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Feminism or Femocracy? State Feminism and Democratisation in Nigeria

Amina Mama*

Résumé: *L'absence d'un mouvement de masse des femmes dans la quasi-totalité des pays africains n'a pas empêché l'inauguration d'une politique du genre par l'intégration de la femme dans le processus du développement. De l'implication de la femme dans les guerres de libération à l'avènement du «syndrome de la première dame», la problématique du genre a déteint sur la lutte des féministes en Afrique. La présente étude analyse ces développements dans le Nigéria postcolonial; son expérience a donné naissance au concept de «femocracy» en lieu et place d'un espace féministe en politique. Pour l'auteur, la «femocracy» n'est pas un phénomène politique viable car elle ne conduit pas à un développement durable du statut politique de la femme.*

Theoretical Introduction

The constitutional and legal status of women, and women's participation in all levels of governance have long been taken as key indicators of the general level of democracy, usually on the basis that, since women constitute a historically oppressed and marginalised group, and at least half of most national populations, their level of political representation and participation is crucial. This is as true of African countries as it has been in Western Europe and North America.

In Africa, national liberation movements called for and relied upon the active participation and support of women at all levels of the anti-colonial struggle. The manner in which women participated has differed from country to country, but all such movements involved women in one way or another. The degree of involvement of women has often been taken as an index of how progressive a movement was, something which has become increasingly important for those seeking to secure the support of the international community over the last decade or so. It is fair to say that the exigencies of engaging in national liberation struggles — which in some cases have involved waging full scale war against occupying forces — required women's active involvement, whether or not the struggle included a commitment to women's liberation. In any case, a great many African women identified national liberation as being in their interests as women, and so participated wholeheartedly, through their own organisations or

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through the movement itself, in the various ways that have been amply documented (Jayawardena 1986, Abdel Kadr 1988, Urdang 1979, 1989), Russell 1989, Organisation of Angolan Women 1984, Mba 1982, Walker 1982, Staunton 1992).

During the postcolonial period, it has increasingly become incumbent upon independent states to display a commitment to improving the status and participation of women. A cynic might be forgiven for suggesting that with independence, African governments have found it expedient to exploit the gender question so as to receive economic aid in an international climate that has become increasingly sympathetic towards women's demands for greater equality. The fact is that despite the virtual absence of a mass-based women's movement in most African countries, the majority of African states have, for one reason or another, begun to profess a gender politics that is usually couched in terms of encouraging women's integration into development. The Women In Development (WID) paradigm, as it has been dubbed, has come under attack from feminist scholars who have rightly pointed out that it assumes women have not been contributing to development, and in so doing, ignores women's work and denies the manifold ways in which development strategies have themselves contributed to women's marginalisation and oppression (Dawn 1988). The actual situation of women and the steps being taken by African governments in the name of increasing women's participation in development vary widely across the region, throwing up interesting questions about the relation between gender politics and democratisation.

In the present era of democratisation, it is both theoretically and politically important to assess the changes in gender politics accompanying the transition away from military and civilian dictatorships, and towards civilian and multiparty forms of government. One may ask for example, whether multi-partyism affords better opportunities for the liberation of women than one-partyism? Or whether civilian regimes necessarily grant greater political space to women than military regimes? What space do transition programs provide for the realisation of women's political ambitions?

Research in the area of women and the state in Africa has so far addressed itself to the effects of the colonial and post colonial state on women, for the most part noting the ways in which both have enhanced male power over women, and the way in which the state has been primarily a vehicle of male elite interests (Parpart and Staudt 1989). Other have highlighted how women have struggled to defend and advance their individual and collective interests under the changing conditions of colonialism and postcolonialism (Mba 1989, Tsikata 1990, Amadiume 1987, Mann 1985). A great many studies have empirically examined the ways in which legislation discriminates against women, the ways in which national

and local development strategies have advanced male interests over women's interests, enhanced male domination in the formal economy as well as in the home, and excluded women from governance. In accordance with all the evidence demonstrating the role of the state in the oppression of women, efforts aimed at improving the situation of women have also targeted the state, for example by calling for legal reforms.

More lately attention has been turned to considering why the state affects women in the ways that have been specified. There is substantial agreement in characterising post-independence African states as patriarchal, but this is variously attributed to the fact that the colonial regimes that they are derived from excluded women, to the nature of pre-colonial African culture, or it is ascribed to the actual processes of state formation. One commentator puts it this way:

Women have neither played a significant part in the creation of the modern state system on the continent, nor have they been able to establish regular channels of access to decision-makers. State policies toward women have, as a result, exhibited varying degrees of discrimination and coercion (Chazan 1989:186).

