

Ujima Radio interview with Dr Foluke Adebisi

R.I.S.E Women, 15 January 2018

Sandra Gordon: One of the things we want to do on RISE women is celebrate our women. It's 100 years since the first women in the UK had the vote, so it is all about equality, but for me it's also getting some feedback from some rising women, some women that have risen and are continuing to rise within our community. How do they feel about that, how do they feel we've progressed as women, what else do we need to do?

My first guest, and I'm so pleased to have this woman with me in the studio today, is the wonderful [Dr Foluke Adebisi](#). She teaches law at the Law School, UoB. In 2011 Foluke received a PhD from Lancaster University where she also taught for a while, before she joined the University of Bristol. She holds an LLM, also from Lancaster University, in International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. She's a graduate of the law faculty of Nigeria and she's also a graduate of the Nigerian law School. She's a solicitor and a barrister of the Supreme Court of Nigeria and during her national service years she was the president of the legal aid clinic, a community development group for law graduates which provides free legal representation. She's definitely a woman you need to know.

She seeks new ways of interpreting the African experience within our consciousness and challenging static ideologies. Her approach is pan-African; pan-Africanism is the belief that African people, both on the African continent and in the African diaspora, share not merely a common history but a common destiny as well. She has delivered talks on decolonising the legal curriculum within higher education, which again is a big area we need to talk about.

She's also the founder of Forever African Conference and Events, a pan-African interdisciplinary conference that's hosted in Bristol, the first of which will be held in 2018. Besides all these amazing things she's also a public speaker, a creative writer, a musician, a spoken word poet, and a blogger, and on top of this she's also a mother as well. Her blog, Foluke's African Skies, is dedicated to Africa and her diaspora, an examination of Africa through critical discourse, humour, poetry and personal reflection. Welcome to R.I.S.E. Women.

It's great to see a black woman lecturing at Bristol University, we need to see an increase in black teachers at all levels of our educational system. What has been your experience of higher education, both as a student and now as a lecturer, and also as a black woman?

Foluke: My first degree was in Nigeria, so obviously there was not a problem with the representation of black women, because the only women you will get in Nigeria will be black women. When I started my undergraduate degree my head of department was a black woman, so it wasn't something I was particularly aware of, the lack of representation of black women.

When I came to the UK to do my Masters degree at Lancaster, there were not that many black women in class, not to talk about being represented academia. I was there for a while - I did my Masters, I did my PhD, I used to give talks on writing your Masters dissertation, as part of one of my roles in the department. There was this particular day, I was giving the talk as usual, and there was a Masters student, a black lady, in the class, and after the talk she came up to me and said: "You know, this is the first time in my life that I have been lectured or spoken to in a classroom situation by a black woman." And she's doing her Masters. I was shocked. Because that had not been my experience of learning law, but that was because I did my undergraduate degree in Nigeria.

So that was really surprising to me, and I sat down and talked to her for a bit, and I realised that just by being there - because she was really quite emotional - I realised that my just being there had inspired her in a way. Because one of the things that was part of my talk was the fact that I had finished my PhD, so she was surprised that here was a black woman who has finished a PhD and is actually teaching me Law in a higher education institution in the UK, and she was really emotional about it. She said to herself: this is an obvious example of what I can do within higher education.

And that made me sad on a certain level, but it also made me aware of having a platform, being able to inspire other people by just existing, and that in itself was amazing. And when I started teaching - I think teaching is a beautiful thing to do. You have the opportunity to speak to people who are sort of in their formative years but they are also critical, because law is a very critical kind of discipline. Being able to meet with students from different backgrounds - I started teaching in Lancaster, so there are lots of people from working class backgrounds, black and white people, brown people as well, and that made me want to do more.

The thing about academia in the UK is, especially legal academia, it is, you could say, elitist in a way, and you would not be able to find there was a deliberate manoeuvre to make it elitist - however, it is. Say for example when I was trying to move on in the profession, there was a particular year when I wrote 44 job applications, and I got six interviews and one job out of that. I mentor lots of black women across the UK, and when they come to me and say they're looking for a job and they expect, maybe second or third application, to get the job. That's the first thing I tell them: I wrote 44 applications. You have to keep going.

