



The Africa Fund

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Tilden J. LeMelle, Chairman

Jennifer Davis, Executive Director

To: The Africa Fund LEGISLATIVE NETWORK
Re: Women and Governance in Nigeria
From: Jennifer Davis
Date: April 2000

Please find enclosed *Reflections on a Visit to Nigeria: Women and Governance* by Stephanie Urdang.

In 1999 Nigeria saw the end of years of military dictatorship. Elections were held at the national, state and local level. However, in one crucial area, Nigeria has not fared so well. Of the 11,000 elected officials at all levels, only 181 are women. Of the 350 members of the House of Representatives only 12 (3.4%) are women. This compares dramatically to South Africa, where the first democratic election in 1994 saw 100 women elected to the 400 member House of Assembly. The U.S. comes somewhere between South Africa and Nigeria, with women making up 9% of the Senate and 13% of the House of Representatives. Women have been more successful at the state level, making up 22.5% of all state legislators, up from 10% in 1979.

Women in Nigeria are working to overcome the many obstacles they face. I know many of you have worked to increase the participation of women in elected positions in this country. This common effort opens the door to the sharing of experiences between women in the U.S. and Nigeria. Those of you wishing to establish such links might begin by contacting the three people below:

Hon. Florence D. Aya
Deputy Chair
Committee for Women Affairs
House of Representatives
National Assembly Complex
Abuja, NIGERIA

Ms. Nkoyo Toyo
Women's Consultative Caucus
14 Adebola Street
Surulere
Lagos, NIGERIA

Dr. Timiebi Agary
Director General
National Centre for Women's
Development
Better Life Street
Abuja, NIGERIA

Please keep us informed of your activities and let us know if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Davis

Reflections of a Visit to Nigeria: Women and Governance

The following are some reflections on a visit to Nigeria by Stephanie Urdang, Coordinator for Gender

Advisors, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). She is a member of the board of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and visited Nigeria towards the end of 1999.

I arrived in Nigeria on this first visit to that country, naive. I knew how strong and forceful Nigerian women are, their courage and strength uppermost in my mind as I thought of the many Nigerian women I have met over the past few decades. This sense was only heightened by my visit. What I did not therefore anticipate was the serious gender and governance crisis that pervades a country that only recently has had elections after the darkness of harsh military rule, and which in many respects is attempting to honor a vision and goal of democracy. The absence of women in political office, whether elected or appointed, and the concerted effort by men in power — whether wielding that power at top levels of government, in the urban and rural communities or in the home — to keep women out of leadership roles is rather stunning. My naiveté lay in the fact that I had assumed otherwise.

Within the first months after the first election to take place after the downfall of the brutal Abacha military regime stories abound, highlighting two realities. One reality is reflected in statistics: Out of 11,000 elected officials at all levels, 181 are women; 3 Senators out of 109; 12 of the 350 members of the House of Representatives are women. The second reality, are the reports that, to his credit, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has pushed women candidates for appointed office and has made his strong commitment to gender equality part of his public statements. At the same time a strong and growing movement among women and NGOs is organizing at a grass roots level to make a

difference, with the next elections, four years after the first, a target point for change.

However, the first reality emerges from a dominant male culture and the prevailing argument that there are no qualified women. This, despite the unusually high number of women university graduates and Ph.D's. And so, stories of resistance against women running for office or against being appointed to senior government or party positions, abound. This is not simply resistance, but can be viewed more as sabotage at the family, local, state and national levels.

Stories: Politics and Gender

I heard many stories attesting to both the hurdles that prevent women from running for office and the successes women have achieved due to their determination and grit.

- In Abuja, the capital, we drove into the stately area set aside for members of Government, passed the President's residence and after a number of false twists and turns were directed to the house of one of the three women Senators, Senator Abdul-Rasaq, where we spent a number of hours in conversation. The Senator is the Chair of the Committee of Women which approves the budget allocations for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. She had spent the morning in a "clinic" for her constituents, women and men who arrived on her doorstep with complaints, requests, worries, that she patiently listened to and tried to respond to, her hand figuratively in and out of her pocket as she (non-figuratively) gave her own money for the really hard and sad cases. As the Director of the UNIFEM office in Nigeria commented, "You know she didn't come away from the clinic without giving her own money".



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Senator Abdul-Rasaq, dressed in Muslim dress, a white headress tightly framing her friendly and earnest young face, described her efforts to run for office, which were barely short of Herculean. Obstacles were placed in her path every step of the way. She found that simple procedures for men became major obstacles for her. For instance, she had to get the signatures of five officials in order to run for office. For men this is a pro-forma process. For her it was not, because she could not get appointments with the men in order to ask them for their signatures. For instance, she did not want to appear as if she was asking for favors as a woman and be the subject of gossip. And so, in order to get to the Governor, she made contact with his wife but even this did not work. She eventually managed to maneuver a meeting by accompanying someone she knew who had an appointment with him.