Given the widely made observation that women played a key role in many of the region's national liberation movements, this appraisal raises a further question: did all the women and women's organisation active in the independence struggles simply opt out of public life once independence was achieved, or were they disenfranchised? Nowadays, even if all states discriminate against women, do women simply allow this to happen, or is there more to the picture than Chazan (1989) suggests? Are postcolonial states a site of gender struggles, and if so, what form do these struggles take? Even if we agree that postcolonial states discriminate against and are coercive towards women, can we still say that women play no significant part in the state? More pertinently, can we say that women have played no significant part in the changes that have recently swept away a number of long-standing dictatorships, and threaten to remove the remaining autocracies?

Whatever the specific role of women in contemporary African states, it is increasingly clear that gender cannot be left out of our analyses. Furthermore, instead of limiting ourselves to considering the impact on and exclusion of women, a more fruitful approach may be to consider the ways in which state formation and state practices are all gendered, and to analyse the involvement of women in these processes and practices.

It seems fair to suggest that now, several decades in to the postcolonial epoch for most African nations, women are likely to have gained in political experience, regardless of whether men have elected to include them in the state or not, especially if the state has continued to be a major perpetrator of sexist discrimination.

Perhaps African women's political maturation has been most visible at international forums. African women not only hosted the Nairobi Conference at the end of the UN Decade (1975-1985), but were highly articulate and active in both the governmental and non-governmental organisations that participated in the Decade. Locally, too, African women have been engaging in political action, both within and outside the state. The African community subsequently pioneered efforts to carry out the Nairobi resolutions. By the end of the decade, several regional structures had been put in place: the African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW) was set up in 1975, designed to be a focal point for women and development activities in the ECA secretariat. The ATRCW was to be supported by the African Regional Coordinating Committee for the Integration of Women in Development (ARCC) and by subregional organs in the five ECA Multinational and Operational Centres (MULPOCs).

By the end of the decade, 51 African countries had set up national machineries with a mandate to promote the full integration of women into development and to eliminate discrimination on grounds of sex. These have taken various forms, the most prominent being the Ministries set up in, for example, Cote d'Ivoire. Others have established women's bureaux, departments or divisions within ministries (Uganda's Ministry for Women and Development, Youth, Sports and Culture), or commissions, committees or councils, such as the Ghanaian National Council for Women and Development set up in 1975. In countries with political parties, the women's wings of the ruling party may have acted as the national women's structure, as Tanzania's *Umoja wa Wanawake* Tanzania, formed in 1962. Finally, in a number of cases, non-governmental organisations have succeeded in acting as the main vehicles for women's development, but in recent years many of these have been eclipsed, or taken over by governments, as was the case with the Sudanese Women's Union. How successful these regional and national structures have been is a subject for debate. It is now clear that international structures can go no further than their component governments in any matter. In order to consider the efficacy of the regional structures for the advancement of women, the situation prevailing within national structures for women must first be known.

In a number of states, individual women have capitalised on the internationally favourable climate and their positions as wives of Heads of State to assume powerful new roles, often arrogating to themselves the right to represent and lead women. The First Lady phenomenon, as it has been dubbed, has reached new levels of prominence, begging a number of questions regarding the democratic character of this form of gender politics, and its likely impact on ordinary African women. The First Lady Syndrome, was conspicuous in the early days of Kenyan independence, and following Siyad Barre's seizure of power in Somalia. The wives of both Heads of

State wielded a great deal of public influence and amassed vast fortunes for themselves. Most recently, African First Ladies have developed organisational proclivities. In Ghana, for example, the government structure — the National Council for Women and Development — has been effectively eclipsed by the 31st December Women's Movement, founded and run by Mrs Nana Agyeman Rawlings, and now far more prominent nationally and internationally than the official structure for women's development.

It is these postcolonial developments in African gender politics that I hope to address by posing the question: feminism or femocracy? Here feminism is defined as being the popular struggle of African women for their liberation from the various forms of oppression they endure. It is counterpoised to the idea of a femocracy — 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, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own. Femocracies exploit the commitments of the international movement for greater gender equality while actually only advancing the interests of a small female elite, and in the long-term undermining women's interests by upholding the patriarchal status quo. In short, femocracy is a feminine autocracy running in parallel to the patriarchal oligarchy upon which it relies for its authority, and which it supports completely. It is worth distinguishing femocracy from the dual-sex system that anthropologists have delineated (Okonjo 1981, Amadiume 1987) for several reasons.¹ The most obvious of these is that in such systems the female political structure is one that owes its authority to women, rather than to the power wielded by one's spouse. Furthermore in the traditional dual system that have been outlined, even male councils were elected or otherwise mandated by the people of the community, rather than having seized power by the gun, or by electoral fraud.

Given that women have succeeded in establishing femocracies in a number of African countries, it is incumbent upon us to ask the question : can a femocracy result in changes in gender relations, or improve the prospects of ordinary women? Can femocracy be democratised ? More

1 Okonjo (1981) puts it this way: In the traditional bisexual system women chose their own leaders to run the affairs of state which were recognised to be in the province of women (1981:102). She further argues that rather than relying on government to appoint women to positions, and therefore by-passing the political machinery, voters in each constituency should elect one person of each sex for seats in the legislature, in order to ensure that distribution by sex would approximate a demographic situation in which about half of the population are women.

generally, can state structures act as vehicles for ordinary women's struggles, or do they only serve the femocracy?

