

**United Nations**  
**Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)**  
**Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)**  
**Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)**  
**Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**  
**Expert Group Meeting on**  
**Equal participation of women and men in**  
**decision-making processes, with particular**  
**emphasis on political participation and leadership**  
**24 to 27 October 2005**

**Nigeria: Political Transition and the Complexities of Gender Empowerment\***

**Prepared by:**

**Leslye Amede Obiora**

---

\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## Women in the Nigerian Parliament: A Case-Study

A useful starting point for my intervention is a recent publication chronicling Nigeria's struggle for democracy which asserts that the republic remains enslaved to, and haunted, by the ghost of its past, including the debilitating legacies of military rule.<sup>1</sup> Outlining a litany of deficits, the editors of the collection observe that the country has been in perpetual transition since its amalgamation for British colonial purposes in 1914. Pondering what has gone wrong with the Fourth Republic, the authors reflect on measures to forestall the risk that the present iteration of democracy is condemned to repeat the failures of its predecessors. Ironically, of the 26 chapters of substantive discussion in the book, only a single chapter comprising of 15 pages dedicates attention to gender dynamics in Nigeria's emerging democracy. This irony captures and parallels the marginalization of gender concerns in the theory and practice of politics in Nigeria. The same patriarchal principles that account for the excesses of the military and the failures of successive regimes in Nigeria define the gender aspects of political participation. To speak of the ghost of Nigeria's past is to acknowledge gender disparities. In this context it is problematic to articulate an affirmative project of wrestling and/or exorcising such a ghost with no more than nominal deference to the profound importance of gender balance for the democratic ideal.

While democratic transition in Nigeria has created openings that politicize gender identity, there remains both a dearth of political opportunities for women and severe self-reinforcing constraints on gender participation. At the reinstatement of democratic government in 1999, twelve women were elected to the House of Representatives and three women gained seats in the Senate. In the 2003 election, the first cohort of women Senators was displaced, but three other women attained office as senators. Out of the twelve women that served in the House, four lost their seats and eight were reelected. Still, the number of women nearly doubled as thirteen additional women were elected into the House (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Women in Elected and Appointed Office, 1999 and 2003.**

Office	No Available	No of Women in 1999	No of Women in 2003	% Of Women (2003)
President	1	No Woman	No Woman	0%
V/President	1	No Woman	No Woman	0%
Senate	109	3 Women	3 Women	2.8%
House of Representatives	360	12 Women	21 Women	5.8%
Governors	36	No Woman	No Woman	0%
Deputy Governors	36	1 Woman	2 Women	5.6%
State House of Assembly – Speakers	36	1 Woman	2 Women	5.6%
State Houses Of Assembly	990	12 Women	23 Women	

<sup>1</sup> Agbaje, Adigun, Larry Diamond and Ebere Onwundiwe, eds. 2004. *Nigeria's Struggle for Democracy and Good Governance: A Festschrift for Oyeleye Oyediran*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Out of 11,881 electable positions in the 1999 elections, only 631 women contested and a mere 1.62 percent won. Out of 109 senatorial seats, 3, i.e. 2.8 percent, went to women. Of the 360 seats available in the House of Representatives, women occupied 12 in 1999 and 24 in 2003. See Lawal, Habiba M. 2004. 'Overview of Political Participation of Women in Nigeria: Challenges, Triumphs and the Way Forward 12.' Paper for International Republican Institute Conference, Abuja March 30.

Cabinet Ministers	34	4 (out of 49)	6 Women	17.65%
-------------------	----	---------------	---------	--------

Source: Lawal 2004, 12.

The negligible presence of women in institutionalized politics is equally apparent in their low participation as party executives, elected officers, and political appointees. The promise of democracy can hardly become a reality for women in the face of arrangements that uncritically affirm patriarchal privileges. In spite of the under-representation of women in formal politics, or perhaps precisely because of it, the processes and outcomes of policy-making bear special significance in the perpetuation of the state as a gendered hierarchy. In this light especially the involvement of women at the National Assembly is indispensable to dialogues aimed at strengthening the incipient reconstruction of democratic principles in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Some of the challenges that attend Nigeria's negotiations of the democratic alternative indeed foreground fertile opportunities to leverage the contributions of women for the cultivation of accountable, credible, sustainable, and truly inclusive democracy.