Sandra: I'd like to pick up on that, in terms of why you think that is - in terms of we're not even getting interviews based on the number of applications. I want to bring it closer to home and the perception of Bristol university being an elitist educational establishment that's not accessible to all. And that isn't just about colour, it's also about class, I think it feels like a class type establishment. Firstly, Foluke, do you think that the university is aware of that general perception, if so - what's been done to address it?

Foluke: I think the university is aware, because students fill in feedback forms, stuff like that. The university is definitely aware it's elitist. When you think about the statistics as well, things like completion rates, black students being satisfied about their experience - because like I said they fill out feedback forms, so they do on occasion mention the fact that, for

example, they don't feel represented in the curriculum. That comes up a lot, and the university has certain programmes in place to tackle it.

Sandra: Have they changed the curriculum on the basis of that type of feedback?

Foluke: It isn't easy to change the curriculum... There was this interview with a student in the literature department, and she'd written a dissertation saying why were there not any black British author on the curriculum. So you can imagine doing literature for three years and not studying any black British authors. But you would study American authors, but not black British authors.

One of the things I noticed was that she was being interviewed on the BBC, she was speaking to someone from the university, and they said 'well, we're aware of these things and we're trying to make changes, but changes take time'. And while not discounting real concerns by students, I'm also aware that changes happen in the context of wider world. There's so much happening in the world now, you've got Brexit, you've got increasing marketisation and privatisation of all services, so how do you make change where that's not the only concern that the university or institution has? So it is a pull and push. So students are going to be making demands and staff like us are going to say as well, 'let's change things in these ways', and that's why these changes take time, you cannot change the curriculum as quickly as you would want to.

Sandra: You were saying how many applications you had to write before you got an interview... there are terrible stats in relation to the amount of black graduates that don't get decent jobs when they leave university. What can be done to reverse that trend?

Foluke: The statistics are terrible. The employment of black graduates are the lowest employment rates. If you disaggregate black African from black Caribbean, black Caribbean students actually have the lowest employment rates. It is quite terrifying when you think about it. I don't work in employability, but from my own personal experience, I started out by not knowing how to write an application, so a bit of it was on me. But then, for example, I have a very African name. I know from these statistics that if you have an Anglicised name, you're more likely to be called in for an interview. So while you wouldn't be able to pinpoint which particular application was rejected or discounted because of the name, the name does have an effect. And I stuck with my name, because it's mine, so there is that, but there's also the question of (and this is a little more complicated) what do we study, how do we study, what do we feel connected to within education. That affects employability. I'm an academic. What I'm interested in in academia is very much related to my own positionality, my identity as a black African woman. And that may not be the general thing employers are looking for, at that particular time.

Sandra: I'd like to think if black students were studying law, that's a pretty straightforward subject area that you should be able to easily go into and find employment. For me it would be quite disheartening to know that black students that have studied law are experiencing the same challenges in terms of trying to find a job.

Foluke: People outside the law think of the law as this very neutral thing. But the law is not neutral. I always say the law is not innocent. You cannot divorce law from the rest of society. What is law? Law is the study of social order. If the society itself is skewed in terms of race, class, and gender, then the law is going to operate in the same way, even though it tries to be objective and neutral. And that's why you've got feminist lawyers, that's why you've got critical race theory, a theory that developed completely from the legal profession within the US.

So our perception of the law as this neutral thing that doesn't need calibration to ensure that it's equal, that is not true. But the only way in which you can achieve that, to ensure that the law enables equality, is to have people within academia keep on working on that. Because you have the law outside academia, the profession, you've got solicitors and barristers and judges, so they apply the law. But before you get to this question of applying the law, of creating the law, we have to talk about what it is, we have to have a critical discourse on how the law works, what's contained within the law, what are the mechanisms of the law – and that's what happens within academia.

