

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

19 November 2012

NGA103907.E

Nigeria: Whether women who head their own households, without male or family support, can obtain housing and employment in large northern cities, such as Kano, Maiduguri, and Kaduna, and southern cities, such as Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt; government support services available to female-headed households
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of Widows for Peace through Development (WPD), a UK-based advocacy organization for widows in developing countries (12 Oct. 2012), indicated that "it is very difficult to generalize" about the situation of women who head their own households, and pointed out that many factors must be considered, including a woman's tribe, sub-clan, geographical location, level of education, and socio-economic status (WPD 15 Oct. 2012). According to the United States (US) Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011*, however, in Nigeria, "unmarried women in particular endured many forms of discrimination" in 2011 (US 24 May 2012, 42).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Sociology and African Development at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, said that women who live without male support are worse off living in large northern cities than in the south (Professor 5 Jan. 2012). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Uju Peace Okeke, a lawyer and sexual-and-reproductive-rights activist in Nigeria, indicated that there are more female-headed households in large southern cities than in large northern cities (26 Oct. 2012).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of Anthropology at the University of Kansas stated that,

[i]n northern contexts, there are firm expectations in Islam about the support husbands and fathers must provide for their wives and children. While there exist Shari'a courts to settle disputes when these expectations are not met (whether women are divorced or widowed, for example), few women avail themselves of them, particularly if they lack male advocates, economic resources, or extensive education. (18 Oct. 2012)

The Assistant Professor indicated that, although she does not have experience in southern Nigeria, she believes that this applies to all Muslim women in the country (18 Oct. 2012).

When asked about the ability of women to live without male support in multi-ethnic cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Kano, Maiduguri and Kaduna, the University of Nigeria professor said that Christians living in the north may be at risk due to "recurrent religious conflicts" (5 Jan. 2012). He also said that ethnicity plays a large role in obtaining employment in the public sector or in the government in the north, adding that a southerner who is not Hausa or Fulani will usually face difficulties in obtaining employment (Professor 5 Jan. 2012). He indicated that ethnicity is also a factor in obtaining employment in the south, although "to a lesser degree" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to *Country Reports 2011*, addressing the issue of discrimination in general,

[a]ll citizens have the right to live in any part of the country, but state and local governments frequently discriminated against ethnic groups not indigenous to their areas, occasionally compelling individuals to return to a region where their ethnic group originated but to which they no longer had personal ties. The government sometimes compelled nonindigenous persons to move by threats, discrimination in hiring and employment, or destruction of their homes.

Those who chose to stay sometimes experienced further discrimination, including denial of scholarships and exclusion from employment in the civil service, police, and military. (US 24 May 2012, 48)

When asked whether there were laws protecting women who head their own households, the University of Nigeria professor indicated that no laws "specifically protect women as a sub-group of the population" in Nigeria (5 Jan. 2012)

2. Socio-economic Status

Daily Trust, an Abuja-based newspaper, reports that, according to the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, speaking about "gender inequality" in the country after the release of the *Gender in Nigeria Report 2012*, there are very large geographical disparities in Nigeria (8 June 2012). She reportedly said that "human development outcomes" for girls and women are worse in the north, and that sometimes poverty levels in the north are double those in the south (*Daily Trust* 8 June 2012). The University of Kansas assistant professor stated that, in northern Nigeria, "women without male or family support face an array of social and economic challenges" (18 Oct. 2012).

According to the British Council in Nigeria, women "rely on a male breadwinner for survival" (UK 2012, 17). A project coordinator at Women's Rights Watch Nigeria, a Nigerian women's rights advocacy organization (Global Fund for Women n.d.), in correspondence with the Research Directorate, indicated that the survival of a family headed by a woman relies on a woman's socio-economic status (Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012). Okeke stated that women living without male or family support face a "major challenge" in the "cost of running a home" (26 Oct. 2012). According to *Country Reports 2011*, women face "considerable economic discrimination," and women who head their own households face challenges in accessing commercial credit, tax deductions and rebates (US 24 May 2012, 42).