The biographic sketches of key women legislators suggest that the schematic sex-role expectations deeply etched in the collective consciousness are up against a fast-shifting reality. Women's steady, albeit modest, progress even within the more conservative cultural and religious enclaves is exploding myths about the incongruity between politics and gender.<sup>3</sup> As these women are tried and proven, the trust of the public and the corollary legitimacy of gender representation grow. There are grounds to argue that the representation of women is self-reproducing and self-sustaining, manifesting as both a catalyst and a consequence of their inclusion. With a view to illuminate the salutary impact of the participation, representation and leadership of women in decision-making processes in the Nigerian political theatre, I will draw on the text of my interview with Representative Patricia Etteh who was elected to the National Assembly in 1999. A close examination of Representative Etteh's case sheds some light, not just on the gender constraints that inhere in the structure of Nigeria's political process, but also on the cumulative roles of individual change agents in catalyzing the emergence of a public space to incubate greater gender participation and representation.

### **Representative Etteh: An Illustrious Ethic of Service**

Just a time log of the life of a democratic politician would illuminate the road involved and the strains among those different roles that sometimes might account for failures that we perceive in the political class.

Juan Linz<sup>4</sup>

The interview data illuminate the motivations and incentives that prompted Representative Etteh to embark on and persevere in her political career, the scope and nature of her undertakings, the quality of her record, and the rewards and costs of political activity. First elected in 1999, Representative Etteh is the Deputy Chief Whip of the National House of Assembly in Nigeria and the interim chair of the nascent caucus for women legislators. She was also the first and remains the only female principal officer of the National Assembly. She was originally voted into office on the platform of the opposition party and subsequently won the ticket to be the Minority Chief Whip.<sup>5</sup> Her fast rise in her new party was remarkable and derived

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim, Jibrin and Amina Salihu, eds, 2004. *Women, Marginalization and Politics in Nigeria*. Abuja: Global Rights, Centre for Democracy and Development, and Open Society Initiative for West Africa.

<sup>4</sup> Linz, Juan. 1992. 'Change and Continuity in the Nature of Contemporary Democracies 195.' In Gary Marks and Larry Diamond, eds. *Reexamining Democracy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>5</sup> Explaining that she felt compelled to defect to the ruling party to enhance her effectiveness, she enumerated her abortive attempts to influence legislative priorities from the angle of opposition. Pursuant to this experience, she came to the conclusion that, Nigeria as a country in transition was not ripe for meaningful opposition, notwithstanding its value for checks and balances.

in part from the fact that her transfer of membership had coincided with the availability of a contest for zonal leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Motivated to enter formal politics by a keen interest in furthering the development of her community, Representative Etteh attributes her political success to her unflinching faith in God and her supportive family. Asked whether she perceives a conflict between the scope of her legislative responsibilities and her obligations to her family, and whether admonitions to women to take their family seriously is intended in part to address the tendency to sexually objectify women or the need to preempt allegations of sexual impropriety, she reviewed the arduous work schedule that preceded the interview which we were conducting after midnight to demonstrate the need for unwavering understanding of one's domestic partner and family members. Apparently, the structure of institutional politics and the sheer time-consuming routine of parliamentary activities presume players whose domestic circumstances enable them to afford the punishing schedule and temper the corollary strains. In material respects, it is easier for a man with a wife who runs the home to thrive in this sphere than for a woman the demands of whose objective reality are compounded by the burdensome social expectations that come with the ideology of domesticity.

