"Spare Tires," "Second Fiddle," and "Prostitutes"?

Interrogating Discourses about Women and

Politics in Nigeria[1]

Grace Adeniyi-Ogunyankin

This paper examines discourses on women and politics in Nigeria and analyzes how the political is gendered in ways that leave women out, and how power operates in political spaces in Nigeria in ways that exclude women. Through the use of in-depth interviews carried out with local women, local politicians, and government workers in Ibadan as well as discourse analyses of Nigerian newspaper articles on women and politics spanning three decades, I show that this perception of women needs to be dismantled. In the paper, I highlight how culture and religion play a role in constructing women as outside of the political landscape and illustrate how women who participate in politics are viewed as "deviants." I note that when women partake in the political sphere, they often do so in gendered ways. Through this study, I illustrate that women, with regards to politics in Nigeria, are perceived as "spare tires," "second fiddle," and "prostitutes." The paper questions the notion that women are unconcerned with politics and would rather be spectators.

Political participation is essential to democracy; however, in most democratic countries of the world, women are underrepresented in the political arena and key decision-making levels (de la Rey, 2005;

Guzman, 2004). As Kethusegile-Juru (2003) argues, "the inclusion of women in decision-making is a fundamental human right and an issue of social justice" (p. 49). Thus, at a very minimum, in a procedural and representative democracy, there should be a balance in the participation and representation of men and women in political life. In this vein, democracy is fulfilled when conscious effort is made to reduce inequalities between men and women through the transformation of "power relations between men and women by promoting the equal distribution of power and influence between women and men" (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2010, para. 7).

One theme that emerged from my PhD fieldwork research on gender and the urban political economy during the 2011 elections in Ibadan, south western Nigeria, is the marginalization of women in politics.[2] So dominant was the theme that in a conversation with a male colleague he declared that he would not vote for me if I contested as a politician because I was a woman and politics was not meant for women. I thought he was joking, but as our conversation progressed, I realized he was adamant. This paper is inspired by that encounter, and the need to explore in some detail women's marginalization in colonial and postcolonial Nigerian politics.

This paper examines discourses on women and politics in Nigeria[3] and analyzes why the political is gendered in ways that leave

---

[2]   In Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999 to the present), men overwhelmingly domi-
      nate politics. No woman has ever been elected president or governor of any of
      Nigeria's thirty-six states. There have been a few deputy governors, the highest
      being six in 2007. In the lower house of the Nigeria's national assembly, called
      the House of Representatives, the highest number of elected women occurred in
      2007 when, of 360 representatives, 25 (7.5%) were women. In the upper house
      of Nigeria's national assembly, called the Senate, the situation of women's repre-
      sentation is no different. In 2007, out of 109 the highest number of women sen-
      ators also occurred in 2007 where nine (8.3%) out of 109 senators were wom-
      en.(see Agbalajobi, 2010; European Union Election Observation Mission to Ni-
      geria, 2011; Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2004; Irabor, n.d.; International
      Federation for Human Rights, 2008).

[3]   Nigeria is a very populous country with various ethnic and cultural groups. This
      paper, while using Nigeria has an umbrella word, focuses on South West Nigeria.

women out. Drawing largely on in-depth interviews carried out with local women in Ibadan, Nigeria, I argue that women are aware of, and critical about, the gendered nature of politics in Nigeria as a key factor operating against the participation of women in formal politics. They openly speak out against culture and patriarchy but are cautious to criticize their religious affiliations[4] even when they recognize the role religious discourses play in their exclusion. Moreover, though women disagree with hegemonic patriarchal cultural discourses that propagate women's political exclusions, they hesitate to challenge the status quo because of their desire to be perceived as respectable women.

I begin the paper by discussing the influence of Victorian ideologies of gender in the gendered formation of the Nigerian state and the consequent impact upon women's exclusion from formal politics. I argue that these gender ideologies have played a key role in shaping discourses that construct women as "spare tires," "second fiddle" and "prostitutes." I next show that culture, religion, and violence through political godfatherism play a central role in constructing women as outside of the political landscape and women political participants as deviants. I also highlight that when women do partake in the political sphere, it is often in gendered ways that do not challenge hegemonic patriarchal structures. I posit however that allowing women to participate in politics in a manner that values their gendered knowledge, perspectives and experiences is a key step towards gender equality. I conclude by examining

It is probable that there are inter and intra regional differences not captured in this paper.

[4] The women I interviewed were Muslims and Christians. The Christians were Anglican, Catholic and from charismatic African initiated churches. Note that when the Christian women stated their religion, they would most often state their denomination as well. Or they would mention their church/denomination in passing during the interview. The Muslim women would just state that they were Muslim. Note that most Muslims in Nigeria are Sunni. The most prominent sects are Ahmadiyya, Sanusiyya and Quadriyya.

women's proposal for transformative change in gender relations in Ibadan.

In this paper, the reference to women as "spare tires" in politics is when rare exceptions are made to justify women's entry into politics based on essentialised notions about women as non-violent, moral, and caring mothers. "Second fiddle" refers to the popular belief that women are supposed to play a subordinate role to male in politics. My use of "prostitutes" in this paper reflects the commonly held assumption that a woman's primary role is to be a "good" wife and mother who values domesticity. Thus, a woman who participates in politics is oftentimes viewed from a moral perspective as a "bad" woman who transgresses her assigned gender role because she is outside the home, where she does not belong, mingling with men in the political arena.

This paper draws on data from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with forty-eight women, ages eighteen to eighty-three, in two local government areas of metropolitan Ibadan, Oyo state. Within each local government area, I chose twenty-four women through purposive sampling. The major variables of concern for the study were income-level and age. I use data from ten key informant interviews with local government workers in the departments of Community Development and Town Planning and the Oyo State Ministry of Women Affairs, two local politicians, as well as discourse analysis of Nigerian newspaper articles (print and web), spanning three decades, on women and politics to support the arguments advanced in this paper.