In what follows, a case study of Nigeria is used to address these questions.

Gender Politics of Military vs Civilian Rule

In discussing the Nigerian situation one cannot avoid starting with the militarised character of the Nigerian state. Nigerians have now probably enjoyed more years of military dictatorship than any other African country, with the catastrophic exception of Somalia. The military have ruled for twenty-five of the thirty-five years that have passed since independence, and her seventh set of soldiers are currently in power. With the exception of one assassination, and one hand over (discounting the most recently thwarted transition program), all have been ousted by the same mechanism that brought them to power: by military coup d'état.

At first glance this is easily seen to be a highly patriarchal set-up because of the exclusively male nature of the upper levels of the Nigerian military. Nonetheless, it is worth digressing briefly to point out that military rule is not necessarily exclusively male. Military rule as practised within liberation movements has often advanced the interests of women, encouraging their participation as freedom fighters as well as supporters, as was the case in Zimbabwe's ZANU, Mozambique's Frelimo, the Angolan MPLA and the Eritrean EPLF, to name only a few.

In Nigeria's own history, several women stand out as having been military leaders themselves: women like Amina of Zazzau who led her troops on wars of conquest, or Queen Kambassa of Bonny who is acknowledged to have pioneered the militarisation of the Bonny state (Awe 1992:30-35). In addition to these, highly successful women like Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan were rewarded with high-ranking titles during periods of military rule in nineteenth century Yorubaland (Awe 1992:55). In theory, it would be possible for a military government to include women at the highest level. Nonetheless, today's Nigerian military apparently owes no allegiance to these antecedents, having started out as an all-made colonial force whose primary responsibility was to ensure the subjugation of the population. Elsewhere it has been noted that the British saw the creation of an all-made army as a key step in exercising their hegemony over the societies they sought to dominate (Mies 1986).

Military rule may not necessarily be completely male-dominated, but in Nigeria it does appear to be so. Given that no women have ever ascended to the top echelons of the Nigerian army, it comes as no surprise to find that women have played no significant role in central government during the seven military regimes. Have the few years of civilian rule allowed for greater participation of women in government? Mba (1989) points out that

women appear not to have fared any better under the few years of civilian government. She reminds us that at independence, the Northern Region was so virulently opposed to women being given the vote that only women in the former Southern regions were enfranchised. Nonetheless, men in the former Northern region insisted on being given seats on behalf of the disenfranchised female population as well as themselves in the first House of Assembly. Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, one of the exceptional few northern women activists, was repeatedly harassed and assaulted for participating in politics, and for joining hands with Southern women to campaign for the vote (Mba 1982, Shawalu 1990). Although General Gowon supported the idea of women being given the vote in the 1973 discussions about returning the country to civilian rule (a hand-over which never occurred), Northern men mounted such vocal opposition to this that he found it necessary to backtrack, finally declaring that in the North, only 'educated women' should vote, a move which provoked further outcry, this time from women's organisations. It was not until 1979 that the Obasanjo military regime, backed with all the coercive powers of a dictatorship, was able to introduce universal suffrage for women (Draft Local Government Edict No.189, 1976). As Mba (1989:76) points out, this was probably not due to any particular commitment to women's liberation, but an almost incidental development that occurred during the drafting of the Local Government Electoral Regulations.

In the rest of the country, women threw themselves into politics both before and after independence, generating a history ably documented elsewhere (Mba 1982). Nonetheless few women have been allowed to play any significant part in government. Although this may be partly a result of the military having dominated the state for so long, the fact is that in Nigeria military rule has always involved significant civilian participation, and so could have involved more women, had those in power been of a mind to do so. As it was the first woman commissioner was Flora Nwapa — also Nigeria's first woman novelist — who was appointed in 1970 by the civilian administrator of East Central State during the military government of Yakubu Gowon. She was followed by Dorothy Miller in North Eastern State, Folake Solanke and Ronke Doherty in Oyo State and Kofoworola Pratt in Lagos State (Mba 1989:72).

The Gowon administration (1966-1975) was supplanted by a military coup led by General Murtala Mohammed, who was in turn assassinated within a few months of taking office, to be replaced by General Olusegun Obasanjo, who was to rule from 1976-1979 and to usher in the civilian 2nd Republic. The policies of these regimes were not significantly different from their predecessors in their gender politics, continuing the almost complete exclusion of women from government. None involved women at the federal level, or on any of the major commissions they set up. At state level,

however, it became unofficial policy to appoint one token woman commissioner out of about ten per state, usually to advise on social welfare or education. During the first set of local government elections under Obasanjo, in which women across the country ran as well as voted, six women were elected in the northern states (including Gambo Sawaba in Zaria's Sabon Gari District), eight in Anambra and a handful in Lagos and Oyo states. All in all, the total number of women elected amounted to no more than a minuscule minority of the 299 local government councils.