Representative Etteh's entry into politics was not preceded by lengthy experience as a civil servant. A trained and accomplished beautician, she explained that when she came into office in 1999, she worked one year as a civil servant immediately following the completion of her secondary school education and was not used to the rigors of public life. However, socialized in and committed to the culture of service that characterized her community, she quickly realized the enormity of the task ahead of her, and, as she put it, denied herself for the first six months in order to focus exclusively on acquiring the tools she would need to cope in office. She completed a diploma course in law, and then proceeded to pursue a degree in political science. Given her initiative, one would assume that she was entitled to concessions from the House in furtherance of her efforts to build up her capacity. But stating that there is no stipend for education, she clarifies that:

. . . in terms of time for me to go for my lecture, I am blessed – let me put it that way. For instance, during the diploma course, my lectures started at 7:30 pm, from Monday through Friday. The House rises at about 1:30 pm every day and that was when I set out to commute to my school, which was about 85km to and fro. The political science education is part time and it takes just two weekends in a month, Friday and Saturday. Luckily in the House, we do not sit on Friday. Neither do we sit on Saturday. So that has given me the opportunity to really sit back and occupy my time and my mind.

Her experience buttresses the assertion that, because they come from outside the traditional networks of legislators, women must work longer hours to compensate for their lack of social and political capital.<sup>7</sup> Substantively, however, it appears that the tasks delegated to her are diverse and not limited to certain areas of policymaking, such as women's affairs and social development. Even where her assignments converged with gender stereotypes, her diligence in the implicit "housekeeping" ultimately materializes into leverage for her decidedly political agenda, and augments her ability to stimulate and contribute to gender reform. Repeatedly, she recounts incremental gains that illuminate the crucial role of so-called housekeeping in terms of sowing the seeds for the legitimacy of gender equity in the House.

Representative Etteh is reluctant to affirm a discourse of marginalization as reflective of her personal experience. She is inclined, rather, to underscore how she defined both the point of her insertion and her location in the system to advance the gender equity agenda. At first glance,

---

<sup>6</sup> Cognizant that the position called for credentials that gave her an edge over other candidates, she vied for it and when she won, her prior experience helped her to distinguish herself on the job.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank. 2001. *Engendering Development* 97. New York: Oxford University Press.

one is struck by the onerous logistics of juggling public and private responsibilities. By the same token, it would seem reasonable to suggest that the Representative was working doubly hard as if to prove herself and vindicate women. In response to the question, “is it really your inner drive that challenges you to go in quest of such broad knowledge? Is it just that you are the kind of person who is perpetually in pursuit of excellence? Or, consistent with the popular belief that women have to work twice as hard as men to get half the recognition that men enjoy, is the pressure more on you as a woman to fill in the gaps?” she said:

I think it is the drive in me. Secondly, we are known to be educationists in the zone I represent. And for me to have got this kind of opportunity, even with my little educational background, I must always have it behind my mind that there will be a time where there will be a demand for more than I had originally. So why can't I devote that little time? That is why I decided that it is better for me to buckle up. Whether it is convenient for me or not, I just have to find time and do that and I believe that whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well. So it is not a question of the pressure.

Determined, teachable, and endowed with a voracious appetite for knowledge, Representative Etteh combs practices across the continent for instructive insights on how to promote meaningful gender equity in the House. She has come to appreciate the importance of mobilizing the financial support of women, especially among private sector and high net worth actors, to build and supplement a financial base to defray some of the prohibitive costs of electoral politics for women. This is a task that she recognizes will not be easy given the generality of sentiments averse to women's agitation for office. Interestingly, she suggests that the predisposition to frown at women's participation in politics is gender neutral.

There is ample evidence that she is not hesitant to leverage her political capital to highlight the gender challenges of democratization. She brings home the fact that, whatever the shortfalls of gender participation, it helps women acquire the knowledge, skills, and exposure that broaden their horizon and auger well for their participation in politics. The challenges of working within the constraints of such a framework reinforce the case for targeted capacity building. Lacking a budget for career development and capacity building, Representative Etteh is forced to appeal to the discretion of the Speaker to authorize important expenditures. In 2004, for instance, he conceded to her participation in a world female caucus held in Italy.