Culture and the Rendering of Women as "Spare Tires," "Second Fiddle" and "Prostitutes"

> The woman is the helper. By virtue of that, they are to play an assisting role […] it's like a spare tire so when the real tire is defective, I mean burst or has a problem, then you can pick the other one and put it there (E. Awoniyi, personal communication, July 10, 2011).[5]

During my interviews with women in Ibadan, the most cited reasons (across class, age and educational levels) for the marginalization of women in politics were cultural and religious. All the women interviewed clearly asserted that politics has been created as a man's world and women's right to participate on an equal footing is suppressed. The interviews highlight C. Otutubikey Izugbara's (2004) argument that "Men and women enter national [imaginaries] differently" (p. 25). In this imaginary, in Nigeria, men are viewed to be natural leaders. As expressed by one participant:

> It seems […] men […] choose to be in the positions. The women, perhaps they look at them and say, what can these people do? What can women do? [They think] that wherever men are, women should not be there to occupy those positions, and that if they get there they won't even know how to do it at all. They come to these conclusions without ever giving women a chance (Ayobami,[6] interview by author, Ibadan, Nigeria, 02 Aug. 2011).

Men's 'presumed' natural right as leaders is predicated on the notion that they have authority and power over women. Many participants highlighted that this apparent inherent political right of men cheats women by presuming that the political is the domain of men.

Women, however, enter the national imaginary as biological and social reproducers who are supposed to stay out of public affairs, or only enter as supporters of men. One participant clearly illustrates this point through her argument that, "They don't like to

---

[5] This comment was made by one of my male colleagues at the University of Ibadan during our discussion on women and politics in Nigeria.

[6] Real names have been altered to help protect research participants.

hear women's voices in public. Only men want to be the ones who will be talking [and] who will become a big person. The thing that [a] woman [is] for is that, she cooks the food, takes care of the children, that she also eats and takes care of her husband" (Mojisola, interview by author, July 15, 2011). Participants posited that women are often unwanted political participants and they see them as being incapable of making sound decisions or that it is culturally unbecoming for women to expose themselves in public for political activities outside of domestic and supportive roles. They consider women who overstep this boundary to be 'culturally deviant.'

The reason why the Nigerian political imagination excludes women as political subjects, and views them mainly as mothers, wives and reproducers of culture, is partly located in the gendered formation of the Nigerian state. An understanding of the history of gender politics in Nigeria enables an analysis of the construct of women as outside of politics. As Mire (2001) argues, "African social and political thought cannot be understood in abstraction from the history of colonial encounter between European colonial conquest and African society" (p. 4). Contemporary narratives about politics—who belongs and who should participate—cannot be divorced from British Victorian ideologies of gender.

In Nigeria, British colonial administrators implemented indirect rule as a tool of governance. The British believed that leaving local community affairs in the hands of local chiefs and rulers was a means of keeping Nigerian culture intact (Kirk-Greene, 1965, p. 246). The appointed chiefs and rulers were usually male and this system of indirect rule disregarded the fact that female leadership was part of culture in many Nigerian societies.

The British also superimposed the Victorian ideologies of gender on many societies/communities in Nigeria. It was inconceivable to the British that Nigerian women could be chosen as indirect rulers because in Britain, the public duty of women was an extension of private role and as Mba (1982) asserts, the "British

administrators worked for a government in which there were no women at any level" (p. 39). Helen Callaway (1987) also notes that the colonizers "assumed African women generally to be in a dependent and subordinate position to men even in areas where women were noted for their independent trading activities and their political power" (p. 51). Thus, colonial administration was based on the ideology that women should occupy the domestic sphere and men the public sphere. This rendered Nigerian women invisible in the governing of British Nigeria. It made the exercise of control they had over their own affairs in pre-colonial Nigeria irrelevant. Colonial rule subdued the representation and voice they had in decision-making (Mba, p. 38; Petsalis, 1990, p. 197; Okoh, 2003, p. 22). Under indirect rule, the British administrators and the 'native' administrators of indirect rule, "rarely consulted women on matters that affected them" (Johnson-Odim & Mba, 1997, p. 11). Colonial rule relegated women solely to the status of child bearers and housekeepers.

Victorian ideologies of gender and domesticity were not only used as a frame of reference by the British for administration in Nigeria, but also instilled through the colonized education of boys and girls. The 1909 Code of Education was gendered (Okonkwo & Ezeh, 2008) because it emphasized training males to become professionals while females were trained to become good wives and mothers (Denzer, 1992). By the early mid-twentieth century, girls' education had reformed slightly. Girls were allowed to pursue education that would allow them to contribute to the colonial economy. Nevertheless, their education continued to stress the importance of devotion to home and family regardless of economic status or education (Denzer, p. 122).

On the eve of Nigeria's independence of October 1, 1960 there were more women, albeit few by comparison to the total population of women in Nigeria, who possessed tertiary education and professional training. However, the gendered education system

contributed to the "preponderance of the male population in the new emerging social elite, which provided the political leadership of the nationalism of the [mid] twentieth century" (Okonkwo & Ezeh, p. 189).

Women and men collaborated in Nigeria's struggle for independence from British rule. However, not many women were involved in the nationalist movements and when women were involved it was class based (Pereira, 2000). Postcolonial Nigeria was built on a "male privileging colonial ideology" that quickly forgot women's contribution to nationalism (Nzegwu, 2001, p. 6). In line with Yuval-Davis' (1997) and McClintock's (1995) approach, gender is crucial to understanding Nigeria as a nation. Nigeria was directly gendered through the feminization of Nigeria as a domestication project and through the imported ideologies of gender that shaped colonial society. In the post-independence era, Nigeria became further gendered by the continual exclusion of women from the public sphere and the reinvention of tradition.

