

Feature Article

The First Lady Syndrome and the Marginalisation of Women from Power: Opportunities or Compromises for Gender Equality? [1]

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Introduction

This article seeks to explore the dynamics of marginalising women from political power, and the ways in which “First Ladies” have sought to intervene through their special position as spouses of men in power. In many African countries, the First Lady phenomenon has opened doors for women that had previously been closed. At the same time, it has created a dynamic in which political space has been appropriated and used by the wives and friends of men in power for purposes of personal aggrandisement, rather than for furthering the interests of women. Nonetheless, by placing the gender question on the public agenda, new opportunities for gender equality struggles are being created. This article mainly discusses the Nigerian situation, but also draws on the Ghanaian experience.

First Ladies and Femocracy

Since antiquity, the wives of certain princes, monarchs and presidents have played significant roles in the national and international politics of their time, and Africa has been no exception. In the 1960s, for example, Aisha Hamani Diouri, the wife of the President of Niger, was reputed to be even more powerful than her spouse, whom she was alleged to have controlled like a marionette. Her legendary powers in manipulating the country's elite and dictating the pace and content of cultural and social trends are recorded in the songs and poetry of the country. When the putschists carried out a coup in 1966, they spared the life of President Hamani Diouri, but assassinated his wife, whom they considered the personification of illegitimate power. [2] Yet Aisha Diouri never had any autonomous space or structure through which she exercised power. All her actions were carried out through the office of her husband, the President. The new trend, however, is to augment the power of the First Lady through the creation of specific state and non-state structures that provide her with independent instruments. This phenomenon has been christened femocracy. According to Amina Mama, femocracy is:

an anti-democratic female power structure, which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own (1997: 81).

Femocracies, Mama adds, exploit the commitment of the international movement towards greater gender equality in the interests of a small female elite. In so doing, they end up reinforcing patriarchal social systems. After all, the basic assumption of the femocrats is that they should have power because their husbands are in power (Tsikata, 1998).

The basic institutional framework for femocracy is usually the office of the First Lady. The First Lady Syndrome, in the sense in which it is used here, is a relatively new political phenomenon on the international scene. It has been traced to the 1992 World Summit for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women, hosted in Geneva at the initiative of six First Ladies, three of whom - Maryam Babangida, Elizabeth Diouf and Suzanne Mubarak - were African (Sage, 1998: 60-61). Here, for the first time, wives of heads of states sought to play an autonomous and co-ordinated role in international politics in their capacities as spouses of leaders. It was at the 1995 Beijing Conference, however, that the First Lady Syndrome however attracted major international attention, when a large group of First Ladies met in the context of a major world event and took centre stage. Hilary Rodham Clinton, wife of the then US President and an illustrious person in her own right, played a leading role.

In Africa, the first Summit, for First Ladies was hosted at Yaounde in Cameroon by President Paul Biya's wife, Chantal Biya, during the 1996 OAU Summit. It was attended by the wives of the heads of the following states: Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Malawi, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Tanzania (Sage, 1998: 61). The communiqué of the meeting, which focused on strategies to improve the lives of rural women, was incorporated into the official communiqué of the OAU meeting (Sage, 1998: 51). In May 1997, Mariam Abacha, then Nigeria's First Lady, hosted the first autonomous First Ladies Summit in Abuja, convened to contribute to peace building in Africa.

From the standpoint of the struggle for gender equality, there is a basic problem with the First Lady syndrome:

Even if the stance being taken by the First Ladies makes them role models for other women, the basis of their power promotes the idea that women can exercise authority or be considered successful and worthy of respect only if they marry well (Tsikata, 1998).

The Ghanaian Experience

One of the most spectacular narratives concerning the use of the office of the First Lady to create a political opportunity for women is that of the wife of the former Ghanaian President, Jerry Rawlings - Nana Agyeman-Rawlings. During her husband's rule, she had no official position in government, but nevertheless played a major role in formulating and even implementing policies relating to women, successfully creating a powerful and autonomous space for herself within the country's politics.

