

CARTA NEWS

The Newsletter of the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa

July - Dec 2019 | Vol 11 | Issue 9

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Somefun's doctoral journey of resilience, chaos, and passion

By Eunice Kilonzo, CARTA communications officer

Four book chapters, eight awards, 21 papers, 43 months of doctoral studies, several fellowships, and the list goes on and on. Cohort Six Fellow Somefun Oluwaseyi Dolapo from the University of the Witwatersrand, has hung her doctoral boots in style. One accolade after another.

After being featured as one of Wits academics – both established and emerging – to have won widely, in fields as diverse as philosophy, entomology, pharmacy, and engineering. She graduated on December 9, 2019.

Seyi, as she is fondly known, says her doctoral journey was not always colorful.

"My PhD journey was filled with so many instances where I asked myself: Why did I decide to go down this path? Why did I decide to persist in this struggle of constant rejections? Why have I allowed journal articles and statistical jargon to become a significant part of my life? Why?"

As a master's student, Seyi, always loved research. She was motivated to enroll in a doctoral program because she "didn't want to be an ordinary postgraduate student."

Her passion for the youth and personal quest for knowledge nudged her on. She settled on a youth development topic, specifically, to create an index on this global development issue

"I worked on this for about six months and was looking forward to submitting my research proposal before my supervisor asked me to change the topic while he was away on sabbatical," she adds. "This was probably the first challenge during my PhD," says Seyi.

"I could not convince my supervisor via email why I had to continue with the topic. I did not want to start a new topic after I had completed the literature review task from ESE: O¹. I used this waiting time of about two months to draft a manuscript on this topic which has been published, and also attended my first Population Association of America conference in Chicago, where I presented a paper on educational outcomes."

By the time Seyi's supervisor returned, he advised her to focus on the sexual behavior of youth beyond a risk approach, therefore, through a positive lens. But she was hesitant as the other fellows in her cohort had submitted their proposals and were getting ready for data collection.

"After going through the five stages of grief [denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance], I



started working on sexual resilience among youth in Nigeria."

This set her on a path she terms as "difficult" for several reasons. One, she was the first in her department to conduct a mixed-method study. Two, the study meant she had to travel to four Nigerian states as representatives of different ethnic groups in her home country. Three, it took nearly a whole year to get ethical approval at the University of the Witwatersrand. The latter, she believes, was a silver lining.

"I went for several conferences, authored and collaborated with other researchers as my main research was on a standstill. One of the highlights of this year was presenting an idea (Mentoring in Research Eco-systems) at the African Studies Association in Chicago. I also got to be a discussant on the "African family formation and living arrangements" session at the IUSSP conference in Cape Town in 2017."

Seyi got her ethical approval in December 2018 and began fieldwork in 2019. She describes this time as "simultaneously chaotic and fun" marked with several canceled flights, unethical practices

♦♦ I wish to thank CARTA for investing in Dr. Seyi Somefun, whose unusual productivity in terms of research output is beyond what any PhD student has done. I know her story and how she was taken by CARTA. It has paid off! She will be an asset as a role model to other CARTA Fellows, ♦♦ her supervisor, Clifford Odimegwu, said.

proposed by field workers but overall a great learning experience as a result of talking to diverse youth."

After the fieldwork, she participated in a fellowship organized by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP). She was one of 11 doctoral researchers from Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, and Nigeria trained on effective communication of their research to policy makers. An opportunity, in another continent, came knocking.

"I got a 6-month fellowship at the World Bank in New York, US. I was attached to the Africa Human Capital Team. My skills as a demographer were relevant for the team as I helped disaggregate human capital outcomes by different socio-demographic characteristics in order to help country offices better target vulnerable populations for interventions."

While in New York, Seyi interacted with several economists from diverse backgrounds and broadened her skills beyond academia. The free-spirited fellow says the PhD experience is one clouded in superficiality, solitude and somewhat, brief.

"I woke up the next day wondering if this is it."

Even as she exited the stage of what was her doctoral journey, she picked nuggets of wisdom that she says encouraged her.

"The key to staying afloat is resilience. We are all dealing with rejection. I applied for the PRB fellowship twice and got in on the second attempt. I only became a World Bank fellow at the third try. Of course, I wanted to give up most of the time."

But she didn't.

"I can't be specific as to why I didn't give up. Contributing to a better world is not one of the top reasons, but I guess the fear of being a failure is. Invest in your hobbies. Traveling, playing football, and tinkering with my fantasy league were activities that helped me through the PhD journey."

Looking ahead, Seyi says she looks forward to "exciting postdoctoral opportunities within and beyond Africa to continue my work on sexual resilience among youth and also to mentor other African scholars."

Title of thesis: *BEYOND RISK: Understanding a Framework for improving Adolescents' Sexual Health in Nigeria.* 

¹ ESE:O is a CARTA partner based in Chile. They represent unique South-South CARTA collaborations. ESE:O provides specialized skills in academic writing support with a mission to get voices of the South into mainstream academic publications. ESE:O is an on-line teaching platform for distance education program that addresses the particular problem of poor writing skills in the African academy. The collaboration allows CARTA to increase its graduates' research output and support them to become research leaders. We are international experts in the development of literacy skills with more than ten years' experience in Latin America, Africa and Asia.