A large part of her ultimate success was because of the support she got from her family and the fact that her father, extremely proud of his daughter's achievements, had been a well-known judge. In the Senate now she faces constant battles. Only two of the three women Senators are gender-sensitive. She spoke of the many different legal restrictions on women: the penal code that permits husbands to beat their wives for "correctional" purpose and the fact that domestic violence is ignored as a family affair, even when wives are killed. Her goal as Senator is to ensure that at the next election more women are elected. One goal is to hold a conference of women NGO's — emerging now after being crushed by the Abacha regime — to bring about unity, and develop a policy for the next four years, including the establishment of pressure groups to push for the election of more women in the next election.

She has no staff to support her as yet. This is provided for her from the government, but she wants to raise her own additional funds to do so, so that she can hire experienced staff who will help her fight for the rights of her constituents. A weak, inexperienced support system would be worse than handling the work by herself, battling against an overwhelmingly male and hostile environment.

Leaving, after a lunch she provided for us, we were ushered out by her father, as we had been ushered in. Himself prominent in the legal community, the pride he had in his daughter was palpable. His daughter is one of the successful women, no doubt due in measure to his support.

- In Imo State I met Ada — angry, forceful and full of humor — who described the extraordinary ups and downs she encountered in being a candidate initially for the National Assembly and later for a party position. She had to contend with tactics that I heard echoed in many different quarters: meetings held at the end of the day when they anticipated that women would need to be home; meetings held at 3:00 in the morning to screen candidates, knowing that women could not attend; women can only stand if sponsored by a man; being denied a constituency because she has only lived in the area because she is married to her husband, but in the place of her birth she isn't eligible because she is now living in a different area because she is married to her husband. She was disqualified and so decided to try and run for a local office, only to find that her husband was being wooed by the party to run for the same position. "You have betrayed me", she told him, "The difference between you and me is that you married a slave while I married a class mate". In the end the man who ran and won had a lot of cash, and bought his way into the position. She then decided to try for a party position, ex-officio, at the State level. At the ruling party Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) convention several tactics were used to try and dissuade women from running — including scheduling meetings to exclude women. In one case women hired a bus for all the women candidates and they waited in the middle of the night for word from a man they had bought off to tell them where the meeting was to be held. Taken by surprise, the men said, "Oh, we're just having a drink. Why aren't you at home?"

The last straw came at the end of the day when the final candidates were being put forward. A registration fee of 5,000 Naira was announced without forewarning. Few women would have such a large sum, close to \$50, with them and most are as unlikely to be able to find it quickly. Ada rushed to a friend's house, and together they scraped up the sum, with a little extra to cover her taxi fare back home. She was the only woman who found the money and therefore the only woman to remain a candidate. Later in the evening she sat with us at the hotel, regaling us with the story, laughing hard at the antics of the men, although underneath there must have been disappointment and anger. The next day, though, the news was good: she was selected to

an ex-officio position at the state level of the party. She had see-sawed from running for office at the state level, to running at the local level, failing both times, to finally becoming a representative of the PDP back at the State level.

- Tactics to prevent women from occupying leadership positions were played out at much higher levels as well. Salome was appointed by Obasanjo to be a Minister. She had been politically active in Kongolo State for many years and at one time had been the Local Commissioner for Health. She came into the political limelight during the recent elections when she coordinated the political campaign of PDP in the North Eastern zone, comprising 6 states. Her name was put forward by the Vice President who knew her political position and who she described as being very gender sensitive. She attended the orientation retreat for Ministers, the final step before taking up their positions. But it was not to be. The excuse that was used was that she did not belong to PDP, the ruling party. This was not true. She had always been a strong member. Her opponents had based their misinformation on the fact that her husband was a member of a different party and because of certain political intrigues that involved a political struggle against a corrupt politician, she had had to back him. However she never switched her party allegiance. When the list of Ministers was announced someone had deviously switched her party membership from PDP to another party. No sooner had she completed the retreat than a strenuous campaign was mounted against her by men in the PDP, claiming that as she was not a party member, according to the constitution, she could not be a Minister. This is an issue being reviewed but meanwhile the erroneous claim about her party membership was used as the basis for strong pressure against her and the Senate agreed to withdraw her name. She was advised by her political mentors to "Take it easy. Let it go. There'll be other opportunities and we will stand by you." She had exhausted all avenues, had failed to get support from the National Council of Women's Societies, and returned home to establish an NGO working on HIV/AIDS issue. "I thank God because I am wiser and better. But I am not giving up either", she said.