When the couple came to power, they encountered the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD), which had been established in 1975 to serve as the government machinery for advancing the interests of women in all spheres of development. Nana Rawlings therefore set up her own machinery, which was to eclipse the NCWD, establishing the 31 December Women's Movement (DWM) as her main organisational structure. Named after her husband's second ascension to power in 1981 the DWM was officially launched on 15 May 1982. It was a huge organisation, with about 30 affiliate organisations and it claimed a rural membership of over two million. This figure was probably exaggerated, but it certainly had a large membership. Over time, the identity of the DWM shifted, from a women's political organisation, to a revolutionary organ, to a non-governmental organisation (Tsikata, 1998). Much of its work has involved mobilising women around small-scale, village-level economic projects, financed by external grants. It seems that the DWM was converted to an NGO so that it could benefit from grants distributed by international funding agencies (Sandbrook and Oelbaum, 1997: 623). In spite of this reconfiguration, some of its staff members remained on the government payroll. The organisation was also represented in the District Assemblies, the structure for local governance in Ghana.

However, the DWM was never politically neutral and was in fact used as an effective campaign instrument for Nana's husband's party, the NDC, during the 1992, 1996 and 2000 elections. So in this case, the First Lady appropriated the space of women's organisations in Ghana by claiming to stand for all Ghanaian women, while at the same time, developing the DWM into a partisan organisation at the service of her husband.

Nana Rawlings led the Ghanaian delegation to Beijing, and presided over the implementation of the post-Beijing decisions. Her approach towards implementing gender policies was entirely autocratic however. For example, she appointed a committee to draw up affirmative action policies, and also instructed the National Council of Women and Development (NCWD) on how to implement government policies. Indeed, the NCWD was effectively taken over by the DWM (Tsikata, 1997: 401).

Nana Rawlings' influence grew to such an extent that there were strong suspicions that arrangements were being made for her to succeed her husband as President. Sakyi-Addo painted an interesting possible scenario for the year 2000, although in the end it did not come to pass:

She will be Africa's first woman president. And there are many more firsts besides. After the oath is taken, the out-going president hands the new president the scroll of office. They hug and kiss deeply on the mouth. There are a few cat-calls. And then they simply swap seats: the First Lady is now the president and the president after 19 years in power becomes the First Gentleman. The first First Couple ever to switch roles (1998: 20).

The significance of Nana Rawlings was that she heralded the phenomenon of the First Lady who demanded an important role for women in society. She was able to appropriate current and pressing concerns in the international development community about the necessity of focusing on rural and poor women. She virtually re-invented rural women as a constituency that all public officials in Ghana are now obliged to pretend to acknowledge. She also demonstrated that there was considerable money and influence to be gained in making claims to represent the women's movement.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the gains for women as a result of the Nana Rawlings phenomenon were marginal. A major study on the role of women in Ghanaian public life, published in 1998 by the National Council on Women and Development, the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research, and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, showed that:

in almost all the institutions studied, there are signs of discriminatory practices ranging from the lack of transparency in promotions to maternity leave... . Women in Parliament are yet to overcome their subordinate position in politics and their disadvantages... NGOs and religious humanitarian organisations are found to be as gender insensitive as central government institutions (Public Agenda, February 23, 1998).

In other words, the institutions Nana Rawlings created did not lead to any significant or embedded institutionalisation of the role of women in politics. Immediately her husband left power, she became marginal to Ghanaian politics. Nevertheless, the transformation of gender relations is a long-term project, and the importance of Nana Rawlings has been that she has put women on the public agenda.

The Nigerian Experience

Ghana may have been the first African country to give institutional prominence to the First Lady, but it is in Nigeria that the phenomenon has flourished. Given the long period of military rule in Nigeria and the masculinist nature of the armed forces, it is not surprising that women played only a marginal role in Nigeria's public life for decades. The public profile of elite women changed dramatically with the coming into power of First Lady Chief-Dr-Mrs Maryam Babangida, wife of General Babangida. Mrs Babangida had first assumed prominence in 1983, when her husband became Chief of Army Staff. On this basis, she became the President of the Nigerian Army Officers Wives Association and began seeing herself as a leader. When her husband became President, she opened an office for herself within the Presidency. She was the first wife of a Nigerian head of state to use her spousal position as a basis for playing a prominent role in the nation's public life.