In addition, women' s role as gatekeepers of customs and culture shapes Nigeria as a gendered nation. As Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, women's role as custodian of culture and custom is pertinent in reproducing the nation. This has been exemplified in Nigeria in the post-independence era by the National Council of Women's Society (NCWS). Elite Nigerian women formed the NCWS in 1959 as a non-partisan and non-political organization (Mba, 1989, p. 71). The NCWS' aims were to "promote the welfare and progress of women, especially in education and to ensure that women [were] given every opportunity to play an important part in social and community affairs" (Pereira 2000, p. 118). The NCWS was recognized as the only organization representing women's interest. However, NCWS has mainly served the interests of a sub-group of women. At the organization's prime, it assured the federal government that it did not desire political power because women had not forgotten their traditional roles as mothers and wives. The

NCWS, as Pereira argues, "employed the discourse of motherhood, and the concomitant responsibility for family affairs and child rearing as the ultimate destiny of all women" (p. 123). Thus, for women, their involvement in national affairs in the public realm is limited to the extension of their domestic role (p. 124). This discourse resonated with Victorian ideology. As such, the NCWS did not make inroads in serving or capturing Nigerian women's interests, needs, and priorities, nor were women included in decision-making processes. Notably, based on Nigeria's pre-colonial history, these women did not uphold the 'traditional' roles of women in Nigeria given that women historically were involved in making decisions.

In light of the preceding discussion, women are expected to honour their duties as mothers and spouses first and foremost. As such, political engagement was assumed to distract women from successfully performing these roles. Even when women are politicians, the validity of their leadership depends on proving that they are "good and responsible housewives and mothers" (Ibrahim, 2004, para. 42). A male politician I interviewed clearly demonstrates this point:

> If you say you have a meeting by 6 in the morning and your children will go to school, you have to care for your children and your husband. This will portray you better and show you're a good woman and you can be a good leader. But if your home is not tidied up, you cannot come outside and say you want to be a leader. You have to show them a good example (Mayowa, interview by author, March 16, 2011).

The expectation is that women should be doting mothers and dutiful wives which, according to this discourse, entails being at home. During the interviews, most women said political participation requires attending evening meetings. Fadeke noted that there is gender imbalance in political representation at the local level because "responsible women" rarely partake in politics:

> […] women are not participating in politics like men because of the odd time they meet. You know they always meet at night. It is not easy for a *re-*

sponsible woman to leave her home for a meeting at night. *Our religious and cultural aspects [do not] even give the women enough opportunity to participate in politics* (interview by author, March 16, 2011; emphasis added).

These late night political meetings contravene the cultural and religious expectation that a woman will be at home in the evening, and not "gallivant about." Because of these expectations, it is then assumed in popular discourse that women who dabble in politics are prostitutes. Seun mentioned that, "a lot of people have erroneous ideas about women participating in politics. A lot of people are biased; they think if you go into politics you become a prostitute" (interview by author, March 23, 2011). Jade, also remarked, "but you know any woman that wants to get there... it's a problem we have in Africa I mean Nigeria. Any woman in top office must be a flirt.[7] They believe that" (interview by author, August 22, 2011). Tobi, further explicated the prostitution narrative below:

> **Tobi**: …if any woman joins politics they'll be like, "*ah she must have been sleeping with men. How can a woman be having meetings in the night*?"…
>
> **Grace**: Do all political meetings take place at night or is it just a rumour?
>
> **Tobi**: It's not a rumour because they think that's the only time they can [meet]. I don't know why. But they do it in the night. Okay maybe they allow themselves to go and do their business during the day then they now come and I don't know why, and they feel a woman should not be there in the night.
>
> **Grace**: That she should be at home?
>
> **Tobi**: Yes (interview by author, July 18, 2011; emphasis added).

Since the political meetings take place at night, there is an assumption in popular discourse that a woman surrounded by several men would be sleeping with them. In addition, given that the

---

[7]   The way Jade talked about being a flirt during the interview included engagement in sexual intercourse.

political sphere is dominated by men, it is believed that for a woman to make it in politics, she must be using her 'bottom power' to rise.

Although women aspirants are not prostitutes, the moral narrative is nevertheless leveraged against them. Many Nigerian women aspirants are subjected "to smear campaigns [centering] on their alleged loose moral standing, [while] some are insulted directly" (IDEA 2006, p. 10). This is problematic because male privilege and double standards obscure the applicability of the same line of questioning to males. As Ibrahim (2004) asserts,

> It is well known…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 (para. 42).

Moreover, husbands are sometimes ridiculed for not having control of their politically oriented wives. The derision leverages the discourse that only "loose" women go into politics. As such, ridicule or the fear of ridicule makes it more difficult for women to obtain their husbands' support. A husband's support, beyond the need for adequate finances, is considered a paramount prerequisite for political participation. Even if a woman has a supportive spouse, it is possible the support may be only transient. As one interviewee explained,

> [The husband] will just wake up and tell you he's no more interested or maybe he starts sleeping outside with another woman too and then when you now accost him, 'Why are you doing this?' He will say, 'Hey you don't have time for me again, it is this your career political thing you have pursued.' That's it (Titilayo, interview by author, March 8, 2011).