Tactics such as these to block women are being

repeated throughout Nigeria and I heard the same stories for different localities, for different women, for different levels. Women were kidnapped at the height of their campaigns to get them out of the way before the final vote; meetings were held at 3:00 or 3:30 in the morning so that women could not be there; day meetings were purposefully dragged on until 6:30 or 7:00 when the critical decisions were made — after the women had had to go home to their families; the claim was made that women can't run where they live (due to marriage) because they were not born there, but can't run where they were born because they no longer live there (due to marriage). Approval from certain state officials, a *pro forma* exercise for male candidates, became a contortion for female candidates who could not get the necessary appointments in order to get the requisite signatures. Perhaps the most insidious of all, is the peer pressure mounted against their husbands — assuming they are supportive in the first place — that ultimately is so strong that the men break and forbid their wives to run. The taunts and derision are persistent: "You think your wife will keep her legs together once she is in office and is away from home? Heh!"; "Women wrapper!" (referring to the cloths the women wear around their waists); "So you have to look after the children now" — derisive laughter — or "Are you wearing skirts yet?" — same laughter. I was told of one case of a devoted husband and father who had sold off some land to raise funds for his wife's campaign. But he cracked under the relentless taunts and when his wife was elected he attempted to have her removed from her position. All he achieved was a breakdown of his marriage and the anger of his children.

Women Meeting the Challenge

If the commitment, toughness and spirit of the women proliferates, this manifestation of patriarchal attitudes will have a shortened life span. These kinds of tactics are being challenged on all fronts by different women, in different circumstances.

Nse Archie Udoh from Akwa Ibom State and a member of an association of women from her state, is one example of how women are fighting back. She told me about the counter-offensive launched by her organization. For example:

■ A woman from one locality had been judged as qualified to run and was "screened" - i.e. accepted as a candidate - but found at the end of the day, that she had been screened out, no reason given.

She had to contend with tactics... meetings held at the end of the day when they anticipated that women would need to be home; meetings held at 3:00 in the morning to screen candidates, knowing that women could not attend; women can only stand if sponsored by a man.

U.S. elected officials and others working to increase women's involvement in politics can contact:

Hon. Florence D. Aya, Deputy Chair, Committee for Women Affairs, House of Representatives, National Assembly Complex, Abuja, Nigeria.

Ms. Nkoyo Toyo, Women's Consultative Caucus (WCC), 14 Adebola Street, Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria.

Dr. Timiebi Agary, Director General, National Centre for Women's Development (NCWD), Better Life Street, Abuja, Nigeria.

For more information contact:

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There was an immediate response from women - market women, civil servants, non-civil servants, members of different parties who signed a letter to the Governor demanding to know why. "If not" they threatened, "we will go naked in the streets". She was reinstated the next day. (To threaten to go naked in Nigerian culture is the ultimate threat, one that no man can resist as he should never see "where he came from".) She ran for chairperson of the local government and won.

■ A woman candidate for chairperson at the local level was locked up by her opponent on the last day of campaigning. When the women heard, they quickly printed a flyer explaining what had happened, and paid young boys to distribute them throughout the locality. She was released immediately because of the public pressure that resulted but it was too late to win. She had missed the final critical six hours of the campaign.

■ A woman running for office came home one evening to find her handbag outside the house. In order to go back home she would have to make a sacrifice and agree to her husband's demands. A group of very powerful women in the community, including a Chief, visited him saying "We just want to be your friend". But he saw their very presence, imposing as it was, as the threat it was intended to be and he withdrew his opposition.

■ Because of the recurring practice of holding meetings at 3:00 a.m., Nse Udoh organizes six or seven volunteers to go in two cars and drive the candidate running for office to the meeting (often after they have had to pay someone to divulge the venue). The women wait outside the meeting until it ends, drive her back, ring the doorbell and hand her over to her husband. In this way no one can claim that she was up to no good with another man in the middle of the night. The large number of women and the two cars establishes their presence so all can see that she is above board.

■ *Day of Laughter:* On the first of July 75 women from a number of organizations and

localities descended upon Abuja, with placards that quoted the ridiculous statements men had made: "Women are under my armpits"; "Enogu says there are no qualified women candidates", etc. They stood outside the National Assembly and held up their placards in silence. Whenever a man asked them what they were doing, they would burst out into laughter. This continued the whole day, until they were invited into the Senate and could make their demands.

■ **Legal action:** And then there are the lawsuits that are being brought against the National and the State Governments. One legal action has been launched by women lawyers against the government for the small percentage of women in Government on the grounds that this is unequal and against the constitution. Another is being planned against the five northern states that have disbanded the State Ministries of Women. Seven had done so originally, but two had reinstated them, one due to direct intervention by the Director of the UNIFEM office in Nigeria.

Elections will be held again in three and a half years. Women have begun organizing and although there is some support from the President, the strength of the pervasive resistance of men once again threatens the participation and representation of women in government. However, the one impression I left with was the determination, courage and fighting spirit of the women.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programs and strategies that promote women's human rights, political participation and economic security. UNIFEM works in partnership with UN organizations, governments and NGOs and networks to achieve social justice and gender equality.