In 1987, five years after Nana Rawlings had established her organisation in Ghana, Mrs Babangida launched the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLP). The wives of all senior state officials were systematically incorporated into this organisation. Military governors' wives in the various states became chairpersons of the state branches of the BLP, with the wives of local government chairpersons acting likewise. Considerable state resources were channelled to the BLP, both officially and unofficially.

The BLP claimed to have made a major contribution towards improving the lot of rural women, including the establishment of 10 000 co-operatives, 1 793 cottage industries, 2 397 farms, 470 women's centres and 233 health centres (Mama, 1997: 92). Most serious observers nevertheless believe that these figures were concocted, and that little of tangible value was achieved, other than to boost Mrs Babangida's image. As Phil Okeke (1998: 18) has argued, the BLP was simply a forum for the display of power, influence and prestige by privileged women. Indeed, Maryam Babangida's style of running the BLP was authoritarian and indeed militaristic. She issued orders and expected them to be obeyed without discussion, much less criticism.

She repeatedly stressed that she was not interested in feminism or women's liberation, but in promoting wifedom and motherhood. She also deliberately countered the emergence of powerful women, ensuring that no woman became a minister during her husband's eight-year rule, and personally intervening to get the only female Director-General in the public service, Francesca Emmanuel, sacked (*The News*, October 4, 1993). One can only conclude that she wanted to be the only female luminary in the public eye.

In 1990, the National Commission for Women (NCW) was established as the official state organ charged with handling women's issues. This was first announced by President Babangida in a message accompanying the launch of his wife's biography. Maryam Babangida therefore apparently believed the NCW was created for her. However, when the NCW under the leadership of Professor Bolanle Awe tried to establish itself as an autonomous body with full competence in handling all issues relating to women, Maryam was outraged. She repeatedly harassed Professor Awe, whom she saw as trying to steal the spotlight from her, and even had her detained by security officials. She eventually got her husband to reconstitute the board of the NCW and place it under the Office of the First Lady.

Not yet satisfied, and wishing to establish a permanent place for herself in history, Maryam Babangida obtained public money through her husband in order to build a huge edifice in Abuja, valued at N1.6 billion (US\$16 million). This she named the Maryam Babangida Centre for Women and Development. In 1992, when it appeared that her husband might have to vacate his office, she applied to the Corporate Affairs Commission to register the Centre as a Trust, with her and her son Mohammed as Trustees for life. The application was queried because they had not gone through the due process of advertising the Trust and obtaining a security clearance (*The News*, July 25, 1994). The Centre was nevertheless registered as a property of the MIB (Maryam Ibrahim Babangida) Foundation.

Maryam Babangida often behaved as if she was the co-president of the country. According to Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, she summoned him one night to scold him over clashing dates for a cocktail reception she wished to organise for ECOWAS ambassadors and their wives. She apparently informed the Minister, in the presence of her husband, that she had "a joint-right with the President to appoint a new Minister of External Affairs" (*The News*, October 25, 1993). Shortly thereafter, Professor Akinyemi was sacked and a new Minister appointed. That event, Akinyemi claims, signalled the beginning of a "joint imperial presidency".

In that "joint imperial presidency", it was often assumed that Maryam was the real power behind the throne. Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, the illustrious Wole Soyinka argued that rather than worrying about the President's hidden agenda, Nigerians should be more worried about Maryam Babangida's hidden agenda, given that "First Ladyism and its attendant sycophancy had burgeoned into outrageous proportions" (*Tempo*, November 17, 1994). It was widely assumed, for example, that major state appointments depended on the whims and caprices of the First Lady.

