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¹FIRST LADIES INFORMATION PROFILE AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

BY

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Introduction

Discourses on women affairs are daily becoming wider in scope and veering into every area of human endeavour, hence, the relevance of feminism in the body politic of a nation. In addition, democracy has become the most popular form of government worldwide with America taking the lead. For instance, America had come to solid terms about her form of government since the declaration of independence in the year 1776 (Pole, 1993:212). Since then, "the term democratic Government has become almost synonymous with the American governance and electoral processes" (Adegboye, 1997:498). Nigeria only gained her independence in 1960. She has since 'Convulsed' with spates of Civilian and Military governments, the latter being the most frequent and longest dispensation she ever had. Only recently, precisely May 29, 1999 she commenced the 4th Republic since independence.

Definitely, Nigeria has a lot to borrow from the wealth of the American democratic experience for her own political survival. Such is the adoption of the title of the 'First Lady'. This work therefore, examines the Nigerian adoption of the title of the 'First Lady from America and laments the aberration. It however reconsiders the office as a tool of political empowerment of the womenfolk in an evolving democratic society in Nigeria.

¹ Adapted from Paper first presented at the Annual Conference of the America Studies Association of Nigeria (A.S.A.N) at Iworo Badagry, Lagos State, 21-24 September, 1999.

The ability of the 'First Lady' to be an instrument of political empowerment however, depends on the level of civil information and education she possesses. How does she acquire the needed information and education? Whose responsibility should this be? These among others are the concern of this paper.

The Title of the 'First Lady and its Aberration

The 'First Lady' has almost become a Cliche in the political arena of all states and nations. Automatically, the title has been arrogated to the wives of Heads of states worldwide. In fact, it is even a practice to have a kind of forum where women who find themselves in such positions hold meetings and discuss issues of common interest such that affect the 'Office'.

However, the origin of the title, 'First Lady' has been traced to America. Language dictionaries have even linked the meaning and origin of the term with America. For instance, the Webster's dictionary of the English Language, (1993:345) gives the meaning of the term thus:

the wife of the President of the U.S.A. or
of the Governor of a State of the U.S.A.
or whoever presides for him at social
functions if the man has no wife

The obvious consensus on the origin of the title proves that the term subsequently became part of the political diction or register of other nations through America. This further proves the fact that 'Presidential system of government is distinctly of American origin (The new Webster's dictionary of the English Language, 1993:3).

Howbeit, Nigeria is not an exception in the catalogue of the nations who had adopted the use of the title of the First Lady. Incidentally, the development in Nigeria was not essentially

identified with the civilian or presidential system of Government.

Historically, Nigeria to-date, has had up to thirteen (13) Head of States since her independence, in 1960. Mundt and Aborisade (1966:755) gave a Catalogue of about eleven (11) of the ruling dispensations as follows:

DATES	NAME	TITLE
1960 - Jan. 1966	Tafawa Balewa	Prime Minister
1963 - Jan. 1966	Nnamdi Azikiwe	President
Jan. - July 1966	Aguyi Ironsi	Military Head of State
July 1966 - 1975	Yakubu Gowon	Military Head of State
1975 - 1976	Murtala Mohamed	Military Head of State
1976 - 1979	Olusegun Obasanjo	Military Head of State
1979 - 1983	Shehu Shagari	President
1983 - 1985	Muhammed Buhari	Military Head of State
1985 - 1993	Ibrahim Babangida	Military Head of State
Aug. - Nov. 1993	Ernest Sonekan	Interim Head of State (Appointed)
Nov. 1993	Sanni Abacha	Head, Provisional Ruling Council

However, from personal observation, the following are the subsequent rulers after the above eleven (11):

Nov. 1993 - July 1998 - Sani Abacha - Head Provisional ruling Council

July 1998 - May 29, 1999 - Abubakar Abdusalam - Military Head

May 30 - Olusegun Obasanjo - Civilian President

In all, Nigeria only had about four Civilian rulers out of thirteen (13).

It was noticeable that the issue of 'First Lady's appearance did not come to the lime-light until the reign of General Ibrahim Babangida whose wife was Mariam Babangida. It was a new turn and a new dawn in rulership and feminine intervention in Nigeria.