There also seems to be a palpable fear that if women were to become dominant in the political sphere, gender relations would be ruined. This poses a threat to national stability—as the discourse that males

are head and therefore *de facto* leaders—will no longer be tenable. This narrative was common in the newspapers I read and was also proffered, during interviews, as an explanation for why men are so resistant to women participating in politics. Concerns centered on the fragility of men's natural dominance and the decline of women's role in reproducing proper morals and culture. There is an underlying fear that women will no longer be under men's authority. As one interviewee pointed out, "It may not all go well with a man. You understand? And no man wants to play the *second fiddle*" (Ayo, interview by author, August 23, 2011; emphasis added). Other women during interviews noted that some men have a complex and cannot handle competition from women, and that they view themselves as superior to women. For them, it does not make sense that they would fall under a woman's leadership. In this way, women's leadership is often viewed by men as going against the natural order.

Religious cultural discourses play a central role in propagating patriarchal gender norms because "the belief that God destined men to be in charge and women to be governed by men is evident in many passages of the Islamic and Christian Holy Books" (Izugbara, 2004, p. 13). In this vein, religion is "used as an instrument in defense of patriarchy. Christian and Islamic law gives central place to paternalistic interpretation to women's appropriate roles and socio-political arrangements of the society" (Ndubuisi 2006, p. 2). During my interviews, people often explained leadership as something that is considered by society as inherently male because males have been ordained as head by God. Atinuke and Zahra for example highlighted the blurring of the Yoruba culture and Christianity/Islam in constructing women's political role as unnatural:

> **Atinuke**: Yoruba people they want women to respect men in the house even in the society. Maybe that's the major reason why they don't give women opportunity. They believe men have the power to be ruling because from

the Bible woman was created from man (Interview with author, June 30, 2011).

Zahra: I think in a situation you know God has made men to be our head so if we look to that as per our culture if we believe in our culture men must always be the leader.

Grace: And do you agree with this view?

Zahra: I quite agree. Biblically, Islamically if you look

Grace: But you yourself do you agree? Let's say for now you have all the qualifications to become President, but somebody now says no you cannot become president because you are a woman like do you agree with it?

Zahra: Um, Islamically? Due to my religion?

Grace: Hmm. But, lets say religion. Now I know religion is very important so lets say religion put aside. What about your own personal feelings? Like I know that's what it says in the Qur'an and in the Bible

Zahra: I know if women if we were given chance. I think we will still be able to perform better than the men […] (Interview by author, June 30, 2011).

Many women I interviewed think that the ordaining of male as head and female as submissive is unfair because of the male tendency to exploit this designation. The women participants consequently called for increased participation of women in decision-making and governance. However, they did not want to challenge the dominant patriarchal cultural and religious discourse. Inasmuch as women acknowledged the egotistical[8] behaviour of men and a male fear of losing control over women if women were to enter politics, they did not critique the Bible or the Qur'an. Although women understood the position of their religious texts on gender relations, some women did not wholly believe that politics is not a place for women. They

---

[8]   By this, I mean some males' inflated idea of their own importance and selfish reluctance to include women in the political sphere.

used religious teachings to highlight that women should not be excluded:

> **Ebun**: […] Women don't have high positions [because the men think] women will be the one making rules for them [especially] when the bible says women do not have custom to make rules […] That's what they are quoting. But, the world is more modern than that now. God left [the] command for everybody to love each other[9] (Interview by author, July 7, 2011).

> **Nike**: Why should I be in the kitchen? I can be in the kitchen to take care of my family. That is what God sent us to this world to come and do. But it's not the only thing. You see when I traveled to Jerusalem […] the guards that were taking us to the places where we were supposed to go and visit, when we were in the bus we were discussing the bible and discussing [that] women are next to God. In that sense, God has made women. We are mothers. We are the ones taking care of these children that he has sent to this world. Not men. How many men can put diapers on their children? How many men can take his child and feed the child like a mother? So we are next to God. And they misuse it. Our men. That is the reason why God is taking it away from them (Interview by author, July 12, 2011).

As illustrated by Nike's comment, sometimes even when women's place in the political sphere is justified, the interviewees ensured that they did not stray far from cultural and religious notions of women's role. They seemed to do this because they want to be, and also desire to be perceived as, a good woman, wife, and mother, who is respectful to her husband and cherishes her matrimonial home.

Violence, "Thuggery" and Intimidation: The Masculinization of Nigerian Politics

The most cited reason that my interviewees provided for their non-participation in politics or lack of interest in political participation was the issue of violence that pervades Nigerian

---

[9] She means that focusing on loving each other would reduce the propensity to promote women's exclusion.

politics.[10] Many research participants, like Damilola, highlighted the "do-or-die"[11] nature of Nigerian politics:

> **Damilola**: I see politics in Nigeria like do or die.
>
> **Grace**: What if it wasn't do or die? Do you want to become president?
>
> **Damilola**: If there was no do or die .
>
> **Grace**: So you are interested?
>
> **Damilola**: Ah, ah! I like it (interview by author, August 30, 2011).

In another context the following exchange occurred:

> **Vivian**: […] There was a woman sometimes ago that they killed, the politicians want[ed] people to vote for them […] We can't have women there. The men won't accept it.
>
> **Grace**: Why?
>
> **Mary**: They will kill her (interview by author, July 13, 2011).

Godfathers, political gatekeepers, in Nigeria dominate politics and dictate who participates in politics. They are also responsible for most pre and post election violence. Politically motivated violence is synonymous with politics in Nigeria. This violence affects women as well. Nigerian women electoral candidates have been "kidnapped, beaten up, sexually assaulted, and shot at in order to deter them from participating in elections" (Denny, 2011, para. 6). United Nations Women (UNWomen), in collaboration with a coalition of Nigerian civil society organizations and activists, spearheaded a pilot study in response to the issue of electoral violence against women. The study tracked incidents of violence against women aspirants in

---

[10]   Note that violence was the most popular reason cited by women during the interviews, other cited reasons, which are beyond the purview of this paper, include low-levels of education and high cost of elections.