When it came to electing the highly elitist Constituent Assembly, only one woman, Chief Janet Akinrinade, was elected, perhaps as a result of her status as a powerful businesswoman, while four others were appointed, making the total up to 5 out of 250, that is 2 percent women. The constituent Assembly was to approve the Draft Constitution produced by the Constitution Drafting Committee, a fifty-man body set up in 1975, with not a single woman on it. Little wonder then, that the Draft Constitution too had no provisions for women. This was challenged by one of the four women on the Constituent Assembly, Abigail Ukpabi, who was supported by other women members, a vocal few thus succeeding in passing a historically significant amendment to the Constitution, outlawing sexual discrimination in customary or Islamic law for the first time in Nigerian history:

a citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not by reason only that he is such a person be subjected either expressly by or in the political application of any law force in Nigeria (Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Official Report, Vol. III:2334-2343).

When the ban on political associations was lifted on September 21, 1978, a few women rushed to announce their political intentions as eagerly as the men (Mba 1989:79-82). Since political associations were subject to the requirement that they not be formed on the basis of ethnicity, religion or sex, women soon discovered that they had best operate under the auspices of the national political parties which emerged. Here they did not fare very well, since women's wings largely confined their activities to registering women voters and campaigning and dancing for their parties. Amongst Northern women politicians, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba and Hajiya Laila Dogonyaro stood out, as did the rivalry between them. Gambo Sawaba joined the Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP), while Laila Dogonyaro ran on the ticket of the Conservative National Party of Nigeria which eventually won the elections. Bola Ogumbo achieved the highest position of any woman when she was selected as running mate to the late Aminu Kano, presidential candidate of the radical People's Redemption Party. Nonetheless a great many women were active in party politics, more visibly so at local and state levels. Shettima (undated) points out that of the five parties registered for the 1979 elections, only two had particular provisions for

women: the GNPP manifesto proclaimed that they would make it compulsory for employers with more than twenty women employees to have childcare centres at their places of work, and the NPN declared that it was:

...committed to the development of our womenfolk on an identical base with menfolk to enable them to realise the innate qualities in themselves. Our womenfolk will be actively encouraged by the NPN to come forward and play a full part in public life (Shettima undated:1).²

When the Second Republic (1979-1983) came into being, led by President Shehu Shagari, a northern former schoolmaster, the record continued to be poor. At federal level there were three women Ministers: of National Planning (Mrs Oyegbola), Education (Mrs Ivase) and International Affairs (Chief Akinrinade). Despite these first steps, the power houses retained a scornful attitude: the Speaker of the House of Representatives declared that women were not fit to head committees. In any case, very few been elected to the decision-making bodies: 17 women contested for the 450 member House of Representatives and only 3 won, whereas of the 5 women who had contested for the 95 member senate, only 1 won.

Regrettably, we cannot conclude on the basis of this track record that Nigeria's civilian regimes have adopted a significantly more favourable position than the military with regard to involving women in public life. However, the poor civilian track record cannot be taken as indicating that Nigeria's military rulers have been more democratic. Elections, albeit first at local government level and under military rule, and later to the Constituent Assembly, the House of Representatives and the Senate offered a democratic space in which women could participate. Given time and experience, the fortunes of women at the polls could only have improved. This was not to be so.

The return of the military through the 1983 coup d'état led by Generals Buhari and Idiagbon, saw women once again excluded from federal levels of government. As usual, no women sat on the Supreme Military Council. There were no women Ministers, and there were no women in the senior ranks of the increasingly powerful National Security Organisation (NSO). The civil service, a channel through which women could hope to ascend to decision-making levels of government, was severely weakened under the regime. It is in this context, and in the light of the generally coercive and repressive character of the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, that the existence of

2 Such statements are open to interpretation, but curiously, the professedly more radical parties, the PRP and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) had no provisions on women at all. One could be forgiven for identifying this silence with the habitual reluctance of left wing men to acknowledge the importance of gender in any liberation movement (Hutchful 1994).

three women permanent secretaries, and General Buhari's proclamation that there should be one woman commissioner in each of the nineteen states must be viewed. The same regime launched the notorious War Against Indiscipline (WAI) which effectively licensed all manner of harassment, including the specific humiliations visited upon women. Women working as petty traders and single women were singled out to be accused of 'indiscipline' and 'moral laxity', while working mothers were blamed for delinquency and the wives of civil servants and military officers held responsible for corruption. Regional variations in gender politics have continued to persist, but extremely misogynistic values and actions have continued to be tolerated across the society. During this period the military governor of Kano State issued an edict banning single women, an action which led to a spate of marriages of convenience and mass evictions by local landlords refusing to accommodate unmarried women any longer. Women in Sokoto State have been repeatedly charged with immorality and subjected to punitive measures, while more generally, the practice of female seclusion has been increasing rather than decreasing, with more complete forms of veiling appearing for the first time. In Lagos State, market women and street hawkers came in for regular harassment, limited only by the existence of strong market women's organisations.