Prior to the time, the personalities of Nigeria's rulers wives

were not known neither do we hear of their wives at all. If at all they influence governance in any form it must have been in a subtle manner.

Not only did Nigeria start to use the title of the 'First Lady', but an Office was carved out for her in the Presidency. This sooner becomes the vogue in all the successive governments. The voices of the First ladies were loudest during the Ibrahim Babangida and Sanmi Abacha regimes. The echoes went down a bit during the short regimes of Abubakar Abdusalam; it is equally in the shade presently.

Office of the First Lady in Nigeria of what relevance? So far, so good with the title. Has the importation of the idea from the U.S. not transcended the nomenclature? It should be noted that the relationship of the First-Lady to the Head of State is primarily domestic and at best the first-lady presides for the husbands at social functions. The inference to be drawn from this is that the title simply attracts the 'honour' of presiding over 'social functions'.

There has never been an office for it in the U.S. The reverse had been the case in Nigeria.

The creation of the office during Ibrahim Babangida era has overlooked the fact that the Head of State's relationship to the first lady was conjugal and not political neither a state affair, otherwise there would have been less of personalization of power. The decision to create an office might however had been informed by the social plague and inability of the Nigerian woman to have a clear perception of womanhood, self-appreciation and self-actualization. This crisis again must have stemmed from the attempt to precipitate the emergence of womanhood from the clouds of 'social oppression'. Studies in the past have shown that, the Nigerian women, like other African women (and probably women in the Western World before the feminist revival) had been "oppressed, ill-used and abused in certain quarters to the extent that the average woman had been nick-named the

never-do-well" (Adegboye, 1998:26). As much as it is desirable that the social misconception of womanhood should be reappraised, an over-expression or mis-representation of the whole idea is not desirable.

Until recently, when the operations associated with the office are being scaled down, the whole scenario had been an attempt to establish the glory of womanhood which has however, resulted in social and personality conflicts, making the 'First Ladies' ride only on the glory horses of their husbands. The results have been excessive display of rhetorics (speeches which were not likely make out of ladies commitment to a measurable cause and which ironically must have been written by more serious minded intellectuals who were co-opted to serve in the presidency under the supervision of less-qualified women), fun-fair, glamour, pomp and pageantry.

The creation of the office has unexpectedly led to the birth of some seemingly laudable projects which were supposedly designed for the less privileged grassroots women but which the later never benefitted much from. While the 'visions' and 'missionaries' took the ('goodwill' of the) grassroots women for a ride, the benefits such as gigantic edifices and projects were only seen in the urban centres. The office mounted programmes under different names and dispensations as the Better Life for Rural Women Programme, Family Support Programme (FSP) and Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP).

Since the inception of the Office, there have been some band-wagon effects, all wives of Military Administrators, all States and Local Government Chairmen have since been addressed s 'First Ladies'.

Good as the title may be, how far has the creation of the office been of benefit to Nigeria at large and the women folk in particular? In the face of the economic down-turn of Nigeria, has it not been used to further drain the economy to satisfy the ego of the elitists (women) and deny the grassroots women of what

was supposedly designed to improve their state? As far as the Nigerian political history can afford us to know, the existence of the office during the military regimes had not been justified to benefit the populace.

Even though the establishment of this office has been identified with military regimes in Nigeria, will it augur well with the evolving Nigerian democracy? In answering this question, this paper had tried to gather some information that are germane to the discourse. Quite a number of views were shared in the discussion titled "Office of the First Lady" what relevance? (Vanguard 1999; Nos 1-3). The salient issue raised in the discussion are as follows:

- (i) That the post, at inception, was first used by some womenfolk as a lobby strategy to influence the presidency where the U. N. Women Forum was being prepared for in 1985 by the National Council for Women (Nos 1:27:32).
- (ii) That the whole idea of First Ladyism is no problem if she is given some role to play in the government but such role should not infringe on the right and freedom of other people (No 1:32).
- (iii) That most of the women in the positions (as inferred from the submissions in the discourse) are not women who have professional accomplishments and that the office was just created to find jobs for their women (No. 2:33).
- (iv) That even during one of the regimes, Senior military men trembled in the presence of the First Lady and that the aberration goes down to the state and local government levels. (No 2:33).

