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The Nigerian Feminist Movement: Lessons from Women in Nigeria, WIN*

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In Nigeria, as in other societies, there is, and there has always been a women's movement or more correctly women's movements. These existed before, during and after colonialism. Many of these may probably not fit into the conventional definition of a movement. Various forms of

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interest groups see themselves as movements. I admit that all of these do serve interests that in many ways attempt at addressing inequalities between women and men in society.

While this is an acceptable criterion of minimizing disagreements in the characterization of women-based organizations, the reality is that there are still substantial differences in the forms of movements that call themselves 'women's movements'. Some 'movement' may or may not have clear objectives, mission or vision but exist as ad hoc bodies, useful when the need arises but with little or no coordination, continuity or sustainability. Some may just be limited to specific local struggles.

In Nigeria, the oldest and largest women's movement can be said to be the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS) founded in 1958. Basu's (1995) definition clearly suits the NCWS.

The Nigerian women's movement is an unarmed movement. It is non-confrontational. It is a movement for the progressive upliftment of women for motherhood, nationhood and development.

This movement is 'at home' with the protection of our culture and tradition as well as with the supremacy of men. It will not rock the boat. It

essentially accepts what the tradition has been and what religion sanctions.

There are sectors of this movement that are more radical than the status-quo and that would raise the struggle to a higher level but are still afraid of what the men would say or do. There are gender activists who would rather not be associated with feminism, publicly or privately. Again there are women 'activists' in the larger women's movement who call themselves feminists when they are in the midst of feminists but will quickly condemn 'those crazy people', a reference to those who publicly admit and declare that they are feminists. There are yet those who are feminists. There are yet those who are feminists, 'but'; these are women who want to be seen truly as feminists *but* become uncomfortable with discussions on such questions as the totality of *who* a feminist is and the extent of feminism in terms of core values, principles and praxis. They are satisfied with declaration and participation in meetings and conferences where the term feminism gets mentioned, but are generally silent when issues of sexual rights are discussed. For them, feminism has limits. They are, for instance, totally homophobic.

Feminism in Nigeria

There is no denying the fact that some forms of feminist struggles existed in Nigeria before what was clearly acclaimed and identified openly as a feminist movement: Women in Nigeria (WIN). However such struggles were largely undocumented. I make bold to state that feminism in Nigeria in its present form - consistent, organised, with clear objectives and ideology - came into being with the inauguration, in 1983, of the organization Women in Nigeria (WIN) following the 1982 national conference on the same theme. WIN was a direct outcome of the conference, envisioned as a feminist movement and named as such.

During its first ten years WIN facilitated the development of many of the self-identified feminists in Nigeria today. WIN started off with a clearly stated rights-based approach to issues about women in Nigeria and was very clear on the issues of gender and social justice. However, the open policy of WIN of 'come one - come all', where anyone, male or female, was accepted as long as such a person accepted the provisions of our

Constitution, carried a danger of WIN including persons who have contempt for feminism but come into WIN with their own agenda. There was no punishment for anyone who played no active roll as long as such a person showed up once in a while at meetings.

In spite of the inherent weaknesses in the nature of membership criteria for WIN, one must always pay tribute to WIN as training ground for the emergence of organised feminist struggles in Nigeria. WIN's open policy of membership led to the entry of many persons who had no clue about feminism and gender justice and its core values and principles. Many enthusiastic members equated feminist struggles to abstract class struggle, with total disdain for gender issues. Internal conflicts generated by ignorance and opportunism as well as male chauvinistic understanding of social struggles as not including gender equality and equity as key components of social justice became a cankerworm that progressively weakened WIN as a movement for social transformation – a core focus of feminist struggles.

The Uniqueness and Contribution of WIN to the Nigerian Feminist Movement

From the onset, WIN engaged in research, policy advocacy and activism aimed at transforming the conditions under which women and other under-privileged classes in Nigeria lived. WIN's further uniqueness was its consciousness of both class and gender in the struggle for the emancipation of women. WIN acknowledged that, although the majority of women like the majority of men, suffered from the exploitative and oppressive character of the Nigerian society, women suffer additional forms of exploitation and oppression - as women. Thus WIN recognized the double forms of exploitation and oppression of women as members of the subordinate class and as women. WIN set out to struggle against both class and gender oppression through promoting the study of conditions of women, disseminating the outcome for policy formulation, defending the rights of women and taking actions to transform the conditions of women.

WIN's Strategies

WIN started off with the strategy of research, analysis and documentation of conditions of women in various situations in the society. The outcome of this strategy provided the much needed data for advocacy and mobilization of women to demand their rights. This strategy also led to the practice of holding annual conferences as a means of public education and the creation of awareness, using research data and gender analysis as convincing tool for demanding for women's rights. We may also mention the adoption of a clear Constitution that emerged from the involvement and participation of all members, the establishment of WIN as an institution with basic feminist principles and values, the emergence of well-defined organizational structures of leadership and representation at national and in the state branches, and clearly defined roles, responsibilities and obligations.

During these first ten years, WIN never received subvention from government and so was able to maintain its independence. It could therefore take actions without compromising since, as the saying goes, 'the person that pays the piper dictates the tune'.

WIN's Publications

As stated earlier, one of the strengths of WIN's strategies, was documentation of research and analysis from a gender perspective. A research theme was chosen each year by consensus and the outcome was published. The first major publication of WIN was the book, *Women in Nigeria Today* (Zed Books, 1985) that came out of the conference that gave birth to WIN.