The thing is, we are all human. We bring our own subjectivity into our own objectivity. Law is supposed to be objective. The idea of objectivity, in my opinion, is slightly false. Because everyone has their own subjectivities, and what you try and do when you're trying to be objective is you say, I'm discounting these other considerations. But what if your subjectivity is regarded as objectivity? What if your subjectivity is regarded as the norm? If the norm of law is middle-class, then how can working-class people be expected to lay down their subjectivities, but not middle-class people? If the perceived objectivity of law is male, then how about women, how about black women? You see what I mean.

Sandra: We're going to talk about aid – the destructive aid to Africa. If I just quickly read through an overview of what Foluke wrote about it (and if you go onto her [blog page](#) you can find more). Now she argued – when should all aid to Africa stop?

"The wealth of the world is built on exploitation of African resources and labour. Considering the resource flow, licit and illicit, out of Africa why is aid to Africa still a thing? Any good accountant knows that you must show both sides of the balance sheet. Not just the incoming. Unless you have something to hide.

The basis of Africa's relationship with the rest of the world is still built on a foundation of inequality. The narrative of the relationship between Africa and the West needs to move from a focus on aid to a focus on investment and equality."

Love that statement and totally agree with it. There's four areas she's broken down. Firstly, we have the problem of the power of the narrative. Secondly, we cannot ignore the fact that the African government have done nothing to change the narrative, either by championing the African centred research, innovation etc. Thirdly, we must question the silences and the silenced. How about the people of Africa who do not directly benefit from the aid, because I think there's a perception that everybody's getting something. And fourthly, and very importantly, we need to ask if those who hand out the handouts of aid are willing to see us as a potential partners and co-investors in our own destinies?

Let's start from the top then – how it's portrayed in the media, and how people inside and outside – the impact of how people see Africa. From your perspective, within Africa itself, do people recognise that in the western world, Africans are seen as poor, their value is less, always begging, always looking for aid – is that the perception you feel?

Foluke: Well, I think that's the perception. I had my primary school education, secondary school education and first degree in Nigeria. I can remember in primary school being asked to debate the point that colonisation was a good thing for Nigeria, and lots of people think that it is a good thing. Part of it is the process of education. Who's providing the education? Most of the textbooks - we've got textbooks published outside Nigeria, outside Africa, so we're getting information about ourselves from outside of ourselves. Of course the perception that is outside is going to be replicated inside, it's just Africanised. So the perception of aid – which is slightly a different thing, because I don't know of anyone who actually receives any aid – which is, you know...

Sandra: Where is the money going?

Foluke: I think the African governments have to answer for that. Because where've you've got aid bodies – if you're going to any country, to give aid or do anything concerned with humanitarian work, you think that if you go to the governments, they should be the ones to give out this aid. But they're not going to do that, obviously. So the problem or the result then is that the idea of Africa as this poor place in need of aid is replicated and entrenched within Africa.

Sandra: As an African person within the country, how does that make you feel?

Foluke: Oh, very angry. Very very angry. The problem is, if you're told a narrative, and that's the dominant narrative, then you think it's true. And I know lots of people within Africa who think: well, it must be true, Africa must be poor. But when you think about the fact that most of the things like electronics rely on mineral resources that are mined from Africa, and everything runs on electronics in the world, and Africa doesn't have that many electronics, then of course you begin to realise that the narrative is either incomplete or completely false.

Sandra: Like you say, education will be key. So you have people who are being educated, and educated from a colonialist perspective – why isn't there someone within the country saying 'stop, what about our history, what about the positive narrative' – why isn't that mantle being taken by somebody?

Foluke: Well I think there are two things. If we start with the question of education, because I was really lucky, in the sense that both of my parents are really academic, they're exceptionally academic. So I think from when I was about six or seven, we used to have, during each holiday, at least one book we had to read. So my older brother and I would get a book to read and then we'd have to exchange. And we had to read them properly because my mum would then set essays and we'd have to write an essay. So I didn't just read the

books given in school. Like I said, you have the idea of a colonial perspective, but if you read wider, then you have the added advantage, but not everyone has that.