- (v) That the position had generated clashes rather than healthy relationship amongst women. For instance, in the state where there were female deputy administrators, there had always been clashes with the office of the First Lady. There had also been reported clashes between secretaries of the Women Commission Ministry and the Office of the "First Lady". These had been informed by the fact that these women execute the same programme at different levels and because there were attempts to monopolise the office in certain respects (No. 2:32).
- (vi) That the Office is no more needed in the democratic dispensation, if women are ably represented in the houses of Assembly viz, State and National levels, these representatives could get women policies along (No. 2:32).
- (vii) That Nigeria should learn from a neighbouring Nation like Ghana where the Office of the 'First Lady' never clashed with office for the Commission for Women. All the 'First Lady's programmes were executed through the National Commission. There, the roles of the Commission are not usurped by the first lady and she does not personally execute projects.
- (viii) That the time is ripe to give the Ministry of Women Affairs the power and opportunity to function well (No. 2:32).
- (ix) That the idea of the Women Affairs Ministry is welcome while the Office of the First Lady is a complication. The activities of the First Lady should be incorporated into the Ministry to avoid duplication

of projects (No. 2:33).

- (x) That First Ladies should only be allowed to play the traditional role as wives and Chief hostesses to their husbands (No. 3:27).
- (xi) That the populace did not vote for the First Lady in the first instance, so, whoever finds herself there should go through compulsory induction course.
- (xii) "Let them possibly go to America and see how the Clintons run the Office (No. 3:28).

Having gone through all the above opinions, this paper will like to make a submission that the office of the First Lady in Nigeria is an aberration and is therefore not desirable. References had also been made to nations and especially America where the title and operations had not caused and is not causing any problem. So far, this paper opines that if the office should be scrapped, the titled could be retained in view of the fact that if reasonably used, it could achieve a positive end. It is within this context that the title and position (not the office) of the First Lady be evaluated as a tool of women's political empowerment.

The 'First Lady' Political Empowerment

Political empowerment could be interpreted to mean the right of access to necessary, relevant information on the rights of the citizen; the right to choose one's political affiliations; the right to exercise one's suffrage and the right to stand in any political office as allowed by the constitution of a nation. Particularly, in a developing country like Nigeria, as in other African Countries, women's political empowerment will involve the breaking away of all elements and signs of marginalisation that will present women as inferior political beings and citizens of the Nation.

The idea of franchise and representative participation in governance should not be restricted to a particular segment of the Society. The issue of social emancipation and political de-marginalisation cut across all the different strata of the women in society even though the fact that the type of emancipation or de-marginalisation that individual women needs may vary from one level to the other. However, generally, the quest is for how to ensure the political empowerment of the Nigerian woman figure and possibly focus on the position of the First Lady as a lead-woman and bring the effect to bear on the general women-folk.

This paper, as earlier discussed in the previous segment, advocates the total scrapping of the Office of the First Lady because of its aberrations and sees the need to bring in the relevance of the Ministry of Women Affairs. The First Lady does not have to personalise 'Women Affairs' or usurp/duplicate the responsibilities of some existing bodies or organizations set up to manage women affairs in the nation. Rather, the position could be used as a boost by working hand in hand with the existing women agencies. The execution of women affairs policies should also necessitate a more intensive work at the grassroot level.

In order to achieve this political empowerment, some factors come to play. First, is the gender issue i.e. the Feminine nature as a compliment of the male gender, therefore, their participation in socio-political affairs brings some wholeness into governments (See Adegboye, 1998:26-27). Second, is the fact of motherhood as a means of inculcating political values into the nation and in particular the womenfolk as children pass through the nurture of their households. The above views serve as pointers to some peculiarities of the feminine gender and then consequent effect on the political empowerment of women. This paper therefore hinges on the theoretical framework that feminism uses political power to transform the society. French (1986:87) in her theory of radical feminism states that:

Feminism is a revolutionary moral movement intending to use political power to transform

In buttressing this fact, literature has also revealed the part played by the family of which the women are a part in political socialization. It has been revealed that one of the important things children learn from their parents is party identification (Jande, Berry, Goldman, 1997).

