9 Marriage as Career Strategy

All Hausa women, if physically and mentally able to do so, marry. And marriage is the most frequently and commonly exercised career option among Hausa women in Katsina. In this chapter, we examine the lifestyles and choices open to married women, the gender-distinct discourse surrounding marriage, and the differently perceived and expected 'appropriate' behaviour within marriage.

We consider the social and economic relationships which exist within marriage: between husband and wife; between co-wives; with their children, and among their affines. We examine how power, authority and deference are demonstrated and played out within marriage, as well as how wives may support or undermine each other and their husbands.

A primary focus of this chapter is the economic activities of married women. Married Hausa women, as other Hausa women, play a vital role in the economy. The 24-hour day married women put in in relation to domestic labour – childcare, socialisation and education, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic maintenance – goes, all to often, 'without saying'. In addition to that burden of labour, married women are a mainstay in the income-earning activities of the community, including petty commodity production and small- and large-scale trade.

Technological change, import restrictions and currency devaluation, structural adjustment generally and its consequences, and Nigeria's disastrous economic policies and practices have had as profound an effect on economic activities within the household, as on street and shop commerce and on industry. The changes in economic activities among secluded women are analysed in this chapter: benchmark data from 1971-73, compared to information from the late 1980s, demonstrate not only the adaptability of the Katsina women, but also the flexibility and speed with which 'traditional' crafts and skills founder and die in the present economic and industrial context.
Women’s crafts and trades are considered in some detail, as is women’s utilisation of economic resources. Husband’s and wife’s economic situations are distinct; they may or may not share class position and orientation. In disbursement as well as in acquisition of funds, women act largely independently of men; marriage enjoins greater spatial than economic constraint.

Women’s profits from their activities are inalienably their own. The husband is expected to be responsible for all household expenses irrespective of his wives’ economic resources, and thus married women are free to employ their economic surplus as they see fit. On the other hand, at the present time there is no guarantee that husbands can afford to support their wives and families fully, any more than there has ever been a guarantee that they would totally support their wives and families if they could.

The present economic crisis has rallied women to ensure their economic survival and protect themselves and their children. However, women can and do use much of the money they earn or are given in cementing their alliances with other women, and maintaining their networks of friends. Particularly through judicious participation in the rituals surrounding life-cycle ceremonies and through gift-exchange, women may effect changes in their social networks, improve their social position, and create bonds of affinity and obligation which stand them in good stead when the need for support arises.

We begin this chapter with discussion of the practice of seclusion of married women in the contemporary context. Most strictly required and followed in the early days of first marriage, seclusion represents a significant social and physical division and separation between women and men, married and un- or non-married women, young and old. On the other hand, the barriers created may be and are eventually crossed. At the same time, and in relation to our economic focus, it must be recognised that for women, seclusion has a positive value economically in the opportunity it affords for carrying out income-earning activities. Male and female discourse and practice relating to seclusion are considered below.

Strict Seclusion: An Introduction to Marriage

Prior to marriage, most Hausa girls have virtually unlimited freedom of movement, especially during the daytime when many girls trade for their