And then secondly the question of power – who's going to say let's stop the aid, the governments who are collecting the aid who are in control of the country, or the people who are not in control of the country and have been sort of brainwashed by this colonial education?

Sandra: That certainly picks up one of your points around the African government. There is this perception, unfortunately, that lots of the African governments are corrupt. And it's used as a general term for the whole of the African continent, it's not even one particular country that they hone in on, they use it as a general perception – and unfortunately that then tags on to how people see black people in general, as being corrupt and not trustworthy. And obviously, I'd imagine the people feel that their governments are corrupt, but they feel powerless to be able to do anything about it.

Foluke: The problem of course is the idea of governments being corrupt, as if they're being corrupt in a bubble, in isolation. So who's helping the African governments be corrupt, where are they hiding their money? Not in Africa. Aid that is being given – why is it being given to them, what are they using it for? If you feel that this government that you're giving aid to is going to waste your money, would you continue to give them the aid, if you aren't getting anything out of it?

So the idea that 55 countries in Africa, all these African governments are corrupt, you have to substantiate that with some evidence. And you have to place that in the context of them being corrupt. And I'm not saying they're not corrupt, I don't particularly like my Nigerian government, but we live in a world system that is capitalist, that is based on this idea of wealth, accumulation of wealth – and that's not something African governments are doing in isolation.

Sandra: Amongst the many talents of this woman, she's also a spoken word artist. Foluke has actually brought some of her wonderful work with her today, and you're going to read a piece for us, which kind of does tie in with what we've been speaking about.

Foluke: This poem, or this piece, because I don't really like to call them poems, slightly Eurocentric I think – you expect them to be verse and rhyme (they don't). So this is called 'an African's lament', and it's sort of an examination of the history of what's happened to Africa and what should come or can be done next.

Is there nothing left?...

What became of the mighty kingdoms of Jukun and Kanem-Bornu? The Empires of Benin, Mossi, Oyo, Kitara, Jolof, Wolof, Songhai?

What became of the people whose stories brought travellers from far off lands to these shores?

Travellers who gazed in wonder at the magnificent splendour of the majesty and the masquerade?

Who remembers the exploits of kings and queens whose legends imbued them with indisputable divinity?

Who could withstand Idris Aloomaa?

Who would not admire Queen Amina of Kano?

Who would not make obeisance before Ovonramwen Nogbaisi?

Would you not shake before Shaka Zulu?

Or kneel before Queen Nzinga?

Would you not be dazzled by Sunni Ali?

Or celebrate Sundiata?

Would you not have kissed the feet of Kabaka Mwanga?

Or feared annihilation by the N'Nonmiton?

What became of the riches of Benin?

The wealth of Mansa Musa?

The splendour of the Asante?

The gold of Buganda?

The gold of Yeke?

The gold of Lunda?

Or even the mountains of groundnut at Kano?

The mounds of sugar at Bacita?

The hills of limestone at Ewekoro?

Is there nothing left?

Have we sold our souls for a pittance,

Our land for a penny,

Our future for rubble,

Our freedom for blood, devastation, and war?

What will we leave to our children but tales of dust and despair?

What is left of the darkness of the night?

But we are what is left.

Empires may rise and empires may fall,

But the African spirit is strong, the African heart remains.

We may have eaten a dinner of death and disgust, bitterness and blood.

But we shall rise once more, we shall rebuild again.

Because we are what is left of the night.

And the dark night will flee before us.

The fire burning in our bellies is a resolute spirit, unwavering, unbending, constant, eternal.

Because we are Africa.

