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NIGERIAN WOMEN'S VISIONS AND MOVEMENTS: AN OVERVIEW

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# NIGERIAN WOMEN'S VISIONS AND MOVEMENTS:

## AN OVERVIEW

by

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Collective action in order to achieve specific ends has always been a feature of life among Nigerian women. They have therefore always organised themselves into very many different associations. These societies can be classified into more than the six categories which Gita Sen and Caren Grown highlighted in their book, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions, 1987. The different organisations reflect not only different periods in the country's history, but changing notions of Nigerian women's views of their society and their role in it.

Women's Associations in Nigeria can be easily categorised as follows:

### I. Traditional Associations (Pre-Colonial Period):

These were to be found in all parts of the country and they had different and varied functions.

#### Kin Group Associations

Among the Edo of Benin, there was the OKA ISI KHUAN -- an association of the first daughters of the Oba or chiefs -- Iwẹbọ or Uzama chiefs. Their function was to attend all installations and traditional ceremonies of the Oba, to play the UBE ceremonial drums and sing the traditional praise songs, the Egbo. Among the Igbo, there was the OMU Society made up of first daughters of the lineage and menopausal women. They had ritual and political duties. They supervised the ceremonies and festivals, headed the women's purification ceremonies. Their leader, Otu-gene was the field marshal in

Ossomari. Her canoe led that of the others in any military expedition. Their society controlled the market and market women, and the traders paid their dues to them. They settled disputes and could fine and discipline trouble makers.

Among the Ibibio, there was the Association of Wives, since men had to take wives from outside the village. These women were not incorporated into the husband's families and couldn't inherit from there. Therefore these women formed an association to protect themselves and to apply collective sanctions against their husbands.

#### Age-Grade Associations

These associations are for those born within the same period. They perform the rites of passage - naming, initiation, marriage, etc together. These associations were to be found everywhere, e.g. in Ijebu there was Egbe Oba Beko 1893-96 - Association of those who returned with the King from Lagos.

#### Business Associations

- (a) Esusu Clubs - For capital formation for trade.
- (b) Craft Organisations for Craftswomen - Potterers, Dyers, Weavers, Bedmaking, cosmetics, beer brewing, etc.
- (c) Trade Associations - For traders in particular commodities (Egbe Oniṣu) [Yam Traders Association].

These professional associations were set up to fix prices, check fraudulent practices, settle market disputes and other matters relating to the demand and supply of their goods.

## II. COLONIAL PERIOD AND INDEPENDENT ERA

Many of these traditional associations fell into desuetude, they were neglected and didn't have the prominence of the past. Many of their functions were taken over by new organisations set up by the colonial government. Markets

were now controlled by the colonial administration and taxation levied on women. Western education led to the decline of the age grades and the initiation ceremonies as girls were away at school. Women were also generally neglected in the scheme of things.

### Welfare Societies

Therefore women started to form new associations to protect own rights. In 1901 Mrs. Obasea and Mrs. Nana Sapara Williams formed the Lagos Ladies League to combat infant malaria deaths; by 1920s they were also fighting for women's education. The Lagos Women's League, Ladies' Progressive Club and the Rosebud Club called for the establishment of <sup>a</sup> school for girls like the boys' premier school, King's College. This demand subsequently led to the establishment of Queen's College in 1927. At the same time they condemned the poor sanitation in the markets and agitated for the employment of women. These clubs were essentially like social clubs made up largely of the elite. They were genteel associations which used their connections to apply pressure on the government.

### Political Associations

Attempts were however made to form women's parties in the colonial period to put pressure on the government in a more direct manner e.g. Lady Oyinkan Abayomi formed the Women's Party whose aim was to agitate against water rate, taxation, housing and market conditions. Mrs. Margaret Ekpo organised Women's Associations at Aba. Mrs. Janet Okala organised Women's Union in Enugu; in Abokuta, Mrs. F. Ransome-Kuti started the National Women's Union in 1946. In 1952 Mrs. Adcockogbe founded the Women's Movement. They all have a common objective - namely, universal suffrage,

admission of women to the Native Authority Councils, non-taxation of women, removal of water rate, more secondary schools for girls, better markets, loosening the control of trading monopolies by foreign firms. But they were no more than pressure groups. Later in the colonial period, there emerged political parties all of which had women's wings. These were led by charismatic female figures like Madam Pelewura but it was not clear that they had definite aspirations for women. They appeared to be set up primarily to catch the female vote.