Ousted in 1985 by a 'coup to end all coups' led by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the Buhari-Idiagbon regime will not go down in history for its progressive gender politics.

With the Babangida regime, the steady picture of military and civilian exclusion of women from all levels of government alters somewhat. At first glance, little appears to have changed. There were no women on the new Armed Forces Ruling Council, or at ministerial level, although the practice of appointing women as commissioners continued. There were no female state governors. At the local level however, a proclamation was issued to the effect that one in four local government councillors should be women. Disappointingly, when local government elections were held in 1987, only two out of 301 women were elected as chairs of local government, actually a decline on previous local government elections. This can be interpreted as indicating a setback in the electorate's gender politics, possibly the result of the high levels of contempt for women generated during the War Against Indiscipline.

Many of the subsequent activities of the Babangida regime fall under the program purportedly designed to effect a transition to civilian rule. Here we see that two women were included in the Political Bureau, one of whom was Mrs Adefarasin in her capacity as Head of the National Council of Women's Societies. That these women were tokenistic, and the Bureau was itself weak, is affirmed by the fact that the Armed Forces Ruling Council chose to ignore the modest recommendation that women be allocated a mere 5

percent of the legislative seats in all three tiers of government. The reason given was this: that since the government believed in equality of the sexes no affirmative action would be necessary to ensure women's participation (Shettima, undated). Women In Nigeria (WIN), a radical organisation constitutionally committed to the elimination of the gender and class inequalities in Nigerian society, was one of the organisations the Political Bureau commissioned to hold consultative workshops and make recommendations. In response to the demands of secluded northern women in particular, WIN called for 50 percent representation of women on the basis that women constitute half of the population (WIN 1989:3), and for social and economic recognition of women's domestic and reproductive labour. WIN also called for an amendment to the 1979 constitution to enable women to confer privileges and rights on their husbands and children; an amendment directed at section 24 (2) which allows men, but not women, to confer citizenship on their spouses and children (WIN 1989).

Yet Babangida's regime is likely to go down in history as one in which women gained prominence. This was not because it had radical gender politics, but because his wife engaged in highly publicised activities, and ordered other wives of the military oligarchy to replicate her example. Mrs Babangida's impact on the body politic ought to be assessed against the extreme marginalisation of women in the Nigerian state and national politics under both military and civilian regimes, which I have documented in the preceding pages.

Emergence of Femocracy

Mrs Maryam Babangida was not an activist of any kind until her husband's seizure of power in 1985. After attending primary school in Asaba and secondary school at a convent in Kaduna, Miss King as she was then called, gained secretarial qualifications in Nigeria and the USA and met her husband, the then Captain Babangida in 1965. Four years later they were married, and she converted and renamed Maryam continuing her career as a housewife for the fourteen years that followed. In 1983, when her husband became the Chief of Army Staff, she too benefited by becoming President of the Nigerian Army Officers Wives Association, as the custom ordained (*New Life* 4, 1990:8). It was in this capacity that she first began to see herself as a leader.

When she accompanied her husband into State House as wife of the Head of State after the successful coup, Maryam Babangida embarked on a short career which was to mark the emergence of a new phase in the history of Nigerian First Ladies: she opened an office of her own and by astutely wielding her influence, she soon became a prominent figure in public life. A brief look at her predecessors indicates how different her approach to her position as wife of the Head of State was.

General Buhari's wife, Hajiya Sefinatu Buhari was courted by her husband from the age of fourteen, married at eighteen and remained a shy and retiring woman committed to a conservative reading of Islam. Hajiya Hadiza Dawaiya, as the most senior of the four women married to President Shehu Shagari, assumed the position of First Lady when her husband became President, but remained out of the public eye. General Obasanjo was not known to have a wife while in office, and Mrs Ajoke Murtala Muhammed was not in place long enough to wield much influence as a result of the brevity of her husband's rule. Mrs Victoria Gowon married her husband during the civil war. Although their wedding was a prominent social event, and Mrs Gowon became known for accompanying her husband on his tours and generally being supportive, her input was unremarkable, being largely in accord with conventional notions of a good wife. Mrs Victoria Nwanyiocha Aguiyi-Ironsi was similarly unremarkable. During the first Republic, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa's wives were kept in full-time seclusion, and none of them ever accompanied him on his duties, or performed any public function.³ It is therefore in comparison to her recent predecessors that Maryam Babangida features so prominently.