[11]   A popular phrase used to describe politics in Nigeria.

real-time during the 2011 elections (UNWomen 2011, para. 3).
Preliminary findings reveal

> 75% of the field monitors report[ed] an incident or incidents of violence
> that were targeted specifically at women. The largest number of these inci-
> dents reportedly took place during political campaigns or rallies, while oth-
> ers occurred at political party events. The perpetrators were identified as
> primarily party supporters and agents (Coalition of civil society Nige-
> ria/UNWomen/UNDP, 2011, p. 1).

As such, women do not like the insecurity of politics (Akindele et al,
2011, p. 192). Women would rather avoid politics altogether than
face the violence. Since politics is "do-or die", it becomes gendered
male through the discourse that "those who possess the wherewithal
take politics by force when force is required" (Agbalajobi, 2010, p.
78). Women are excluded because they often opt out of exercising
force. The pervasiveness of violence thus gives more credibility to the
discourse that the political is a male prerogative and domain. Solape
pointed out that women are unable to contend with the violent
nature of politics:

> There are too many risks involved in Nigerian politics that I have to admit
> when it comes to physical strength, women are not as strong as men defi-
> nitely […] and that's one admission I'm not ashamed to make. We're not
> built that way (interview by author, July 26, 2011).

Moreover, there is a fear to speak out against the government
because they believe that the godfather's foot soldiers are always
"around the corner", ready to harm critics:

> The person who talks and says this [and] that concerning politics—they
> quote them and kill them—that's why nobody wants to talk. Try to under-
> stand. And I want you to really understand. Ah ah! If we both do it, it will
> be good. Do you understand me? If we both do it, it's for it to be good. But
> when they are killing people—who wants to die? Why don't you just wait
> until it's your time to die? Focus on your work… That's why I don't see
> some women who will [contest]. As for me, they can never call me to con-
> test. I don't want trouble (Sike, interview by author, July 16, 2011).

Politics is gendered via violence because violence is associated with masculinity. Violence is not considered a deviation but an accepted part of masculinity and there is a growing connection in society between being a man and being violent (Jhally et al., 1999). The danger in accepting violence as a masculine norm is that in Nigeria, the validation of violence also allows politics to continue to be gendered and normalized as masculine. Accordingly, because violence is gendered masculine, and politics in Nigeria has become synonymous with violence, it is easy to say women do not belong. In this vein, since violence is gendered masculine, it is normal when men engage in politics and by this logic, when women participate in politics, it is considered abnormal. Thus, there has been a normalization of political violence in Nigeria. Terms such as 'tough', and 'strong' are used to describe 'real' men while the antithesis is often ascribed to womanhood. Using this reasoning, since political power in Nigeria is often attained through violent struggle, 'real' men then belong in politics, and 'real' women do not. This explanation normalizes and masculinizes violence and praises women for staying true to their nature by fearing violence and not participating in politics. The women who transgress risk having their womanhood called into question and are often labeled negatively.

In sum, not dismantling the notion of violence as natural and politics as masculine, and restricting women and men to a particular gendered script does not change anything; it only continues to situate women as outsiders and foreigners to the political terrain. Rather than problematize violence and condemn it as unnecessary, it condones it. Masculinity and femininity needs to be recognized as performances learned via socialization in order to disrupt the notion that politics is the purview of men.

Does More Women in Politics Equal Meaningful Change for Women?

So far I have tried to demonstrate the marginalization of women in Nigerian politics. Now, a pertinent question needs to be asked: Does having more women in politics mean that things will get better for women? Not necessarily. Women politicians do not necessary support women's rights. For example, Nigerian Senator Eme Ufot Ekaette, a high profile woman politician, proposed an indecent dressing bill in 2008. The rationale for the bill was that a dress code is a solution to rape and sexual violence against women. However, the bill's proposed discourse blamed the victim, rather than recognize the existence of gender inequalities that promote a culture of violence against women.

The existence of a *femocracy* in Nigeria serves as a potential impediment to gender equality. Amina Mama (1997) defines *femocracy* as " 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" (p. 81). In a similar vein, Jibrin Ibrahim (2004) posits that 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 (para. 1).

The primacy of wives of men in leadership also means issues concerning Nigerian women are often not part of formalized decision-making, and are instead placed under the purview of the wives. This is a gendered and classed process. It is "gendered" because it makes it seem like women's issues are not significant enough for formalized decision-making and politics. It is "classed" because it limits who participates in contributing to what is considered and/or what is done about women's issues.

During my interviews with staff in the Women Affairs Division of the Department of Community Development and a senior official with the State Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development, it was mentioned that there are frequent liaisons between the governor's wife and the wives of Ibadan local chairmen. For example, on issues pertaining to women at the local level, the Women Affairs branch of the Local Government Community Development Department hold meetings with the governor's wife. When the Local Government Women Affairs staff meets with the State Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development or the Commissioner, the wife of the Chairman is usually present. Whenever there are top-down initiatives that the State Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development want to pursue, the State Ministry discusses strategies with wives of the chairman. Moreover, the State Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development uses the wives of the chairmen to hold local governments accountable to women with regards to programming and initiatives. This genders politics through not accounting for how women's issues might be taken up if woman assumed leadership roles. It assumes that leadership is male, and that women will always be by the leader's (their husband's) side.

Despite the foregoing negative analysis, there have been cases in which First Ladies have been instrumental in advocating for women's increased involvement in politics. An example is Patience Jonathan, the current First Lady of Nigeria, who worked to increase the number of women in decision-making her project during and after the 2011 election campaigns. Rumours suggest she pushed her husband to choose a 'large' number of women as cabinet ministers. Should politics be played out via influence, especially bedroom influence? Though gains are made for women, bedroom politics of this kind does not begin to address the root causes of women's marginalization from politics.