However in the 1950s, there emerged three associations which made the welfare of women their concern - Women's Movement founded by Chief Elizabeth Adekogbe, Chief Ogunlesi's Women's Improvement Society, and Chief Wura Eṣan's, Ibadan Womens Progressive Union. These three fused into the National Council of Women's Societies in 1957/58. The National Council has emerged as the most significant of the colonial associations and has survived until the present day. In looking at women's organisations and their visions of society, it will be useful to study this particular organisation closely. The Council was to be an umbrella organisations for all women's societies and their spokesman in matters concerning women. It has until quite recently remained so, and been thus recognised by government. All women's societies are supposed to be affiliated to it. There is a state branch of the Council in each state.

#### Its Objectives

- (a) To promote the welfare and progress (economic and social) of women laying special emphasis on education and training.
- (b) To awaken and encourage in women realisation of their responsibilities to the community.
- (c) To ensure by every legal means that women are given every opportunity to play their part as fully responsible members of the community.

- (d) To encourage the affiliation for all non-political women's organisation in Nigeria.
- (e) To foster co-operation with other national and international bodies with similar aims.

### Its Functions

- (a) Providing a platform for formulating women's opinion and ideas and dissemination of such opinion and ideas.
- (b) Dealing with requests and petitions from member societies for social reform or other requests by making representations to the government or other appropriate bodies.
- (e) Sending delegations and representatives to and receiving delegations from national and international organisations, meetings and conferences.
- (d) Publishing a magazine and any other publications which the Council may think necessary.
- (e) Holding a biennial convention at which all member societies will be represented.

It has  
/ a number of Standing Committees on topics such as Arts and Letters (Music), Education, Environmental Protection, Health, International Relations, Law and Status of Women, Women and Employment, Social Welfare. These various committees have well-defined objectives. For instance the Arts and Letters Committee aims:

- (1) To assist Nigerian women artist in developing their skills.
- (2) To propagate and draw attention to problems of women artists as a whole.
- (3) To promote research and documentation.
- (4) To create a forum for promotion of women artists.
- (5) To help the youth deal with future through arts.
- (6) To enlist cooperation of mass media in publicising women in arts and letters - Music.
- (7) To promote the collaboration of women artists with government and other organisations.

This Committee presented a programme on Nigerian Women in Arts 2nd - 7th March, 1987 which included a Workshop, Exhibition and a Seminar on Women Artists.

The societies affiliated to the National Council are

many and of various types:

(a) Traditional Market Women's Associations - Looking after the interest of market women within their commodity groups.

(b) Religious Organisations such as

(1) Tekas Women Fellowship in Jos; its purpose is

(a) to preach the gospel

(b) to encourage fellowship and unity among women.

(2) Young Women Christian Association whose object is

To promote fellowship among members and foster their spiritual, mental and physical welfare. To create a sense of global understanding and community responsibility. Apart from providing for young women, it works with women for rural community development objectives and aids women in prison.

(3) The Isabatudeen Women's Society:

It aims at promoting the upliftment of women as laid down by Islam. It founded the first Muslim girls' secondary school in Nigeria.

(c) Professional Associations such as the Federation of

Women Lawyers, the Nigerian Association of University

Women, Society of Women Accountants, etc., The Women's

Wing of the Nigerian Trade Union Congress which is currently

banned can be classified within this group though their organisation's

operations are different in certain respects.

Nigerian Association of University Women founded NAUW in

1964 by university graduates, is a good example. Its

objectives are:

(1) To encourage and promote education of women at all levels.

(2) To create a platform for the objective study of contemporary problems in society.

(3) To promote the continuation of education and intellectual growth of its members.

(4) To stimulate public opinion on women's affairs and to note any legislation affecting the rights and welfare of women.

- (5) To cooperate with other organisations seeking to promote the welfare and emancipation of women.
- (6) To promote understanding and friendship among women.

To adhere the objectives they hold monthly meetings, organises adult education and literacy classes for women, girls' vocational training programmes, careers talks etc.