Mrs Maryam Babangida, already a powerful public figure grew increasingly prominent through the Better Life for Rural Women Program (BLP) which she launched in 1987. Initially under the auspices of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), BLP was launched at a workshop on rural women held on September 13-16, 1987, in Abuja. The idea of focusing on rural women was not new. Long before BLP, WIN, in describing rural women as the backbone of the nation's food production and the most exploited section of Nigeria society, had emphasised the importance of rural women in the WIN Document (WIN 1985). Internationally too, the plight of rural women had attracted the sympathy and aid of donor organisations as well as the support of an international women's movement seeking to include and articulate the concerns of the most exploited groups of women in the so-called Third World (e.g. Dawn 1988). More locally, other sources credit Professor Ogundipe-Leslie with the idea of focusing on rural women during her

3 Mrs Flora Azikwe, wife of the first Nigerian Governor-General, who was installed prior to independence, was perhaps the most active and progressive of the lot. She not only hosted the wives of other heads of state and accompanied her husband on numerous tours and duties, but also saw women as having important roles to play in national development and campaigned tirelessly for women's education at school, college and university levels, at a time when she was one of the very few women with university education. She also supported a number of charitable causes and was widely respected both at home and abroad for her grace, dignity and her love of traditional fabrics and attire.

mysteriously brief tenure in the Presidency during which she worked for the Directorate of Social Mobilisation (*African Guardian* 16.11.92:24).

Whatever the source, rural women became the professed target of the Nigerian First Lady's program. BLP soon evolved beyond DFRRRI. Following the Abuja seminar, attended by the wife of the Chief of General Staff, Mrs Rebecca Aikhomu, the wives of all the military state governors were called upon to set up Better Life committees in each state. They were instructed to familiarise themselves with rural women's problems and link them with the appropriate government agencies and to initiate and monitor programs. Governors wives were to encourage rural women to "become more active and useful to themselves, their families and their environment at large" and the method of doing this involved training and income generating (*Daily Times* Special Publication 1990, Tongo 1990:10). It was therefore through military governors' wives, who automatically became the Chairpersons of the state level BLP committees, that Mrs Babangida sought to implement the goal of 'mobilising rural women for development'.

In addition to the Chairperson, each state was to have a co-ordinator/director-general to head an office in the state level DFRRRI offices, and an advisory board comprising whichever women were commissioners, director generals, heads of parastatals, High Court judges or deputy general managers. There was also to be a committee in every state, comprising all the above and representatives of existing women's organisations. Each state committee was instructed to form seven implementation sub-committees, and it was these that were to advise, organise and mobilise rural women wherever they deemed it necessary (Tongo 1990:9-10).

The second high-profile event took place a year after the launching. The first Better Life Fair was held in Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos in September 1988. Here women from women's organisations and many of the rural co-operatives that had been formed were bussed in to central Lagos to exhibit their products. Attended by the Head of State as well as the wives of the military elite, and a good many other eminent women as well, it was a highly publicised jamboree. At the end of it all, the Federal Government announced that it would set up a National Commission on Women and Development. This was something that had been lobbied for by women's organisations over a great many years, but which was now established by a military decree (No. 30) 'in recognition of the commitment of (the) government to the ideals of Better Life for Rural Women Program' (Tongo 1990). The National Commission on Women and Development (NCW) was thus irrevocably linked to the First Lady and the BLP, conceptually as well as structurally, a point returned to below.

The second BLP fair was held on march 12-19th 1990 in the new national capital, Abuja, and focused on 'Food Processing and Preservation',

as though to underline women's traditional role as nurturers and providers of food. During the launching of this jamboree, an award ceremony to install Mrs Babangida as 1989 'Woman of the Year', chosen by the Government's National newspaper, was held. In fact the New Nigerian Woman of the Year Award was initiated with Mrs Babangida, and became a much less prominent affair thereafter.

Impact on the Nation's Gender Politics

The endless parades of the over-dressed wives of the military across the pages of the newspapers and the nations' television screens soon began to provoke criticism from several quarters. Since neither the First Lady nor any of the state BLP branches had any Federal or State budgetary allocation, no satisfactory answers were given when questions were raised about the sources of the monies being spent. Between 1989 and 1991, Gani Fawehinmi, the renowned lawyer filed several lawsuits, protesting that since the First Lady had no constitutional position, she had no right of access to the nation's treasury. None of these suits were successful, but Chief-Dr-Mrs Maryam Babangida, as she was known, declared that BLP had been 'self-financing', and continued to be unaccountable. The second BLP fair involved air travel and five-star hotel accommodation for governors wives, their advisory committees, their implementation sub-committees and the invited rural women — from all 21 states. In addition to all these expenses, all the governors wives took out full-page newspaper advertisements to congratulate Mrs Babangida on being chosen as 'Woman of the Year', again at public expense. As if this were not enough, the same set of governors wives took turns congratulating her during the peak hour of national television news broadcasting throughout the week of the fair (Tongo 1990).

Still on the financial front, there were accusations (and there are witness to the fact) that public funds had been used to purchase items for display at the fair, where no such items had been produced by rural women. In some areas rural women complained that the BLP committees had seized their goods without paying for them, and did not return them after the fair. Others protested that the 'credit facilities' extended to them by BLP consisted of loans which charged exploitatively high interest rates (Tongo 1990). Other rural women complained that machinery had broken down and was not being maintained, or that it had been run by men rather by the women themselves.