We are the lightning and the rain,

The flood and the forests,

*We are the midnight whisper and the noonday wail.
We are darkness and magic, we are silence and thunder.
We are the storm.
We are Africa.*

Sandra: Thank you for sharing that with us, that was powerful. And that kind of summarised the conversations we've been having. It's that kind of positive dialogue that we need to have more of. There needs to be more of that out in our community. I think it's about pride. Sometimes we talk about African pride, we talk about black pride and black power, and everything – what is it, and how can we get more of it, especially with our young children that are coming through? Because it's important, so important. What do you do, in terms of the spoken word? Have you written anything, do you go around speaking, are these things you just write, do you perform?

Foluke: I used to perform. Like you said before, I'm a mother, so I used to perform before my son came along, but it's more difficult now, because you can't do that during working hours, you have to do that after working hours, and that's the time I spend with my son. But I do intend to go back into it, so if I'm invited to perform anywhere I'm really happy to. I have done a couple of performances before, and you can find me on Youtube, there are a couple of them on Youtube.

Sandra: So where would they find you on Youtube?

Foluke: I think if you typed in 'Foluke African Child' there's a spoken word piece called African Child and I've performed that quite a few times.

Sandra: That leads into the conversation we were having in relation Africa and the perception around Africa. One thing I will say is that it wasn't until I experienced an opportunity to travel within Africa that really opened up my eyes, because unfortunately the media will feed you one side.

When we talk about Bristol, it's never pictures of the underpass, the current state of another side to Bristol, it's always Clifton, there's always particular pictures of a city they like to paint, and I think that's exactly what happens with Africa. Because if you go to Africa, there are some amazing places, some beautiful place, of course there's some run-down places, but that's everywhere. The only vision you see of Africa is the negative one. I would encourage us as a community to go out and travel; we need to travel to these places, it's about creating our own narrative, our own awareness and being able to hold arguments when people want to throw you negative images you've got a positive image you can actually use as a reference as well.

Big question: what else needs to be done? We talked about aid: countries are not going to stop receiving aid. I think the governments have a massive responsibility to wake up, there's a reason why countries keep rushing to Africa to keep stripping the resources there. What do we need to do?

Foluke: I think the governments need to sit up but I don't think they're going to, so it's left for us the people. I think African people, both on the continent and outside the continent, have to join together and disregard the idea of the African governments, because if you think about it, the African countries, the African states, were created out of colonialism. So they're always going to act the way, do the thing they were created to do. The colonies were created to benefit the motherland, and they're still going to do that because that's what they were created to do. The whole point of colonialism was to be able get resources out of Africa to other places. That's still happening, because the colonies still exist, they're being called states but they're still acting like colonies.

If an African government wants to do something they have to make sure that the international community agrees with that. How is that being independent, how is that being free? So the states are not independent, but the people have the power to be independent. And it's in our coming together, in understanding, that we are unified in our end. Because if Africa is being perceived badly, no matter how far removed a black person is from their African history, they're being viewed with the same lens. So the result is the same. So it's about African people working together and ignoring the nation state.

Sandra: I wanted to finish on one of the things that Foluke is involved in for this year: she's the founder of the Forever African Conference and Events, and she's looking to host an amazing conference in Bristol. Tell us about it – firstly, why did you want to do it?

Foluke: Why did I want to do Forever African Conference and Events – mainly because my students really want to have something within the university which is not completely academic but which they could sort of take ownership of and be proud in having participated in this.

The idea of the conference is to bring together students, researchers, NGO's, innovators, community people, who identify as from Africa or with African, and bring everyone together and celebrate this identification and also work, because we were talking about aid to Africa, stuff like that, it's a lot of talk but then the question is, what do we do next. We talked about employability, what if we could bring together employers and black graduates who are looking for employment, that particularly identifies with who they are. Bringing people – researchers and companies – over from Africa. Black graduates, what if they wanted to go and work in an African country? How do they do that? It's bringing those links together, celebrating but also moving us forward, so that we don't just keep talking about the misrepresentation of Africa but we then begin to re-represent Africa in its positive and complete light.

Sandra: That sounds amazing. So you're hoping to do something this year – June. For you to do something like this is amazing, and I'm sure it's not easy, first to convince people of your vision, what needs to be done. Students are on board but as with anything, it needs funding. How are you getting on, because I know you're trying to get funding, you're trying to get people to buy into the event, what kind of reaction have you had?