All these professional associations are post 1960 developments. They are set up to protect the interests of their members as they go into fields previously dominated by men, to encourage more women to come into the field by giving career talks, scholarships and even extra lectures and coaching for new entrants into the profession. They also check discrimination against women. They look after the peculiar needs of women as demonstrated in their practice e.g. female doctors, take special interest in diseases affecting women. The Federation of Women Lawyers have been very active in studying the Nigerian taxation laws and demanding their review as they affect women.

#### (d) Service Clubs

A more recent development is the emergence of service clubs which are Nigerian arms of international organisations. These are the Inner Wheel, Soroptimist, Lioness and Zonta International Clubs, International Women Society.

Zonta International Club aims:

- (1) to contribute by study and action to the improvement of the legal, political, economic and professional status of women;
- (2) to work for the advancement of understanding, good will and peace through a world fellowship of executive women in business and the professions united in the Zonta idea of service;
- (3) to foster the spirit of good fellowships among Zontians and its clubs;
- (4) to increase the measure of that service by consistent self-improvement;

- (5) to serve and to help communities and individuals to help themselves

Among its objectives is the provision of assistance to needy individuals in various ways such as by scholarships and sponsorship of medical treatment.

These are the major groups of associations affiliated to the National Council of Women's Societies. On the face of it, the National Council appears all embracing as it has affiliated members at all levels of society. Its new affiliates also seem to have been able to expand its horizon and vision of the role of the Nigerian women as shown by their objectives. However, until quite recently when its leadership has tried to work at mobilising people at the grassroots, it has really been more of a middle/upper class organisation. Its leadership can definitely be categorised as such, and participation in decision-making by the rank and file had not clearly involved all levels of women. However, its contribution must not be dismissed offhand. At the early stages, the Council had the women with the necessary expertise who could articulate the views of women. On specific issues it could mobilise the women when necessary to give support to its views and thus act as an effective pressure group at a time when no other women's group was in a position to do so.

There have, however, within the last two decades emerged new organisations which have refused to be affiliated to the National Council. New religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, are included in this group. Christian Associations such as the Catholic Women's Association, the Association of Bishop Wives, Good Women's Association have a definite religious bias and are concerned primarily with the church,

the Christian community and women's role there.

Among the Muslims there have also emerged similar organisations. The most well-known is the Federation of Muslim Women's Association (FOMWAN) in Nigeria which was established in 1985. It responded to the need for a central focus to link all Muslim women's organisations. According to its brochure,

"another serious need was for a body which could express the views of Muslim women at national and state levels. Many women societies already existed in the country mostly aiming at social progress for women, and some Muslim women joined such societies. However they were dominated by non-Muslims who were not interested in an Islamic approach to social problems and current issues ... It was therefore felt necessary to establish an independent platform from which Muslim women could express a specifically Islamic view of the problems of women and of society in general".

It claimed that certain problems affecting Muslim women, such as female education, <sup>Sharia</sup> / can only be effectively tackled by the initiative of Muslim women in conjunction with their male counterparts. Its aims have been categorised under the following headings:

- (a) Encouraging and propagating Islam.
- (b) Promoting unity.
- (c) Promoting educational and Social Development

all among Muslim women.

This association has been very active of late, but its formation is significant for the women's movement and visions. It has introduced in categorical terms a certain element of division among Nigerian women by insisting that only Muslim organisations can speak for Muslim women. However, its fears have had earlier precedents, for instance in the Arewa Women's League which for sometime tried to set a National Council for northern women because it believed that the National Council only voiced the views of southern women. This movement can also be regarded as a reflection of the

degree of success which the National Council has had in being the women's voice.

Another radical development within the last few years has been the formation of WIN, Women in Nigeria, in 1982 after a conference called specifically to discuss the situation of women in Nigeria. It was founded by a group of men and women committed to the task of establishing an organisation which will work unceasingly for an improvement in the condition of Nigerian women. Apart from seeking to improve the lot of women, it also believes that there are other oppressed groups in society and <sup>that</sup> it should therefore form links and work with other organisations fighting against sex and class oppression. It seeks to combat sexist practices and to provide non-sexist alternatives to government and institutional policies. Unlike other post-independence societies, it has worked closely at mobilising women at the grassroots and with other organisations which seek to change the structure of society to ensure a participatory democracy.

Within the last few years, there have also developed Women's Cooperatives whose objective is to give women more access to funds, government aid and extension services for improved technology etc.