In 1993, General Sani Abacha took power and his wife, Mariam Abacha, became the First Lady, occupying the office established by her predecessor. Her eldest daughter, Zainab, also opened an office for herself in the Presidency – that of the First Daughter. Mariam Abacha herself took to political intervention at the highest levels. For example, she played a significant role in getting state jobs or contracts for her friends and cronies. She was sufficiently confident of her powers to openly declare in a BBC interview that although she did not make decisions herself, ministers and foreign diplomats seeking appointments with her husband should come to see her, as she had the capacity to fix their problems (*Punch*, November 4, 1999).

Meanwhile, she had the legacy of Maryam Babangida to demolish. In their "professional careers" as wives of army officers, the two women had developed a bitter rivalry. Now that it was Mariam Abacha's turn to be First Lady, she set out to dismantle the work of her predecessor. The BLP was dissolved and a "new" similar organisation, the Family Support Programme (FSP) was established in its place. The Family Economic Advancement Programme was also set in motion to implement the FSP and significant state funds were devoted to it. State officials were incorporated into these structures exactly as they had been in the days of Maryam Babangida and the BLP. The Maryam Babangida Centre for Women and Development was taken over by the state, in spite of its registration as a private trust.

These two First Ladies generated a great deal of negative publicity for women in general and for the struggle for gender equality in particular, because of their activities and their high-handed manner. They were showy and arrogant, behaving in many senses like patriarchs, in a society that expected women to be self-effacing, shy and modest. Many men, and indeed women, would never forgive them for this. Their arrogance and disdain for the lot of ordinary women were seized upon by patriarchal and sexist groupings as evidence against the futility of struggling against gender discrimination. They also became obscenely wealthy, using their positions to force ministers, state governors, heads of parastatals and entrepreneurs to donate huge sums of public money to them and their causes.

So these brief outlines of the political roles played by these particular First Ladies (and indeed Nana Rawlings in Ghana), lead us to concur with Amina Mama's conclusions on the question of femocracy in Nigeria:

Femocracy has affected the gender politics of the nation, but not in the way that one might have hoped. It cannot be said to have enhanced gender equality or to have in any way challenged conservative attitudes to women. Instead, eight years of femocracy has generated promises to appoint token women, and has made the parading of expensively attired wives into a political tradition (*Mama*, 1997: 97).

The Impact of the First Lady Phenomenon on Opportunities for Women

It is clear that the First Lady syndrome has many negative tendencies - the promotion of autocratic practices, personal aggrandisement of the First Lady, cronyism, and a host of others. Nevertheless, there are questions about the potential positive impact of the First Lady phenomenon in creating opportunities for agency among female political actors, and creating a body of female political activists who are growing in numbers and in public recognition. By bringing their influence to bear on the placement of women into positions of power, First Ladies can be said to have helped increase the pool from which women could be recruited into positions of power.

Even the self-aggrandisement of First Ladies touches on a repertoire of practices that may help women to compete more effectively in struggles to access positions of power. For example, in the Nigerian context, numerous male politicians market their candidature through the use of praise singers who are image-makers and through the use of public

offices to provide goods, services and money to their local communities, which thus become a source of loyal voters during the elections. One of the findings of our study of the marginalisation of women in the 2003 elections, was that men found it easier to succeed in politics precisely because they previously had access to power, and abused their positions of power to make money and gain access to resources that they were later able to convert into political capital to guarantee their continued hold on power. This is extremely discouraging, especially for those activists in the NGOs who worked hard to encourage high quality candidates – defined as women with good professional track records, integrity, and respect in their communities - to stand for political office, only to find out that these qualities were unsuited to the corrupt minefield of Nigerian politics.

Given this context, those First Ladies who encourage the promotion of women into positions of power, no matter how dubious their motives, are providing access to political skills and resources that will enable the pool of women politicians to become more competitive in the cut-and-thrust of campaigning.

