What led you to emigrate from Nigeria?
- 2) What was your educational level before you left Nigeria?
- 3) Did your level of education fit into your new environment?
- 4) What are the challenges faced in achieving what you have managed to achieve so far?
- 5) Did your leaving Nigeria make any difference with the roles that you play with your families?

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Vicky Omifolaji is a Social Worker with Job Capacity Assessor Provider Services of Centrelink in Morwell, vicky.omifolaji@centrelink.gov.au