She hopes to draw on her experience at the world forum in order to convene a conference of all the female elected officials throughout the federation, from the local to the federal level, as well as any women who have ever contested elections. Her core objective is to stimulate dialogue that will help identify persistent concerns that militate against gender representation and participation. In addition, she seeks to cultivate networks of erstwhile female politicians whose institutional memories and wealth of experience invaluablely enrich the struggle. She also hopes to draw on cross-cultural experiences and feature female politicians of high standing and profile from both the North and the South in order to share knowledge and help consolidate the strategies and agenda of women politicians across Nigeria. In designating the National Assembly as the venue for this conference, she is counting on latent consequences to amplify the more immediately discernible concrete gains.

Representative Etteh consistently alludes to the critical role of individual agency in the mediation of gender norms. Elaborating on the onus on the individual, she contends as follows: “At least show your talent, let them know what you are worth, what you can offer and with that, you don't have any problems.... You must learn to carve a niche for yourself and I do not think we have any problems doing this at the legislature.” Her respective posts have entailed diverse opportunities to work with men, a situation she enjoys and credits for the trust of her male peers, many of whom are now favorably disposed to her entreaties. Reminiscing on the path of her political career, she notes that she is quick to identify men who could be valuable allies for her purposes. With this mode of operation, she underscores both the importance of strategic

coalitions and responsiveness to one's constituency. Maintaining that men are generally hospitable to gender representation and willing to accommodate and work with women parliamentarians, she indicates that "we have no problems relating to them; I even enjoy working with them because I learn a lot and they give us opportunities to express ourselves." In another context, however, she illustrates circumstances that provoke male resistance. These typically revolve around the question of sharing power that men perceive as their prerogative in the state apparatus. One implication here is that the fight over gender rights in addition to being an abstract and ideological struggle, manifests vividly as conflict over the distribution of power and resource control.

In this vein, it is interesting that the Honorable Representative asserts "[t]o be honest with you, it is when we have little problems that we quickly come together and see ourselves as females." Her minimization of the obstacles posed by gender to her mandate and mobility parallels the perspectives of several other women legislators.<sup>8</sup> It is plausible to extrapolate that the competing demands of these women's portfolios militates against the ready transformation of gender into a rallying point from which to organize a politically purposeful scheme. The gender consciousness of these women about the burdens of invidious gender bias is heightened and politicized by the cognitive dissonance triggered by male presumptions that seek to circumvent their political influence. In fact, the origin and appeal of the female congressional caucus can be traced to collisions between the authority of the experiences of these women and the onerousness of artificial constraints imposed on them by the larger system.<sup>9</sup>

The female colleagues of Representative Etteh share her commitment to create spaces for more women to gain access to the legislature and to find their footing on equal bases with men. In tandem, they are working hard to ensure that they are the shoulders on which others stand to progress even further.<sup>10</sup> Positioned to referee and temper gender resistance at close range, the female representatives are quick to reason with their male counterparts and appeal to their good offices. Mindful of the government's craving for validation from the global community, these women do not hesitate to invoke international edicts as an engine for the vindication of gender expectations vis-à-vis the democratic entitlement.

The global consensus on the value of democracy features prominently as an impetus for gender representation and participation. Emphasis in the national discourse on international normative standards has partly inspired the promulgation of a national policy that espouses 30 percent representation for women in all spheres of national life, especially at the decision making levels of the government.<sup>11</sup> This affirmative action policy, informed by the Platform For Action that came out of the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, remains a mere aspiration. The strategy has however reinforced campaigns to raise awareness, mobilize the grassroots, and build party leaders' capacity to operationalize affirmative action; and is helping accelerate the substantiation of the national policy on women.

The experiences of current women legislators establish that the quest for inclusion and representation transcends mere access to the House. Their struggles within the parliament capture the mutually reinforcing overlap between the deficits of procedural and substantive enfranchisement. The Deputy Chief Whip was successful in prevailing on the Speaker to address obstacles erected to frustrate women's effort to participate in the Constitutional Review Committee. Her narrative shows her facility in negotiating and brokering compromises such as

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibrahim and Salihu, *supra* note 3.

<sup>9</sup> Part of the impetus for the formation of the caucus, which was modeled after an American template, came when, at the initiative of the American government, the women visited and observed several legislative transactions and forums, including the Black Female Caucus.