For example, during her last year as First Lady, Maryam Abacha was widely reported to have imposed an affirmative action policy on political parties. She “unofficially” directed them to ensure that they each nominated one female gubernatorial candidate for the 1998 elections. However, her powerful husband died before the elections, bringing her reign to an end. Currently, the First Lady of Ebonyi state has also been encouraging her husband to engage in an effective affirmative action policy. This includes the appointment of two women onto the state executive council, the appointment of two women as local government chairpersons, and the appointment of women as the secretaries of all 32 local government councils in the state. Many women have also been appointed as board members and heads of parastatals. In addition, the state is pursuing a vigorous policy to combat the culture of boy preference in primary and secondary education (in which only the boys in the family are sent to school, while the girls are kept home for economic reasons or to perform chores), has passed a law against harmful traditional practices against women.

So it is worth noting that not all narratives concerning the First Lady syndrome in Nigeria are negative. One positive story is that of Justice Fati Abubakar, whose husband was Head of State in the one-year interregnum following the death of Sani Abacha. Her husband, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, held power for only one year before handing over to a democratically elected government. During her year's tenure at State House, his wife, a High Court judge, established Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA). Unlike the two previous First Ladies, she formally registered this organisation. She also refused to use her husband's position to make state governors and government departments contribute to WRAPA's purse, or acquire land allocation by political fiat. Today WRAPA is generally recognised as one of the most effective non-governmental organisations fighting for the advancement of women's human rights in Nigeria. Given these positive glimpses of the impact of First Ladies, some civil society advocates have argued that:

It has become clear that First Ladies have a crucial role to play in democracy but the issue is what precise role? There have been suggestions that a constitutional role be created for the position with precise guidelines as to how such roles should be performed. Women can champion this campaign; after all traditional rulers have been lobbying to have an active role in local government councils (Agina-Ude, 2003b: 94).

This proposal is however unlikely to attract much support, not least because the First Lady syndrome has continued to pervade political life.

The Proliferation of the First Lady Phenomenon in Nigeria's Civilian Era

The impact of First Ladies can be assessed in light of the subsequent political developments. In May 1999, General Olusegun Obasanjo was elected as Nigeria's President after 16 years of unbroken military rule. On coming to power, President Obasanjo publicly declared that he had no First Lady, only a wife. [3] This promise lasted only six

months. By the end of the year, all media organs and official communications were referring to the President's wife, Stella Obasanjo, as the First Lady. In November 1999, she announced the establishment of the Child Care Trust, with herself as the chief trustee (*Vanguard*, November 4, 1999). This Trust was established to tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment, nutrition, health and education as they affect children, and was launched in January 2000. A large sum of money was raised in the process. Meanwhile, it became clear that President Obasanjo's directive that the office of the First Lady be closed down had been disregarded, as Stella Obasanjo began writing letters using the First Lady letterhead (*Punch*, January 15, 2000).

Stella Obasanjo has also made strenuous efforts to capture public attention in the style of the two Maryams, during their First Lady tenures. She frequently appears on television and even addresses the nation standing before the national crest, a privilege usually reserved for the President. However, she has experienced difficulties in maintaining her premier standing under the First Lady banner. This position and the status attached to it have become too powerful and important for one person alone to monopolise. The competition in Nigeria to claim this space is now intense.

One of the wives of the Vice-President, Titi Abubakar, launched her own organisation, Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), which has been able to maintain a higher public profile than the First Lady's organisation. WOTCLEF has not only succeeded in establishing branches all over the country, but has also successfully presented an anti-trafficking bill before the National Assembly, which was adopted and passed into law in 2003. Titi Abubakar is now establishing her authority and credentials with international organisations involved with human trafficking and child labour.

Not to be outdone, Jamila Abubakar, another wife of the Vice-President has launched her own Gede Foundation in Washington DC and in Nigeria. This organisation focuses on HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. At least 22 governor's wives have also launched their own foundations and projects all over the country (see Appendix).

In February 2003, former President, General Ibrahim Babangida, declared his intention to stand for the presidency in 2007. In the same month, his wife, Maryam Babangida registered a future First Lady's organisation for the second time round: Better Life for African Women. Having learnt her lesson the first time, in this instance, she followed the due procedure of the Corporate Affairs Commission in registering the organisation in its new form.