The question then arises, what potentials have the First Ladies in the nation as pre-requisites that could guarantee women empowerment in the Nigerian Nation? The answer to this question is not far-fetched. First Ladyism is a matter of chance. Only those ladies who 'fortune smiles on get there'. Nobody votes anybody to such a position. The position is only occupied by ladies who have their husbands voted into power. Really, what presently obtains in Nigeria as far as political orientation of women is concerned is not sufficient to equip any lady for the position. Moreso, no lady knows (not even the wives of aspirants) whether she will have the chance of getting there. Do we then make the whole issue a subject of chance? Definitely no. The answer to this riddle is to equip every woman by giving them adequate political-education right from the on-set. The effect of this and the content of education will be discussed in the next segment of this paper.

The Role of Civil Information and Education

The concern of this paper includes the examination of the role of civil information and education in the political performance of the First Lady and the consequent empowerment of the Nigerian womenfolk.

This section of the paper hinges on the assertion that education is needed for equal participation of women in the development process. This development process could be said to

~~include all forms~~ - political in this case. Anand states:

Education, along with income generating Capacity, has been perceived as the golden door of success and equal participation of women in the development process ... (Anand 1983).

It is worthy of note that access to the right information and consequent education is very crucial in ensuring women's empowerment at all levels. The political operatives of the U. S. and the rate of women empowerment is reflective of the kind of civil information and education made available in the American society. The work of Adegboye (1997) has described Information Services as the wheel of the American democratic process. The work examines the wealth of information resources that freely flow within the American society and views it as a tool for the maintenance of the System. Definitely, the women folk of such a society will continually benefit from such resources as to enhance their political emancipation and empowerment. Some American writers opine that:

Knowledge is not only power, but It is the key to freedom and thus to the maintenance of democratic society (D'antonic and Ehrlich, 1961:151).

... Power grounded in knowledge and framed by respect for human dignity, is the necessary tool for the development of a democratic system (D'antonic and Ehrlich, 1961:152).

Apparently, if the Nigerian government borrows a leaf from the U. S. Systemic approach to free flow of civil information, the better for the women folk. A conscious effort to educate the Nigerian women folk politically will have two effects viz:

- (i) The education of every Nigerian woman from the grassroot level to the top echelon and the consequent political empowerment of every woman.
- (ii) The preparation of every Nigerian woman for the occupation of the post of the 'First Lady' peradventure she becomes one.

It is in light of the above, that this paper will suggest the following measures:

- (i) Introduction of intensive civil education programme to the school curricula - from primary to tertiary levels.
- (ii) Development of good library services and reading culture generally and especially among the womenfolk (see also Adegboye, 1997 & 1998).
- (iii) Introduction of special and mobile library services to the grassroots women (constituting materials in audio-visual forms for the illiterates and with special reference to civil education and political empowerment of women).
- (iv) The use of the print and electronic media in promoting women participation in politics and women self-esteem.

- (v) Training and re-training of ruling president(s) wives in civil education.

It is expedient to add that it is only by grooming the Nigerian womenfolk through adequate exposure to relevant information and education in civil matters that will ensure good performance by the time an average woman assumes the position or bears the title of the 'First Lady'. It is also worthy of note to say that such education or enlightenment will profit both the leadership (the First Lady in this case) and the followership (i.e. the womenfolk). This is because both parties would no more be ignorant of their rights and expectations of the populace of the services of any woman that is 'opportuned' to be in that position.

While the womenfolk look for what it entails to have political emancipation, rights and empowerment, the 'First Lady' also will be conscious of the fact that the position is to be used in harnessing resources to boost women's political empowerment and not to be used for personal aggrandizement neither the oppression nor eradication of the rights of other fellow women. In addition, 'First Ladies should also be conscious of their own personal integrity'. Good relations and integrity are earned and not inherited. The women involved should endeavour to deliver quality services to the society and desist from glorying in 'cheap popularity'.

Conclusion

The misuse of the office of the 'First Lady' in a country like Nigeria is not desirable, therefore, the office should be scrapped. The maintenance of the title may be desirable in the Nigerian democratic dispensation as long as it remains a matter of 'nomenclature' (though with its primary functions), and does not promote excesses but used to achieve positive ends and in this case, political empowerment of the Nigerian women. This could only be achieved through adequate civil information and

education. This paper wishes to submit that Nigeria should learn from America where the whole concept originated from and make amends where need be. Anything short of this is an analogue to "crying more than the bereaved."

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