According to the University of Nigeria professor, it is easier for a woman to live alone without male support if she is educated and has a high social status because she can use "family connections," and is more likely to gain employment through connections to powerful individuals and politicians than through education (5 Jan. 2012). The Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator stated that if women are educated, it is "easier to cope" with running a household without male or family support (18 Oct. 2012). However, sources indicate that there is a very high rate of unemployment in Nigeria (Professor 5 Jan. 2012; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012), including for graduates (Professor 5 Jan. 2012).

According to the Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator, in the "majority of cases [of women heading households] there is a high level of poverty, especially among widows" (18 Oct. 2012). *Leadership*, an Abuja-based newspaper, reports that many widows are uneducated or lack the skills necessary to be self-reliant (24 June 2012).

About divorced women, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, Ayesha Imam, an independent consultant on women's rights, NGO development and sustainable development, and the former head of the Department of Culture, Gender and Human Rights at the UN Population Fund, said that women are "usually economically worse off after marriages are dissolved" (20 Oct. 2012). Sources indicate that, after divorce, men do not pay alimony to their ex-wives (Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012; VOA 22 Mar. 2012). Imam indicated that, in Muslim law and customary law, divorced women "are not entitled to maintenance (except during iddah-the waiting period)" (20 Oct. 2012). She added that, in Christian marriages and secular marriages, although "maintenance orders" can be made, they are rarely enforced (Imam 20 Oct. 2012). Imam also stated that, since state "social provisions" and pensions do not exist, divorced women who do not have custody of their children face the challenge of not having their children's assistance in old age and not being able to benefit from their children's labour (ibid.). Voice of America (VOA) reports that the Executive Director of Voice of Widows, Divorcees and Orphans Association of Nigeria (VOWAN), an organization that it describes as providing skills training and setting up marriages for women in Kano state, indicated that, since no alimony is paid, divorced women heading their own households "barely make ends meet" (VOA 22 Mar. 2012). The Executive Director of VOWAN reportedly also stated that these divorced women may turn to prostitution or other criminality to survive (ibid.).

Okeke indicated that there is a Nigerian societal belief that single women need men to survive (26 Oct. 2012). According to Imam, the societal belief that all women should be married can lead to problems for single, divorced, or widowed women, including sexual harassment and discrimination in employment (20 Oct. 2012). Imam goes on to say that, in southern Nigeria, especially in the southeast, which is largely Christian, "there is social stigma against divorced women," while in northern Nigeria, which is largely Muslim, "women may divorce and re-marry several times without stigma" (20 Oct. 2012). However, Imam qualified this latter assessment by saying that a woman who divorces more than three or four times will be viewed as a "difficult" woman (20 Oct. 2012).

3. Employment

Sources indicate that obtaining employment in Nigeria is very difficult (Professor 5 Jan. 2012; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012). According to Pambazuka News, a web forum for social justice in Africa (n.d.), in Nigeria, women have higher rates of unemployment than men (24 Nov. 2010). The Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition, a national network of Nigerian women's rights NGOs (18 July 2008, ix), states that there is a high unemployment rate among

educated women in urban areas (18 July 2008, 25).

The US *Country Reports 2011* reports that women face discrimination in accessing formal employment (US 24 May 2012, 42). The British Council in Nigeria says similarly that women in Nigeria struggle for an equal opportunity to earn a living (UK 2012, 17). According to *Country Reports 2011*, some traditional and religious practices, rather than laws, prohibit women from work (US 24 May 2012, 42). *Country Reports 2011* also states that women face discrimination in obtaining promotions and salary equity, as well as keeping jobs while pregnant, due to a policy of many businesses to fire women upon becoming pregnant (ibid.). According to the Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition, educated women face discrimination in almost all private industries (18 July 2008, xii).

Although women are underrepresented in the formal economy (UK 2012, 17), they are present in the informal economy (Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition 18 July 2008, xii; *Daily Trust* 8 June 2012; Pambazuka News 24 Nov. 2010). Pambazuka News states that, when women can find jobs, it is most often in the informal sector in areas such as agriculture and "petty trading" (ibid.).