Women's success in politics is often questioned in popular discourse, and some people have noted that iconic female politicians gained their posts via patronage. Reuben Abati (2011), writing in the Nigerian *Guardian* newspaper, notes, "many of the women in politics are in public positions not because they merit them, but because they have been put there by their husbands, parents, or Godfathers. In that wise, they are agents of male domination, and not flag bearers of women empowerment" (para. 13). A few interviewees, especially professional middle class women, shared this opinion with regard to political appointments. The following expresses this sentiment:

> I have seen a few women like this Okonjo Iweala who has been brought back a few times and other women who are doing well. But, unfortunately again, apart from this Dora Akunyili, who was [in charge of] NAFDAC[12], you find that those ones who are now ministers, I'm sorry to say so, many of them are political appointees more on connections than on their own ability (Solape, interview by author, July 26, 2011).

Even when women are in the political sphere, it is possible that they may not serve the best interests of women. They may make anti-democratic decisions and they may be accused of using godfathers to get ahead. This does not mean that all women in the political sphere are tainted in this way. It also does not mean that it is hopeless to agitate for increased participation by women. Rather, it means being more critical of narratives that assume complacency when a token woman is represented. We need to ensure women in leadership roles do not move us in a backward direction, but a step towards promoting gender equality.

---

[12]   The National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC)

A Woman's Touch?: The Case for Women's Political Participation

Despite the negative and dominant narratives on women politicians, there are some discourses that promote the participation of women in politics. Some of the newspapers[13], when they had positive things to say about women, were usually within a particular discourse about women that continues to gender politics. This discourse posits that women will bring sanity and decorum into politics and therefore they should participate. Their participation is based on the possibilities of what women will do to reduce the pervasive violence and corruption rather than on the fact that they should be given the equal opportunity to participate regardless of what they will do or not do for the political landscape.

Some of the women I interviewed strongly believed that because women are wives and mothers and conversant with domesticity as well as compassionate, caring and more moral than men, they will perform better in politics than males. Below are three examples from the interviews that illustrate the foregoing narrative:

> We women are not so stubborn or hard-hearted as men […] [We] will do it well because people use to say you women are our mothers […] though we haven't seen any woman who has been maybe head of state or head of anything, […] I know that if women come to power they will do well (Toni, interview by author, August 23, 2011).

> Let the women try even this Presidency [or] governor[ship] let us see what we have […] [Women] have the fear of God in them more than the men […] and I pray that one day we [will] get there in Jesus' name (Fadeke, interview by author, March 16, 2011).

---

13   Women in Government (*Sunday Tribune,* March 31, 1991); Who shall go for us? (July 16, 1992); Are you ready for a female leader? (*Sunday Times,* July 27, 1992); Women to the rescue (*Guardian,* July 7, 1994); and That Iyabo's Interview, Nigerian women and 2007 Nigerian elections (*Nigeria World,* July 15, 2006).

> You know women. Women are different from men. We are more kind, right? We are close to our children so we will do better than men (Sade, interview by author, August 23, 2011).

However, the women's narratives do not redress the current patriarchal discourses surrounding women and politics in Nigeria. Rather, the narratives proffered by my interviewees fit neatly into the patriarchal discourse on women and continues to gender politics as masculine as it remains exclusionary and expects that women can only be painted in the political landscape in particular ways. The male-female binary is retained and only serves to further reinforce patriarchy and gender roles. The narrative also privileges specific forms of femininity as well as obscures the fact that it sets particular barometer for evaluating women politicians. Moreover, if this narrative is prevalent, when a woman deviates from these expectations, she may not be seen as the exception but rather a wake-up call to re-evaluate whether women should continue to participate in politics. For example, there is a prevailing narrative that women are more moral, and therefore less corrupt. Since Nigerian politics is known for its high level of corruption, some people have called for women to take on their "spare tire" role to reduce corruption. However, when the first female speaker of the House of Representatives, Patricia Etteh was impeached in 2007 on allegations of corruption, the usefulness of women in politics became questionable in popular discourse. For example, in an article on the news website *Nigeriaworld* Bayo Omolola (2007) wrote,

> The heart-disturbing news about the involvement of such a highly placed female politician reduces the hope that the masses have for a better country that women are expected to build when they have the chance to be at the helm of affairs. The news also signals that women can be as guilty as men in doing damages to the nation *(*para. 7).

Nigeria is infamously known for its corruption, yet Patricia Etteh's level of corruption is situated within a gendered discourse while countless corrupt men have not been judged in a similar manner

that discriminates against the male gender. A perfect example would be the outgoing speaker of the House of Representatives, Dimeji Bankole, who was accused of corruption towards the end of his term. The judgments levied against him were on an individual basis, not on his gender. As such, it is important that women are not included in politics on the basis of gendered notions. Otherwise, they will never be valued as 'true' politicians but rather viewed as foreigners with special entry visas to the political landscape.

However, arguing that women should play a significant role in decision-making and governance on the basis that they have different experiences and perspectives, alongside the democratic argument, is more relevant (de la Rey, 2005; Kamau, 2010; Kethusegile-Juru, 2003). Some of the women I interviewed also engaged with this discourse when I asked them if Ibadan would be different if more women occupied decision-making and political positions. Some reasons proffered for why women would be better were that they have better knowledge about the city, food security issues, and water and sanitation issues. Therefore, their inclusion in decision-making processes would entail investment in infrastructure and a reduction in the 'reproduction tax'[14] on women (Chant, 2007, p. 52). Here is a sample of my exchange with one of the women:

> **Adeola**: If a woman is councillor or governor […] She may look at all the things that—like right now you know for us to fetch water and throw out the garbage that is women's work, not men's. **[…]** So a woman may think, people are suffering from things like this. Like the water, I said we don't have right now, she could find a neighbourhood and provide water for them. She may look at things and say, "ah, the women they don't have where they will be throwing trash." She'd provide a vehicle that will be throwing the waste away for them (interview by author, August 1, 2011).