In 1992, the Central Bank of Nigeria reported that BLP projects had cost 400 million naira over the first 5 years, a figure which did not include staff salaries, vehicles or other overheads (*African Guardian* 16.11.92:21).

The absence of systematic monitoring makes it hard to assess what the concrete achievements of the BLP have been. Because of the unaccountability of the First Lady, no annual reports were ever written.

Nonetheless, many claims were made. Tongo (1990) reports the establishment of skills training in weaving and soap-making, pottery, palm fruit processing, yoghurt making, gari-processing, the establishment of rural markets and small-scale industries in several states. Otu (1990) credits BLP with enabling women across the nation 'to go into lucrative businesses', and lists farming, animal husbandry, cottage industries and cooperative societies. It is worth pointing out that these are all activities which Nigerian rural women engaged in long before BLP came along. The increased availability of loans and equipment, and the establishment of many cooperative societies since the advent of BLP are also listed as major achievements.⁴

After five years of BLP the claims were even grander: 10,000 cooperatives, 1,793 cottage industries, 2,397 farms, 470 multi-purpose women's centres and 233 health centres were accredited to the First Lady's program by the end of 1992 (*Newswatch* 2.11.92). A world press conference was called to laud the success of the BLP, commemorative stamps were issued and a specially commissioned film entitled 'Legacy' was screened to the same end. A medley of full page media advertisements once again congratulated the First Lady on her achievements.

In the absence of good empirical evidence, one can be forgiven for being skeptical. Rural women seem to be as industrious as they have always been, while poverty continues to be endemic. The dramatic decline in urban as well as rural living standards and the worsening security situation nationally has resulted in greater reliance on rural areas, and there is evidence to suggest that worsening conditions have encouraged people to return to their villages of origin.

Of more analytic interest is the management style of the BLP. This was run on military lines, with the First Lady issuing orders from State House. With no avenue for feedback, discussion or internal criticism, the program was not set up in a way that allowed it to respond to any needs that rural women may themselves have identified (Tongo 1990). The low visibility of rural women further suggested that they were not involved in decision-making or direction of the program, however much they may have embraced the BLP and throw their enthusiasm behind it. Although governor's wives were ordered to travel to the rural areas and familiarise themselves with the plight of rural women, and some consultative workshops were staged, the real authority and direction of the BLP rested

4 For example, Kaduna state the number of cooperative is said to have increased from 20 in 1986 to 300 in 1990. For other states it is asserted that in 1990 there were 300 cooperatives in Bauchi, 480 in Bendel and 162 in Imo, but we are not informed as to whether these were formed in response to BLP, or whether these were women's co-operatives or not (Otu 1990).

with the First Lady herself. It cannot therefore be described as democratic in any real sense of the term. 'Rural women' were the targets but not the decision-makers, and their interests had already been decided.

On closer examination of the pronouncements made in the course of the BLP, we can see that Mrs Babangida assumes the interests of rural women to coincide with national interests, as these have already been defined by a state which has consistently excluded women from decision-making. The fact that different social groups may have very different perspectives on just what the national interest might be, or that women's exploitation has never been addressed in national development planning is not recognised. Instead rural women are portrayed as a passive and under-utilised community who can be mobilised to do more productive work by elite women, for the betterment of their communities. The irony of this is that whereas elite women are almost by definition unproductive, even at the household level, it has long been established that rural women are already the most hard-working sector of the population: the problem is that their work is undervalued and under-remunerated (WIN 1985). Changing this fact is likely to require a great deal more than the authority and wealth of the First Lady.

There were also other events that need to be considered in appraising the democratic and feminist potentials of this style of gender politics. The BLP was not only high profile and expensive. It was also extremely conservative. On no occasion did Mrs Babangida give a public address without distancing herself from any kind of 'women's lib' or feminism, by stressing that the first duties of women are the traditional ones of wifedom and motherhood. Her conservatism is further attested to by the way in which traditional rulers across the land, better known for obstructing efforts to educate and uplift women, rewarded Mrs Babangida with titles. In December 1991, the University of Nsukka conferred an honorary doctorate on the Presidents wife, who rewarded the University Administration by delivering a badly-needed donation of 7.5 million naira to this poverty-stricken and crumbling edifice of higher learning. Later that year she was also awarded doctorates by the equally impoverished universities of Ogun, Port Harcourt and Ogbomosho.