3.1 Employment in the South

The University of Nigeria professor indicated that a woman living without male support "can only get a reasonable job" in Lagos, Ibadan or Port Harcourt with the help of someone "in authority or very rich" (5 Jan. 2012). He said that, when a woman can find a job, it is usually a "low paying and high demanding" job in the informal sector, which is "equally difficult to come by" due to the "almost stagnant" economy, poor infrastructure, and underdeveloped industrial sector (Professor 5 Jan. 2012). The Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator stated that, although times are changing because more women are going to school, it is "generally easier" for women in the south to obtain work than women in the north, although they often end up working in "difficult" jobs, such as "petty trading" and subsistence agriculture (18 Oct. 2012). Okeke indicated that educated women in the south can obtain employment, but "many of them face sexual harassment" (26 Oct. 2012).

3.2 Employment in the North

According to the Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator, women in the north are "usually secluded" while men "do everything" (18 Oct. 2012). The Executive Director of VOWAN reportedly stated that "women have been relegated to the background in northern Nigeria" (VOA 22 Mar. 2012). According to the University of Nigeria professor, a woman who is not Muslim but lives in the north "may be less bound by the religious values of the North to look for employment" than Muslim women (5 Jan. 2012).

Voice of America reports that, according to the Executive Director of VOWAN, divorced women in the north do not have the skills required to earn a living (VOA 22 Mar. 2012). Action Health Incorporated, a non-governmental organization striving to improve the health of adolescents in Nigeria (n.d.), indicates that, according to statistics, women in the north have less education than women in the south, and that 68 percent of women in the northeast and 74 percent of women in the northwest do not have any formal education (2011). According to the University of Kansas assistant professor, many women in large cities in the north work in the informal sector but "these activities rarely are able to support an entire household" (18 Oct. 2012).

4. Housing

The Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator indicated that it is "very difficult" for women who run their own households without male support to obtain housing (18 Oct. 2012). She added that there is no government-funded housing (Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012). According to Okeke, landlords often refuse women as tenants if they are unmarried or not living with their husbands (10 Apr. 2010). Okeke also indicated that, if a landlord rents to a single woman, male "sureties" are required (26 Oct. 2012). Okeke added that "women who travel and wish to reside in areas different from where they are known are assumed to be prostitutes" (10 Apr. 2010). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.1 Housing in the South

According to the University of Nigeria professor, a woman heading her own household can obtain housing if she can afford the "steep rents" in places like Lagos, Ibadan and Port Harcourt (5 Jan. 2012). He stated that, in urban areas, people usually have to pay two to three years of rent in advance of obtaining a home, plus paying commission to the rental agents (Professor 5 Jan. 2012). Digital Journal, a global media network based in Canada (n.d.), similarly indicates that, in Lagos, landlords charge two to three years of rent in advance, and reports that sometimes fees paid for the rental agreement and for the agent exceed the amount of the rent (22 Mar. 2012). According to Digital Journal, some agents in Lagos are fraudulent and take money without providing a home, and some take advantage of "the seeming desperation" of the person searching for a home (22 Mar. 2012).

Okeke indicated that it is difficult for uneducated women in the south, particularly in the cities, to obtain

housing, although women in southern villages may be able to obtain housing through their extended family (26 Oct. 2012)

4.2 Housing in the North

The University of Kansas assistant professor stated that, from her experience residing in urban areas, "it is extremely uncommon for single women of marriageable age to live alone" (18 Oct. 2012). According to the University of Nigeria professor, other than a "few exceptional cases," "most house owners" would not rent their houses to single women due to Islamic and traditional values (5 Jan. 2012). He added that these women would be considered by society to be "wayward and unlady like" (Professor 5 Jan. 2012). The University of Kansas assistant professor stated that housing requires "substantial savings," and tenants must pay one to two years of rent in advance of obtaining a home (18 Oct. 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Okeke indicated that in the north, in some cases, a woman's family will "take care of housing" (26 Oct. 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Land Ownership

This Day, a Lagos-based newspaper, reports that, according to the Director General and CEO of the National Centre for Women Development, statistics show that "house ownership by the women folk in Nigeria is less than 5 percent" (1 Apr. 2010). According to *Daily Trust*, the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development said that women own 4 percent of the land in the northeast and just over 10 percent in the southeast and the "[s]outh-[s]outh" (*Daily Trust* 8 June 2012).