The increasingly crowded arena of elite women's activities and organisations operating in Nigeria has not found favour with the First Lady herself. On 24 June 2003, Stella Obasanjo called the wives of the state governors to Abuja and publicly declared in front of television cameras that: "There is only one First Lady in Nigeria. Period." (*Africawoman* no 4, 2003: 1). She went on to warn them to stop using the title First Lady of their husband's states, and to revert to their proper title of governor's wives. They were also directed to stop receiving the wife of the Vice-President when she visited their states. Wole Soyinka was so shocked by this performance, which was shown on national television, that he declared: Mrs Obasanjo clearly has an ego that is bigger than those of the two Maryams. She is probably in the same league with Imelda Marcos and ... Marie Antoinette, wife of the last French monarch (*The News*, 3 July 2003).

In April 2003, Chinonye Obiagwu, a human rights campaigner and Executive Director of the Legal Defence and Assistance Project (LEDAP) filed a lawsuit against the wives of the President, Vice-President and 22 state governors. His suit required them to:

render public accounts of all the funds raised in their respective foundations and projects and to refund funds and properties not accounted for (Agina-Ude, 2003: 1).

In January 2004, the President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Wole Olanipekun announced that his association was joining the LEDAP case against the First Ladies (Guardian, 26 January 2004). Increasingly, human rights organisations are concerned at the negative impact that First Lady activities and organisations are having on the genuine struggle for gender equality, and have decided to tackle the phenomenon and try to hold it accountable.

The Continuing Marginalisation of Women in Politics

If femocracy is not the answer, and First Ladies do more harm than good, how then do we begin to reverse women's marginalisation from power? The Declaration from the Summit of all Women Politicians in Nigeria held in Abuja on 28 June 2002 stated:

Women of Nigeria have noticed with utter dismay the almost complete deterioration of our political and social values, borne out of more than three decades of continued male dominated and oriented misrule. The obvious conclusion is that enough is enough; the time for positive change has arrived. In mapping out the path to national rebirth, the systematic entrenchment of practices aimed at the continued marginalisation of women in the political process must stop.[4]

Halting this marginalisation requires that we understand the processes and instruments used to exclude women from power. The marginalisation of women in Nigeria's patriarchal political system is not a new phenomenon. It dates back to the colonial era. Indeed, until 1976, women were not even allowed to vote in Northern Nigeria. This marginalisation has continued into the Fourth Republic. For instance, only 631 women stood for a total of 11 881 electable positions during the 1999 elections. Those that managed to win constituted a mere 1.62% (181 of the total positions available). The table below provides a summary of women elected in the 1999 and 2003 elections.

Table 1: Number of Women Elected in the 1999 and 2003 Nigerian Elections

Office	Positions available	No. of women in 1999	No. of women in 2003	% of women (2003)
President	1	None	None	0
Vice President	1	None	None	0
Senate	109	3	3	2.8
House of Representatives	360	12	21	2.8
House of Representatives	36	None	None	0
Deputy Governors	36	1	2	5.6
State House of Assembly: Speakers	36	1	2	5.6
State Houses of Assembly	990	12	23	21
Cabinet Ministers	34	4(out of 49)	6	17.65

Conscious of the necessity to induce change, numerous gender activists and civil society organisations in Nigeria, such as Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Gender and Development Action (GADA), Community Partners for Development (CPD), Federation of International Women Lawyers (FIDA), Women Law and Development Centre, Open Society for West Africa (OSIWA), Global Rights and the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) ran advocacy programmes, and undertook training and research on affirmative action for women leaders in political parties. They succeeded in encouraging a significant number of women to come forward and compete for political office, with a view to enabling women to occupy at least 30% of all appointed and elected posts in the country, in line with Nigeria's National Policy on Women.

