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In the eye of a storm

Olayiwola Adeniji

ONE of the dominant issues of discourse in the world today is gender and the struggle for equal rights for women; a struggle to move the women from the margins to the centre. The popular coinage being women empowerment. Interestingly though it is a struggle endorsed by the United Nations since 1946 with the setting up of a Commission on the status of women with the aim of focusing on the promotion of women's rights in political, economic, social and educational fields. It only began to enjoy real global attention following the end of the United Nations decade for women (1985).

Notwithstanding the many conventions held and ratified by the United Nations in undoing the 1954 convention on the rights of women; the 1981 convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the 1985, Nairobi forwardlooking strategies, many nation states hardly took the issue serious. There was too wide a gap between these declarations and their implementation. It took the Beijing Conference for many governments to realise that this is no issue to be trivialised.

In different parts of Africa, inspite of the often orchestrated cultural inhibitions, not a few women have distinguished themselves in politics, commerce and administration. The story of the struggle for independence will for example be incomplete without the heroic roles of the women who not only picked up the gun when the need arose but also led discussions at national constitutional conferences. But typical of male-dominated societies, very little is heard about these women, many of whom paid the ultimate price in the process.

It is this among others that this book seeks to address. By focusing on Nigerian's aborted 'Third Republic' it provides invaluable information on the role Nigerian women in that hard to be forgotten epoch in the evolution of Nigerian politics. It documents their experiences - the process, the many difficulties and obstacles in the way of the women. In a way, it also magnifies their undaunting spirit to forge ahead.

The book is divided into two sections: the first is centred on *Gender Issues* with contributions from such renowned women activists as Jadesola Akande a professor of Law and former university administrator, Joy Ogwu, Abiodun Idowu, Margaret Vogt, Omowunmi

Clara Osinulu & Nina Mba (Ed.),
NIGERIAN WOMEN IN POLITICS.
1986-1993, Association of Univer-
sity Women Malthouse Press,
Lagos, 1996.

Ogunsola, Adesina Sambo, Ada Okwuosa and Mary Kanu. The second section is a profile on some of the nation's female political gladiators of the era.

The political transition programme of the Babangida administration definitely provides an interesting study because of its numerous conflicts and paradoxes. To the credit of the administration, women for the first time in the history of the nation enjoyed so much prominence with such populist programmes as the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, MAMSER, Centre for Democratic Studies and the Directorate for Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI), women were sensitised to their rights and privileges as citizens. But Nina Mba sees it all as a charade. In the forward to the book she wrote: 'The Babangidas simply used women and tried to hijack the feminist movement in Nigeria.'

Osinulu in the preface decides to go beyond the Babangida regime to contextualise the gender struggle within a historical matrix which shows that the oppression of the Nigerian women has always been in the character of a male dominated Nigerian ruling class.

In highlighting some of those traditional practices, customs and societal norms that help to disempower the woman, she argues that women must recognise these as gender-specific to elicit the appropriate attitudinal response.

Jadesola Akande writes about the legal basis of women's participation in politics. Examining the 1979 constitution and the various electoral laws, she establishes that there is nowhere that any positions are excluded from the reach of women and therefore urges the women to take greater interest in politics. 'It is the duty of women to make deliberate efforts to increase the level of participation of women in politics in all its ramifications, that is, participation in the actual contest for elective offices and actual participation in the voting exercises, so as to ensure that substantial num-

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bers of women folk are elected into leadership positions where they can effectively participate in decision making processes'.

Joy Ogwu in her presentation argues that the issue of gender oppression must be looked at from the view of a synergy of an economic and political points of view. According to her, the most significant obstacle for the woman is basically economic. Women's limited participation in politics, she contends is an expression of their being economically underprivileged.

The impact of government sponsored women's organisations forms the kernel of Abiodun Idowu's contribution in the third chapter.

Margaret Vogt examines the military and women in politics and concludes that the military in Nigeria by its culture and orientation is not used to operating on equal terms with women hence the difficulty of accommodating them in government.

'The military probably without deliberately doing so, has entrenched a system bias against the extensive involvement of women in government, because they themselves have evolved through a strictly sex-segregated world.'

Omowunmi Ogunsola and Adesina Sambo examine in the succeeding two chapters the related issue of women in *Intra party politics* and *Women and the struggle for elective office during the transition period*. Both address the difficulty of the woman politician in making a breakthrough in intra party politics having to run against a structural operation dominated by men which is not too sympathetic to the cause of women.

Sambo concludes: 'the lesson from the experience of women's struggle for political power in the aborted third republic is clearly that the chance of success in elections are contin-

gent upon the effective control of the structures of political parties.'

This, she added, must be aided by the adoption of affirmative action, which is supposed to be a government-initiated advocacy for the special rights of women. Mary Kanu signs off the section with an examination of the role of the media in the campaign for women empowerment. She blames the media for under-reporting women politicians, but also enjoins the women to invest in publicity like their male counterparts.

In the second part, the reader encounters some of the key players in the struggle for women participation in the politics of the Nigerian Third Republic. Quite a revealing profile except that these were silent on the less than complimentary role some of them played even against some of their own. Often times, oppression is made possible only by the complicity of some members of the oppressed class. It is interesting to note that inspite of the many odds against them quite a number of women made significant contribution to the political process.

Some of these women no doubt will serve as an inspiration to others wishing to follow in their steps. But the reader might want to know if Glory Kilanko of Women in Nigeria (WIN) is a politician or pro-democracy activist. She did not belong to either of the two government sponsored parties. She probably would have been more useful in the book as a resource person on the role of women-focussed NGOs. This is a piece of work that goes beyond the usual sloganeering, a well contrived document that should ginger the desired response from both the 'oppressed' and those who serve as their oppressors.

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Write Me From Iowa

James Gibbs

ADMINISTRATOR, novelist, literary stylist, Chukwuemeka Ike's latest offering purports to be transcriptions of twenty-six tapes sent by Ify, a Nigerian writer participating in an international programme for writers in Iowa, to her family in Nigeria. An 'author's Note' indicates that 'The story reflects the actual experience of a Nigerian writer who partici-

**Chukwuemeka Ike,
TO MY HUSBAND
FROM IOWA,
Malthouse press,
Lagos, 1995.**

pated in the International Writing Programme (sic) of the University of Iowa' and points out that 'Ify, who tells the story, is, however, imaginary, as are the other characters.'

The major interest is in the writer's response to America, to chat shows, women priests, party politics, the treatment of American Indians and of writers, to library facilities, super markets, and so on and so forth. Other considerations, for example the persona's Nigerian citizenship and Anglicanism, contribute to individuality. Given the 'Author's Note' and the tenor of the chapters, the

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