Country Reports 2011 states that there is no statutory law against women owning land (US 24 May 2012, 42). Okeke notes that the rights of married women to acquire property have been upheld in some courts (10 Apr. 2010), and that the states of Oyo, Kaduna, Sokoto and Zamfara have enacted married women property laws (10 Apr. 2010, note 67). However, she states that "[t]hese married-women-empowering laws discriminate against unmarried women as only married women have the right to acquire, hold, dispose of any property and have personal liability in contractual matters" (Okeke 10 Apr. 2010). Okeke also states that women face obstacles in obtaining loans required to own property (*ibid.*). For example, lending institutions usually give loans to men, and if they agree to give a woman a loan, a male guarantor is still required (*ibid.*).

Country Reports 2011 states that "some customary land tenure systems allowed only men to own land, and women could gain access to land only through marriage or family" (US 24 May 2012, 42). However, sources state that many customary laws prohibit women from inheriting property (*ibid.*; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012; Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition 18 July 2008, 61). The Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition states that these prohibitions exist in most parts of Nigeria (*ibid.*). Okeke states that women are allowed to inherit property from family "only on rare occasions" (10 Apr. 2010).

In the case of divorced women, the Nigeria NGO CEDAW Coalition states that all of the property acquired during the marriage belongs to the husband (18 July 2008, 61). Sources indicate that after a divorce, women are often evicted (VOWAN *n.d.*; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012).

Sources state that many widows become "destitute" after the family of their late husbands take their late husbands' property (US 24 May 2012, 42; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012). Sources note that some widows are evicted after their husbands' death (*ibid.*; *Leadership* 4 Jan. 2012). According to the Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator, her organization has received "many cases of forcible ejection of widows from their homes by their husband's families" (18 Oct. 2012). Sources add that widows themselves often become the property of their late husband's family (*Leadership* 4 Jan. 2012; Okeke 10 Apr. 2010). *Leadership* reports that widows may be forced to marry a specified male relative of their late husband (4 Jan. 2012), and Okeke indicates that decisions that the widow makes must be approved by her late husband's family (10 Apr. 2010).

6. Violence

The University of Kansas assistant professor indicated that violent crimes are "highly prevalent" across Nigeria, and that "women who lack the economic resources to access safe housing are disproportionately exposed to this risk" (18 Oct. 2012). When asked if women who head their own households without male or family support are exposed to a risk of violence, the Women's Rights Watch Nigeria project coordinator said that "[w]omen in both [the] north and south risk armed robbery attacks and there are increasing incidents of rape" (18 Oct. 2012). Further, according to the British Council in Nigeria's *Gender in Nigeria Report 2012*, "women who have never been married are more likely to have been attacked than married women" (UK 2012, vii).

Okeke indicated that, mainly in the south, women are more likely to be abused when they are no longer with a male partner (26 Oct. 2012). Okeke added that women who head their own households in the south are "stigmatized"

and exposed to "psychological violence" (26 Oct. 2012). The British Council in Nigeria report says that almost "half of unmarried women in parts of southern Nigeria have experienced physical violence" (UK 2012, 2).

7. Support Services

According to the University of Kansas assistant professor, "few widows or divorcees" she knows access social or economic support from the government, adding that there are "effective" HIV services, which "rarely include other forms of economic support" (18 Oct. 2012). However, other sources indicate that there are no government support services for women who head their own households (Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012; Professor 5 Jan. 2012). Those same sources also point out that there are, in general, no government social services (ibid.; Women's Rights Watch Nigeria 18 Oct. 2012), such as welfare or social security (ibid.). According to the University of Nigeria professor, the Ministry of Women's Affairs provides very little in the way of services (5 Jan. 2012).