<sup>10</sup> Meyerson, Debra. 2001. 'Radical Change, the Quiet Way.' *Harvard Business Review*. October. 79(9): 92-100.

<sup>11</sup> Steady Steps of Progress: Achievements of the Obasanjo Administration 1999-2004; National Planning Commission, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy: NEEDS NIGERIA 44 (2004).

this one, and a close examination of the dynamics of her interactions with her male colleagues suggests a degree of cultural competence. However, some may question the value of such individual competence within the context of a culture rife with gender asymmetries.

Whether or not the recurrent pattern of intermediation, supplication, and deference in Representative Etteh's narrative signifies the emerging face of clientelism or its intersection with gender subordination in Nigerian politics, the perennial optimism that has equipped the Honorable Representative to triumph over adversities mediates her inclination to seize on every potential opportunity to contribute to the transformation of gender realities. Such an optimistic posture could come only from a foot soldier intimately acquainted with the conditions and casualties of the war that is arguably the routine for the growing corps of female veterans at the National Assembly. Though she is forced by necessity to privilege the instrumental, there is intrinsic worth in Representative Etteh's laborious undertakings. Her valiance and sense of duty have earned her respect across the spectrum, respect she harnesses resourcefully to ameliorate gender prejudice and to infuse equitable principles into the political system. The possibility of political capitalization equates the unsavory dimensions of her experience to warrior marks worth celebrating.

In a sense, Representative Etteh saw the sparcity of gender representation as a rich vein and mined it for political mileage, illustrating how women can cultivate the latent types of capital with which they are equipped. In interrogating the possibilities of non-conventional forms of capital, one is compelled to confront the blindspot of privileging middle class women to the neglect of the potential of women who can bring to bear benefits that do not necessarily coincide with considerable socio-economic status. The biases in the demography of women who are more likely to vote and participate in both institutional politics and its higher echelons bear out the absence of a unitary category of woman undifferentiated by class, ethnicity, marital status, and the like.

Privileging the elite compromises the base required to agitate for gender balance in the political process. Research data reveal recurrent disconnect between relevant non-governmental organization and grassroots agendas and underscore the importance of grassroots mobilization. A vigorous civil society is a crucial institutional supplement to democratic political parties, and provides an indispensable bulwark for groups, such as women, who are traditionally excluded from power. The importance of the grassroots is augmented by the post-transition tendency for international donors that support the civil society sector to "move on," and for civil society to retreat at the expense of jeopardizing democratic consolidation.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the country's political transition in 1999, during which elections brought formal end to military rule, a return to the ideals of democratic pluralism, and renewed hope in constitutionalism, women in Nigeria have not entered the national legislature in significant numbers. The April 2003 elections further supported Nigeria's reformist trends and marked the peaceful transfer of power from one civilian to another civilian for the first time in the country's history, but a number of factors have constrained women's access to formal political power. These include enduring patriarchal principles nurtured during decades of military rule, pervasive governance challenges of the new regime, a narrow focus on political democracy rather than substantive democracy, agitation fatigue among women, and lack of access to and control of critical assets among women. With the new democratic dispensation, Nigeria has also faced increased ethnic, communal, and religious violence from groups who had formerly been silenced by authoritarian leaders; government forces have often themselves been engaged in the violent

---

<sup>12</sup> Geske, Mary and Susan C. Bourque. 2001. 'Grassroots Organizations and Women's Human Rights.' In Marjorie Agosin, ed. *Women, Gender and Human Rights: A Global Perspective*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

suppression of opposition. Corruption, national economic difficulties, and renewed religious fundamentalism in certain regions have also hampered Nigeria's progress toward democracy. Despite these limitations and the still small number of women in national office, there are several effective women politicians who are managing, often through the power of their own sheer will, to occupy a prominent place in national political life. The consistent performance of these women has begun to dispel the idea that women are unsuited for politics. As this paper indicates, women in the Nigerian parliament are creating the foundation for the more substantial representation of women in office in the future.