A significant development within the last year has also been the programme of Better Life for Rural Women which has within the last few weeks been expanded to include all rural dwellers. This is an association (non-formal) of a group of committed women under the leadership of the first lady, Mrs. M. Babangida. They are made up of professional women and those occupying leadership position in various spheres of Nigerian life. Their aim is to make life easier for the rural woman. They wish to act as a catalyst for development

by helping to mobilise women for that purpose, by finding outlets for their products, and by encouraging women's creativity. They work closely with the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DIFRRI) which has the responsibility of opening up the rural areas.

A different type of women's organisation is the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) whose main objectives are to provide a focus for women's studies in Nigeria, encourage research which will be useful for policy formulation on issues affecting women. It also aims at building up a documentation centre on women, finding funds for research on women and networking with other women's organisations.

Comments and Observations:

These are only some of the women's organisations in Nigeria. In spite of so many years of military rule, women have been able to create movements within which to articulate their views and draw attention to their needs. Each of these associations demand close study in the light of the DAWN guidelines on this topic.

However certain elements of their aspirations have become quite clear. They all reject the subordination of women and a situation that prevents their full participation in the affairs of this country; hence they have all laid emphasis on the education of women. Even FOMWAN is in support of this move. Indeed at the recently concluded International Seminar on Women and National Development in Lagos, Hajia Aisha Lemu, the leader of all Muslim women called on all Muslim organisations to emphasize education for women. Both religious education and western-type education must be encouraged because "all women and men are made equal by God". The most recent trends as typified by WIN and Mrs.

shows

M. Babangida's Team also / a commitment not only to women per se but to a new society where those marginalised sections of the society will now get a fair deal and equal opportunities with more fortunate Nigerian citizens. They are groping for a non-sexist society where gender will not be a factor in a person's full participation in the development of the society. These new societies are also prepared to go beyond the Women's Associations and work with male groups.

But inspite of these new developments, a great deal needs to be done, and the achievements of female organisations may be hindered by their own inherent weaknesses. Women's organisations in Nigeria are too diffuse and disparate in their aspirations. According to Chief Toyin Olakunrin in her keynote address to the Ibadan Seminar on Women and Development in 1985, there is a great gap between the reality and the objective for women in development because of the lack of communication among women. According to her, "it is the women folk who hold tenaciously to the traditional rites and practices, and yet it is us who want changes. The two differing views belong to the opposite ends of the age structure ... The older age group has confidence in current practices and fear change; the younger ones resent the current inequalities and have confidence in a greater tomorrow when we will have dignity within the community". The women's associations in this country have been so fragmented and divided among themselves between the polarities described by Chief Toyin Olakunrin that they cannot constitute an effective force in demanding improvements in the female condition.

They also have different strategies. The National Council which sees itself as an umbrella for all women's societies is a development of the colonial period. It has

therefore remained strictly apolitical. It believes in operating within the system and in attempting to reform it by legal gradual process. Drastically opposed to its approach is WIN which, according to one observer, stands for "radicalism, uncompromising objectives, fearlessness in the face of the dreaded feminist tag, identification with rural and illiterate women and a socialist perspective." Between these two polarities are a host of other women's societies, such as the FOMWAN, which appears to promote total obedience of women to Moslem concepts of propriety, and the elitist service organisations such as Zonta, Soroptimist etc which are Nigerian arms of international organisations and are essentially philanthropic societies.

The question of leadership arises out of this plethora of organisations. Which one can speak with authority for Nigerian women? Which can successfully form a network with all others, encourage them to work together for the good of the cause? Are Nigerian women ready to cross lines and work in coalition, in the realisation that "you can't get anything done unless you get a critical mass?"

The question of a critical mass raises the point about the membership of these societies. In spite of the protestations of WIN, there is still a class problem in this regard. Most of these organisations are elitist in their membership and aspirations. They also represent the minority. To be heard, they must be able to articulate the views of all women. They must have a clear idea of what their agenda will be.

The problem facing Nigerian women's organisations is not lack of will to organise or lack of ideas, but the need

to co-ordinate efforts, mobilise women at all levels of society, and draw up an agenda which will make gender irrelevant in their lives and their participation in the process of development in this country. It is the problem of strategy and the right method.