The University of Nigeria professor stated that some NGOs exist; however, they are driven by the "lure" of available funding, "hardly effective," and, when services are provided, the follow-ups are "poor" and they do not do much to "deepen the capacity of the beneficiaries" (5 Jan. 2012). The University of Kansas assistant professor indicated that in the north "there are few state or religious-based organizations to provide women a 'safety net' in providing for their children, generating income, or repaying debt" (18 Oct. 2012). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

7.1 Women Housing Plan Initiative

Sources reported in 2010 on the launch in Abuja of a program called the "Women Housing Plan Initiative," which aimed to "assist and empower" single, widowed, and married women to own homes "in support of their immediate families" (*This Day* 1 Apr. 2010; *Vanguard* 7 Mar. 2010). These sources added that the federal government supported the initiative (ibid.; *This Day* 1 Apr. 2010). Further information about the Women Housing Plan Initiative and the government support for this program could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

7.2 Marriage Programs

Sources report on marriage programs that have been created to wed unattached women to men in Kano (VOA 22 Mar. 2012; AFP 3 May 2012; *Leadership* 19 Mar. 2012) and Zamfara (*Vanguard* 6 Oct. 2012). In Kano, VOWAN and the Hisbah board, also known as the "Islamic police," have been matching men with widows and divorcees (AFP 3 May 2012; VOA 22 Mar. 2012), sometimes in a "mass wedding" (Euronews 19 May 2012; *Christian Science Monitor* 18 May 2012). According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Hisbah board pays the necessary dowries and provides small grants to the couples getting married (3 May 2012). Media sources list a variety of reasons why this program was created, which include:

- Women need husbands for "social security" (*Leadership* 19 Mar. 2012).
- Divorce rates are increasing (VOA 22 Mar. 2012).
- Dowries are expensive for men (AFP 3 May 2012). Imam also makes reference to the inability of poor men to afford the costs associated with marriage (20 Oct. 2012).
- To fight the stigma of divorce for the divorcee (*Christian Science Monitor* 18 May 2012).
- Women need financial support after divorce (VOA 22 Mar. 2012). Similarly, Imam states that the program was created due to the economic difficulties of widows (20 Oct. 2012).

The VOWAN website states that there has been great interest in this program, which led the Kwankwaso [Kano State governor (Kano State n.d.)] administration to increase the number of marriages performed in the initial stage of this program from 100 to 200 (VOWAN n.d.). Although local officials reportedly say that women participate voluntarily (AFP 3 May 2012), activists reportedly have expressed concerns that women, some of whom are victims of domestic violence from their first marriage, are being pressured into "potentially dangerous new relationships" (Euronews 19 May 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights; Centre for Elimination of Violence Against Women; Centre for Women's Research and Development; Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre; Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria; Gender Training and Development Network; Girls Power Initiative; Human Rights and Justice Group International (Nigeria); International Federation of Women Lawyers (Nigeria); Mom's Club of Onitsha Nigeria; Muslim Sisters Organization of Nigeria; Nigeria – Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs, Federal Radio Corporation, National Commission for Women, National Council of Women's Societies Nigeria, National Human Rights Commission; Project Alert on Violence Against Women; Women Living Under Muslim Laws (Nigeria); WomenAid Collective; Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative; University of Ibadan's Centre for Women's Research; Voice of Widows, Divorcees and Orphans Association of Nigeria. Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: associate professor and Chair of the Anthropology Department at Brown University; professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Port Harcourt; professor of Sociology and African Development, University of Nigeria.

Internet sites, including: All Africa; Amnesty International; BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights; Ecol.net; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; Ireland Refugee Documentation Centre; Minority Rights Group International; Newser; Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo); Ovcsupport.net; Plan International; Social Institutions and Gender Index; Stop Honour Killings; *This Day*; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Network, Population Fund, Refworld; Women's UN Report Network; United Kingdom Border Agency; Violence is Not Our Culture; Widows' Rights International; Women's Housing Plan Initiative; WomenAid Collective; Women Living Under Muslim Laws; Women's Housing Plan Initiative; Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative. Attempts to find the following government websites were unsuccessful: Federal Ministry of Environment, Housing and Urban Development, Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Labour.

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