Following the way political party primaries for the nomination of candidates for the 2003 elections were conducted, it became evident that the political parties systematically eliminated women, through a well-orchestrated process of manipulation and pre-determination of the outcome of most of the primaries. Most of the women that came forward to compete in the primaries were shut out through connivance, although the parties had previously promised that they would ensure that female aspirants would be encouraged and supported in getting party nominations. Not only did the parties and their leadership not keep to their word, they also refused to respond to the numerous complaints of discrimination, procedural breach or outright injustice experienced by female aspirants. [5] Following this debacle, a number of civil society organisations engaged in a research and advocacy project, both to understand the mechanisms used to eliminate women from the political contest, and to propose policy proposals to redress the situation. In-depth studies of fifteen female political aspirants revealed a number of strategies used to undermine women.

Subverting Affirmative Action

In general, party officials refused to take the candidature of female aspirants seriously. Some of the parties adopted an affirmative action strategy of waiving nomination fees for female aspirants. However, party executives in most constituencies used this to undermine women, labelling them as aspirants who lacked the required commitment to the party. Party barons at the local level argued that by convincing the national executives to remove nomination fees for them, women had demonstrated a lack of commitment to the party. Because male candidates made their financial contributions willingly, they were portrayed as being more committed to the party, and more deserving of recognition and reward.

Labelling Women Aspirants as Culturally Deviant

Concerted allegations and campaigns portraying women aspirants as people acting in ways that contradicted their culture, were also systematically used to marginalise women. Many party officials made open or covert allegations that female aspirants were too assertive and independent, and could therefore not be team players. When Chief Titi Ajanaku wanted to contest for the Ogun gubernatorial ticket, for example, she was accused of being an "Iron Lady" who would take over the whole state. And when the Honorable Habiba Sabo was successfully elected to the Bauchi State Assembly, she had to deal with the contradictory situation of being "kalabi tsakanin rawuna" – literally, the headscarf among the turbans. The implication is that women, who normally wear headscarfs in Muslim Hausa society, have no business being among the male wielders of power. In Igboland, Onyeka Onwenu and Loreta Aniagolu were confronted with a retrogressive cultural campaign that claimed women could not be leaders because they were not allowed to "break kola nuts" – a revered rite in Igbo society.

Undermining the Moral Standing of Female Aspirants

Closely associated with negative labelling is the use of abusive language to demoralise and delegitimise female aspirants. Many of the female aspirants profiled in Ibrahim and Salihu (2004) were subjected to whisper campaigns and innuendos about their alleged loose sexual and moral standing, and some were directly insulted and referred to as prostitutes and harlots. Campaigns were organised around the “true marital status” of female aspirants as a means of questioning their moral standing.

In the case of Onyeka Onwenu, the golden voice of Nigerian music, some men questioned her legitimacy to stand for the Chair of a Local Government in Igboland on the grounds that she was married to a Yoruba man. Others spread rumours that because she was using her maiden name, she had to be unmarried and therefore did not have the moral standing to contest the post. Not surprisingly, many of the women who won political campaigns first had to prove that they were good and responsible housewives and mothers (see, for example, the profile of Habiba Sabo Gabarin in this issue of *Feminist Africa*). Yet it is well known, for example, that many male politicians go on the campaign trail with girlfriends and/or sex workers. Male supporters see such behaviour as a normal sign of the virility of their leaders. Women candidates, however, even if they are not sexually promiscuous, indeed, even if they are saints, are expected to shoulder the burden of proof to show that they are morally upright. This suggests that the moral standards set for women politicians are higher than those for male politicians.