---

[14] This refers to the social reproductive work women engage in such as the collection of water, house work, cooking and unpaid care work in addition to their income generating activities.

Such reasoning was more common among low-income class women because most of these issues are connected to the socio-spatial inequalities present in the city and their social-reproductive work, which have little resonance for middle-class women. For example, the major challenge Bukky, a middle class woman, identified in her life is:

> **Bukky**: You know the challenges I face now as a housewife really have to do with staff. You know as I said, I'm out of the house all day. I can wake up in the morning and the housekeeper may not turn up. […] Now I have a running battle with my gardeners. I have two of them. I've not seen them and my flowers are due for trimming. So you know you don't have people who can do it. The quality of services that you get now is very bad (interview by author, August 26, 2011)

In contrast, Tayo, describes her challenge as: "We don't have a toilet here, we also don't have water here. We have to go to Oke Ado to get water" (interview by author, July 20, 2011). Thus, the low-income women argued that because of their experience, they would have more insight on how to formulate, plan, and implement policies and programs to address these issues. This is clearly a more productive narrative because it places more value on women's experience and also provides a stronger argument for the inclusion of women.

Conclusion: The Road Towards Social Transformation

> We need one another […] we need to complement one another we must both be there we must both develop the nation, it must not be a one sided issue and I believe if we have that in mind we will be able to go far […] (Funmi, interview by author, July 14, 2011).

> You know they are just starting. And one day they will get there. At least we now have women commissioners, women ministers, women senators, women honourables women as deputy governors […] (Ayo, interview by author, August 23, 2011).

Although, my interviewees were not impressed by the ways women are excluded from politics, they were still optimistic that things would improve. Some praised the incumbent administration for its progressiveness in selecting the most number of women cabinet ministers (13) that Nigeria has seen to date. However, while an unprecedented in-road has been made with regard to the appointment of women to key posts, we must not celebrate too soon. As Lisa Denney (2011) has argued, "It is doubtful whether the top-down changes that President Goodluck Jonathan has made through political appointments of women will transform the role of women in politics without similar results achieved from the bottom-up" (para. 10). Thus, it remains pertinent to continue to challenge the discourses and factors deterring women.

Fortunately, many gender activists and organizations have been, and remain, active in challenging the marginalization of women in politics and advocating for change in Nigeria. Groups such as Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), Gender and Development Action (GADA), and Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics (FONWIP) have done a lot to raise more awareness among society and government. Their current priorities are for the government to follow through on the National Gender Policy's aim to advance 35% affirmative action for women in all governance processes as well as the domestication of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

However, in the push to reduce the marginalization of women, there is a disproportionate focus on sensitizing, educating and empowering women. For example, the Oyo State Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development as well as the Women Affairs branch of the Department of Community Development usually target women for their sensitization programs. But is it possible for transformation to occur if only half of the population is being sensitized? There is a need for "a political environment that

empowers women and simultaneously sensitizes men and transforms masculinist structures and processes on the importance and strategic relevance of increasing the role of women in national and sub-regional political decision-making processes for the advancement of democracy" (Mensah-Kutin, 2010, p. 30). Tola, suggested that men can become more sensitized once they actually hear what women have to say and recognize that women have contributions to make:

> **Tola**: You know that men act and behave in a way that asserts that they are the head of everything, so they use that to cheat women. Men would think that they are the ones who can plan and make everything work so that's the reason that I would give for why it is usually males who do it.
>
> **Grace:** What do you think we can do about it?
>
> **Tola:** *As women, we are the ones who know how things work in the city. We are the ones who know what's going on in the city very well.* If they leave some room for women to occupy some positions, that would be good.
>
> **Grace**: What are the steps that you think we can take to get there?
>
> **Tola:** … so let's say they do a meeting they say that those women who have the opportunity or the time, they should please come o. … And [when] they allow women to talk or be part of the meeting, you know from there they would observe the intelligence of the woman that if she's in office, she will also succeed and do good things for the city … (Personal communication, August 2, 2011; emphasis added).

The women I interviewed noted that the way forward, with regards to transformative change, starts at a young age:

> We should correct it from the home front…. they should let the boy-child and the girl-child perform the same role so that there won't be discrimination in the workplace about the position to be occupied by a female or a male (Seun, interview by author, March 23, 2011).
>
> We should not discourage our female children. You know these things started from when we were young, if the men are talking, a woman should

> shut up - even if they are talking nonsense. Anytime we have the opportunity to contribute to pour our mind …we should not allow inferiority complex to pull us down. If we continue like this…hmmm…I am afraid. But we should start it from our home. We should encourage our female children to be even [participating in] school politics (Fadeke, interview by author, March 16, 2011)

My interviewees also emphasized that in addition to teaching their daughters to be confident and telling them that they should not play the "second fiddle", they will also socialize their sons in a way that deviates from prevailing gender stereotyping and norms. Hopefully, this type of socialization will pave the way for gender equality in the political arena. As one interviewee cogently remarked, "Things like that should change. They should be saying it in stories that 'once upon a time o, men were the only ones who were doing politics. But now, women are also doing it'" (Tola, interview by author, August 2, 2011). Clearly, women envision equal access to Nigeria's political landscape where they would no longer be considered "spare tires," "second fiddle" and "prostitutes."