Foluke: Well, I think I mentioned this earlier as well: things take time. I'm really positive about the conference, I know it's going to be fantastic, but it's trying to convince

people - especially people who don't have that lived experience, of being a black academic, a black student, a black researcher - trying to convince them that this is a good thing to do. I talk a lot, so I've been doing a lot of talking and meeting with people and writing letters, and it's moving slowly, but I'm not focusing on that, I'm focusing on actually putting on the conference, and having students celebrate something, because that is going to come – people are going to realise what a fantastic thing it is eventually.

Sandra: We spoke earlier about the perception of Bristol University. In my opinion, I would've hoped that Bristol University would've jumped on this. This is a fantastic way to dispel some of that perception very quickly, by promoting and supporting an event like yours. I know you're working with them to try and change that dialogue, and hopefully, they will take the opportunity to do that.

Foluke: Hopefully.

Sandra: I know that you've also had some fantastic reactions from academics outside of Bristol who want to get involved as well.

Foluke: A lot of black academics, and this is not just in the UK, I've had people writing to me from Canada, from across Africa, black academics think this is a fantastic idea, and from different fields. I'm a lawyer, but I don't want this to be about law. So I've got someone who's doing some innovation in Scotland in medical techniques, some artists from New York, writers from Canada, microbiologists from across Nigeria, tax lawyers from South Africa, so you know, people think this is a good thing. Pulling together all this enthusiasm and putting it into action, that's the next step.

Sandra: We've very much been talking about the narrative, the negative perceptions of us as a black community, so to have something that's all about positivity, for someone who, wherever you may be in the world, because I'm sure with technology that will be televised, people will be able to see it on YouTube etc, to visualise: oh my god, there's black academics at a particular level. A lot of us know that we are at that level, but there're also a lot that don't. And it is about creating our own narrative, so I think it's great that you're doing that.

Foluke: Thank you. I mean, it's not just about the narrative, I think it's also about creating the opportunities. Because the narrative is made up of misconceived realities, but if you change the reality, the narrative will follow.

Sandra: I think that's one of the things that putting on a conference like this will achieve, so good luck. I know that you're in contact with Emmanuel, and we've done lots of stuff with UWE around their Africa week, so I'm hoping that one day we can see a joint thing going on here, because the issues are exactly the same in both universities, it's about bringing that together. You've got another spoken word piece for us, so if you'd like to introduce it?

Foluke: This is sort of a tribute to the 100 years of giving women the right to vote, specifically because I'm an intersectional feminist, so this is called ['Black women and the](#)

[promised land](#)'. The 100 years of getting the vote is a milestone, but what does that milestone mean? So I'm just going to read that:

Black Women & the Promised Land

*Black women who overcome draw a line in the sand,
for the next generation to step over, over, over,
till we get to the Promised Land...*

I stand here looking back on the souls laid out behind me, the ones who withstood the invaders, the ones who didn't give in when everything had been taken, the ones who survived. The ones whose voices stretch across time to speak to me, saying 'Courage Daughter. This land is still yours. The land remembers.'

I pay tribute to those who have gone ahead. To Moremi and Emotan, proud forest warriors. To Amina, Queen of the desert. To Queen Nzinga of Mbundu. To Sirleaf Johnson.

To Graca Machel. To Winnie Mandela. To Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan. To my grandmother. To my mother. To you. To all of you.

To those whose names have been swept away by the wind, to those whose breath was taken by the waters, to those whose lives were lost in the sands. This land is still yours. The land remembers.

Black woman spread your wings and fly high. The path of our freedom is (still being) paved with blood.

*Black women who overcome draw a line in the sand,
for the next generation to step over, over, over,
till we get to the Promised Land...*

Sandra: Beautiful. Thank you so much. If you just give out some details?

Foluke: My blog is called Foluke's African skies, you can find it at www.folukeafrica.com