The Indigeneity Ploy

The 1979 Constitution introduced the concept of indigeneity into Nigerian public law as an equity principle to guarantee fair regional distribution of power. Over the years, however, the principle has been subverted and used to discriminate against Nigerian citizens who are not indigenes of the places where they live and work. Women who are married to men who are non-indigenes of their local governments suffer systematic discrimination. In their own constituencies, they are told that by marrying “out”, they have lost their indigeneity. In their husband's constituency, they are told they do not really belong because indigeneity is based on the consanguinity (blood relation) principle. It is particularly insidious for women because many of them who married men from their indigenous areas lost their claim to indigeneity when their home areas were carved up in subsequent state creation exercises, as Nigeria moved from three to four regions, to twelve states, to nineteen states, to 21 states, to 30 states and finally to 36 states. Women's indigeneity is commonly invoked when women seek political office. Jadesola Akande shows in her profile of Chief Titilayo Ajanaku, that when the aspirant successfully campaigned on behalf of the leading candidates of the Unity Party of Nigeria – Obafemi Awolowo and Bola Ige – the party was happy. However, when the proposal to offer her a political post in the State was first mooted, the party suddenly remembered she was “an Egba married to an Ijesha man” and was not therefore an indigene of Oyo State – and thus not suitable for office (Ibrahim and Salihu, 2004).

Political Party Techniques for Eliminating Female Aspirants

Political parties in Nigeria have developed a large repertoire of sharp practices to eliminate people from political party primaries. These strategies, which include endorsement by powerful “godfathers”, zoning, violence and thuggery, bribery and so on, particularly affect women, who are less likely to have the financial resources and access to male networks to either combat these practices or to “play the game”.

Conclusion

Given this history and vast armoury of sophisticated techniques for eliminating women from democratic political spaces, it is clear that new strategies need to be found to circumvent the barriers and to allow women access to political processes. This article has sought to show some of the obstacles to more equal participation by women in politics. “First Ladies” have

sought to intervene and bring women into the corridors of power through their special positions as spouses of the men in power. In Nigeria, which has been the main focus of this article, there is no doubt that the First Lady syndrome has placed women in the public eye. However, the phenomenon has created a dynamic in which political space is being appropriated and abused by the wives and friends of men in power, for their personal aggrandisement, rather than for furthering the interests of women. Moreover, women have great difficulties in standing for political office in electoral politics, because they lack the resources (such as illicitly garnered money and powerful networks) that guarantee success in elections. What is clear from this analysis is that countering the marginalisation of women in politics requires comprehensive advocacy strategies that would multiply the routes through which women can obtain access to positions of power. As the Gender and Development Action publication puts it, Nigerian women and their supporters must develop a comprehensive political strategy to secure more positions of power for themselves (Toyo, 2003: 2).

In this regard, while First Ladies can give prominence to some women and certain women's issues (in an ad hoc way), recent experience indicates the need to transform the electoral system to make it serve the interests of women. In other words, we need to address the question of numbers and proportions of women in positions of power, as well as the problem of political processes and dominant values (Pereira, 2004). Constitutional reforms that will provide for and guarantee the application of quotas for women as a basis for political representation would be an important point of departure in this regard. Reform of the electoral law to allow for a system other than the "first past the post" approach, which is currently applicable in Nigeria, would also be useful. The promotion of serious and co-ordinated political education, information provision and conscious political engagement with grassroots women voters, so as to electorally threaten political parties that eliminate high-quality female aspirants, is necessary.

Finally, developing sustainable long-term networks that can strengthen the capacity of women to develop alternative approaches to political campaigning – approaches that emphasise issues, principles and popular interests rather than the use of money, violence and the usurpation of the party machine - are indispensable.

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Footnotes

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[2] This information comes from Dr Yahaya Abdullahi, Special Adviser of the Speaker of the House of Representatives and connoisseur of Hausa poetry and songs of Niger Republic. Interview, Abuja, Nigeria, June 27, 2004.

[3] Maybe we should use the concept of first wife here, since it is generally known that Obasanjo has many wives, from whom he has chosen Stella Obasanjo, formerly Abebe, to be his "official wife".

[4] Declaration at the summit held in Abuja by Global Rights in collaboration with Centre for Population and Development Activities (CEDPA) and Gender and Development Action (GADA), 2002.

[5] This occurred in a broader context in which the entire primaries became a charade, as the most popular candidates, both female and male, were eliminated by party barons and substituted with other candidates supported by state and party executives.

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