References

Ajayi, Y. & Ogbu, A. (2011). President Jonathan's 13 women: Can they deliver? THISDAY LIVE. Retrieved from http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/president-jonathan-s-13-women-can-they-deliver-/95176/.

Ajayi-Soyinka, O. (2005). Who is afraid of agency?: Theorizing African women out of the victim syndrome. In J.R. Chepyator-Thomson(Ed), *African women and globalization: Dawn of the 21st century* (pp. 67-94). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Akindele, S. T., Adeyemi, O. O. & Aluko, K. (2011). The myth and reality of women in politics: A discourse of the core issues. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 5 (4): 190–207.

Anderson, B. (1983). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. London: Verso.

Bolaji, K. (2008). Towards greater participation of Nigerian women in democratic governance and development: Challenges and prospects. *Gender and Behaviour* 5 (2): 1406–1420.

Center for Asia Pacific Women in Politics. (2012). Women heads of state. Retrieved from http://www.capwip. org/participation/womenheadofstate.html

Coalition of civil society Nigeria/UNWomen/UNDP. (2011). Statement on violence against women in politics in Nigeria. Iknowpolitics. Retrieved from http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/41654.

Davin, A. (1997). Imperialism and motherhood. In F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (Eds.), *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (pp. 87-151). Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

de la Rey, C. (2005). Gender, women and leadership. Agenda 19 (65): 4–11.

Denney, L. (2011). Nigeria: Women on the outskirts of politics. openDemocracy. Retrieved from http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lisa-denney/nigeria-women-on-outskirts-of-politics.

Denzer, L. (1992). Domestic science training in colonial Yoruba land. In K. Tranberg Hansen (Ed), *African encounters with domesticity* (pp. 116-142). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

European Union Election Observation Mission to Nigeria. (2011). Final report on the 2011 general elections. European Union Election Observation Mission. Retrieved from http://www.eueom.eu/nigeria2011/reports

Guzmán, V. (2004). Democratic governance and gender: Possible linkages. Vol. 48. United Nations.

Ibrahim, J. (2004). The first lady syndrome and the marginalisation of women from power: Opportunities or

compromises for gender equality? *Feminist Africa*, 3. Retrieved from: http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_3_feature_article_3.pdf

International Federation for Human Rights. (2008). The Nigeria NGO coalition shadow report to the CEDAW committee. Retrieved from: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/48a0007a2.html.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2006). *Nigeria: Country report based on research and dialogue with political parties*. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2011). Women in national parliaments. Retrieved from http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

Irabor, F. (2011). Review of women's participation and performance at the 2011 General Elections in Nigeria. Baobab Women. Retrieved from www.baobabwomen.org

Izugbara, C. O. (2004). Patriarchal ideology and discourses of sexuality in Nigeria." In *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series*, 2:1–34.

Jhally, S, Ericsson, S, Talreja, S., Katz, J., Earp, L. & Media Education Foundation. (1999). Tough guise: Violence, media, and the crisis in masculinity. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Johnson-Odim, C. & Mba, N. (1997). *For women and the nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*. University of Illinois Press.

Kamau, N. (2010). *Women and political leadership in Kenya*. Retrieved from http://www.hbfha.com/downloads/Women_in_Leadership_Study.pdf.

Kandawasvika-Nhundu, R. (2010). International women's day 2010. International IDEA. Retrieved from http://www.idea.int/gender/womens_day_2010.cfm.

Kethusegile-Juru, B. M. (2003). Intra-Party democracy and the inclusion of women. *Journal of African Elections* 2(1): 49-62.

Kirk-Greene, A.H.M. (1965). The principles of native administration in Nigeria; selected documents, 1900-1947. London: Oxford University Press.

Mama, A. (1998). Khaki in the family: Gender discourses and militarism in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*: 1–17.

Mba, N.E. (1982). Nigerian women mobilize: Women's political activity in southern Nigeria, 1900-1965. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

McClintock, A. (1995).Imperial leather: Race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial conquest. New York : Routledge.

Mire, A. (1998). In/through the bodies of women: Rethinking gender in African politics. *Polis* 6 (2): 1-19.

Mutame, G. (2004). Women break into African politics. *Africa Recovery* 18 (1): 4

Nzegwu, N. (2001). Gender equality in a dual-sex system: The case of Onitsha. *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 1(1):1-32.

Okoh, J. (2003). Feminism: An African perspective. In N. C. Ejituwu & A.O.I. Gabriel (Eds.), *Women in Nigerian history : The Rivers and Bayelsa states experience*. Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Onyoma Research Publications.

Okonkwo, U & Ezeh, M. (2008). Implications of missionary education for women in Nigeria: A historical analysis. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10(2) : 186-197

Pereira, C. (2000). National council of women's societies and the state, 1985-1993: The use of discourses of womanhood by the NCWS. In A. Jega (Ed.), *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria (109-133)*. Uppsala : Nordiska Afrikainstitutet in collaboration with the Centre for Research and Documentation, Kano.

_____. (2002). Understanding women's experiences of citizenship in Nigeria: From advocacy to research. In CODESRIA/Arab Research Centre Symposium on "African Gender Research in the New Millennium: Perspectives, Directions and Challenges", Cairo, Egypt, 7–10.

Petsalis, S. F. (1990). *The silent power: A portrait of Nigerian women*. Montreal: Meridian Press.

UNWomen. (2011). Nigeria: Tracking electoral violence against women in real-time. UN Women. Retrieved from http://www.unwomen.org/2011/04/nigeria-tracking-electoral-violence-against-women-in-real-time/.

Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and nation*. London: Sage Publications.