This inaugural publication was followed by:

Women and education (edited proceedings of the 3rd annual WIN conference) (1992); *Child abuse* (1992); *Women in Nigeria - The first ten years* (1993); *Women in the transition to democracy in Nigerian politics* (edited proceedings of the 8th annual WIN conference held in Kano (1989)); *Women and violence: Breaking The Silence: Women Against Violence* (edited proceedings of the 10th anniversary WIN conference, 1993); *The WIN document: Conditions of women in Nigeria and policy recommendations to 2000 A.D.* (1985, 1992).

These publications became invaluable in the understanding of gender issues in Nigeria. There is no way a collection of persons from different backgrounds, cultures and different experiences could be in serious actions together without conflicts. This would have been unnatural. However, WIN had its in-house policy of conflict resolution, and the principles on which the feminists worked helped in the process of constructive criticism a healthy practice for movement building. WIN succeeded as a training ground for many Nigerian feminists who are still committed in many ways to feminist struggles.

Beyond WIN

A lot has happened since the transformation of WIN from its initial focus and content to the present period when in almost every feminist gathering, questions arise that raise doubts. The Nigerian feminist movement has a forum - Nigerian Feminist Forum (NFF) - which is larger and more coherent than WIN.

The NFF was launched in January 2008 after an incubation period that started with the launching of the African Feminist Forum (AFF) in

Accra, Ghana in 2006. As a chapter of the African feminist Forum, the Nigerian Feminist Forum is bound by the values and principles of the AFF. The NFF has effectively replaced WIN as the Nigerian Feminist Movement, and it has gone beyond the historical stage of isolated country movements to become part of the continental (Pan African) feminist movement. AFF documents clearly state the content, context, values and principles of the present vibrant Nigerian feminist movement. Let me quickly point out that we in the NFF know that there are many self-identified Nigerian feminists within Nigeria and in the Diaspora who are yet to be part of the NFF, which is still very young. Hence NFF is not a closed club nor is it a 'come one, come all' club. We have learned from the past. There are clear guidelines and conditions for becoming a part of the NFF. The secretariat of both the AFF and the NFF are ever ready to furnish potential, interested feminists who wish to be members with information on how to do join.

The information is contained in the Charter of the Feminist Principles for African Feminists clearly states how African and Nigerian feminists alike define themselves, the understanding

Feminism and Patriarchy, our identity as African and Nigerian feminists, our ethics as individual and institutional African and Nigerian feminists, and our understanding of feminist principles of the AFF is binding on all the country level feminist forums including Nigerian Feminist Forum.

From WIN to NFF

WIN's lessons and experiences for the NFF as a new formation include the need for the adoption of basic principles of organization and action. There is also the need to agree on responsibilities as well as structures for coordination and leadership to ensure organised actions and sustainability. This is already being practised in the NFF with a central organizing committee serviced by a joint secretariat of two feminist organizations, both located in Lagos.

Two recent events have tested the strength of NFF. One was the rallying of Nigerian feminists and many other progressive sectors of Nigerian society to put an end to attempts by a private university to *force virginity and HIV testing on Nigerian girls* entering the institution. Another was *the mobilization against a state attempt to ban the use of*

condoms. Nigerian feminists along with various institutions caused the state to annul the policy, thereby putting an end to the matter. The most recent had to do with a proposed federal bill, introduced by the female chairperson of the Nigerian Senate Committee for Women and Youths, to institutionalize a dress-code for women. The NFF, together with several women organizations, put an end to the proposed bill through several press conferences and the weight of Nigerian women's mobilization to fill the hall where the public hearings on the bill took place. There are many other situations that show the resurgence and revitalization of feminist activism in Nigeria.

We celebrate these victories. It is gratifying that this can happen in present primitive neo-colonial Nigeria (and Africa), where laws are imposed by the imperialist 'International Community'; our leaders have kept us in the backyard of that global community to serve as the dustbins or refuse dump for what does not work or what is dangerous to the community of the G8 countries. Our leaders are prepared to sign imperialist conditionalities drafted by the ailing

IMF and the World Bank. These conditionalities for unequal trade agreements and perpetual indebtedness of the developing or retrogressing world where we are located, create and deepen poverty with women bearing the greatest burden imposed by culture and tradition and reinforced by the new forms of imperialist-driven religious evangelism.

To worsen this already bad situation from present-day globalization policies of re-colonisation of Africa (in particular, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, etc.), the United States and the rest of the West have come with poverty alleviation strategies and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to divert our attention from the cruel poverty imposed by their policies and the excruciating challenges women in particular face from the new importation of imperialist style of democracy. Hence, if in spite of these burdens, feminists, the larger women's movement, and our allies have been able to challenge effectively these offshoots of imperialist-directed democracy in our country, we have cause to celebrate - with our eyes open, of course, to see when they try other gimmicks.

This is the present state of the Nigerian feminist movement and its relationship with the larger Nigerian Feminist Movement, an offshoot of the Pan-African Feminist Movement (AFF).

WE FORESEE A SUSTAINED ACTIVE
FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA THAT
WILL PLAY A STRONG ROLE IN THE
AFRICAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND IN
THE GLOBAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT AS A
FORCE TO BE RECOGNIZED AND
RESPECTED.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!