In September 1992 Mrs Babangida, perhaps stung by Gani Fawehinmi's law suits, attended a policy briefing of the elected Senators and called on them to make the post of the First Lady constitutional, stating that this would be: 'One of the most functional symbolisms of the truly liberal political system in the Third Republic' (*The Guardian* 12.9.92). In other words, advancing her in this way would be a good way of appearing liberal. In the course of her address she emphasised her respect for women's traditional roles, pointing to her literary debut 'On the Home Front' as evidence. Her call was not supported by the only woman out of the

ninety-one senators-elect, Mrs Kofo Bucknor Akerele (*National Concord* 22-9-92). Perhaps this manoeuvre is best seen as one of several of Mrs Babangida's attempts to institutionalise and consolidate her position. The second involved the National Commission for Women (NCW), and here we shall see that she was a little more successful.

Institutionalising the Femocracy

In 1990, the National Commission for Women, decreed into being by the Federal Government at the end of the 1989 BLP Fair in Lagos, was inaugurated. A nominally independent NCW Board was appointed and headed by Professor Awe, a widely respected women's rights campaigner and academic. One of the first matters the new structure sought to address was the BLP, which the board assumed would come under the auspices of the NCW, now the legitimate governmental body for all women's affairs. The NCW board conducted a tour of BLP programs, concluding that 'the program did not have the sort of structure that would enable it to permeate down to the grass-roots and to cover a wide area' (*Newswatch* 2.11.92). On the basis of their findings, plans were made to strengthen the administrative structure. These plans were never carried out, for reasons that become apparent below.

That there were likely to be stresses between the BLP and the NCW became evident when the state level NCW offices were set up. There were now parallel structures across the Federation: BLP offices answerable to the First Lady, and NCW offices answerable to the Chairperson, and both ultimately answerable to the Head of State. Relationships between the NCW leadership and State House appear to have reached a climax in July 1992 when the organisers of a seminar on women's development at which Professor Awe was to deliver the keynote address, were suddenly arrested. When Professor Awe went to request their release, she too was detained and subjected to humiliating interrogation by members of the state security services. A delegation of highly respected women in Abuja for the same seminar failed to persuade the First Lady to have them released. It was only when President Babangida sent his own personal assistant to the police station that Mrs Awe was freed and allowed to be driven back to her hotel (*African Guardian* 16.11.92). Matters did not end there.

The following month, in August 1992, Decree 42 was issued by the President, repealing Decree 30 under which the NCW had been constituted. It was now to be restructured so that it would henceforth be headed by the wife of the President, with an appointed Director-General reporting directly to her. Professor Awe's resignation was tendered thereafter, the reason given being that she was 'unable to carry out the objectives for which the commission was set up', a statement which did little to quell widespread speculation that she was forced out by the First Lady (*African Guardian*

19.11.92). In any case the entire board of the NCW was dissolved by the Federal Government only a month later (*Democrat* 18.9.92). Only now that the whole NCW was controlled by the President's wife did the BLP offices move from State House to become a department within it.

In view of this history, it is not surprising that there were⁴ those who felt that it was simply a front for her continued access to the treasury and the growing personality cult she had established for herself. In fact BLP was the only operational department, although a Child Welfare Department was also to be formed — or rather, moved from the Ministry of Social Welfare. In addition to these two operational departments there is a Research and Planning Department and two departments concerned with the bureaucratic servicing of the NCW itself — finance and personnel.⁵

The NCW was not the only structure for women established during Mrs Babangida's tenure as First Lady, and dominated by her. In November 1989, the Federal Government laid the foundation stone for a multi-million naira Centre for Women and Development. At the launching, President Babangida commended the BLP and 30 million naira was collected on the spot. Donations came from the Ministry of External Affairs (50,000 US dollars), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (3 million naira), Ministry of Works and Housing (2 million naira) and the Chief of General Staff's Office (100,000 naira). The President then announced that the Federal Government would provide whatever else was necessary (*African Guardian* 16.11.92). State Governor's wives proceeded to hold similar high-profile fund-raising events for women's centres in their various states.

The Centre was completed in record time and must be the largest women's centre in Africa, if not the world, comprising a conference hall, a library, a shopping complex, a bukateria (restaurant), an exhibition hall, an administrative complex, hotel and multi-story car parks. The main exhibition running continuously is the 'Hall of Fame', dominated by portraits of the First Lady and glass cases filled with local and international awards won by her. It comes as no surprise that after a meeting between Mrs Babangida and selected 'women leaders', it was decided to name the centre after her, so it became known as the Maryam Babangida Centre for Women and Development.

5 Apart from the national offices in Abuja, each state was to establish a Directorate of Women's Affairs, but no mention of any of these is included in the available annual report of the NCW, or in either of its new publications (*The Nigerian Woman and Partners in Development*, the Commission's Newsletter). The relationship between the state level BLP and NCW structures has remained unclear, although merging (or perhaps more accurately, the engulfment of one by the other) seems to be the most likely consequence of the First Lady heading both NCW and BLP.

Prospects for Women and Democracy

From the above discussion of the evidence it would seem clear that Nigeria has seen the emergence of a femocracy, rather than the development of a women's movement, or the creation of a feminist space in Nigerian politics. Given this state of affairs, it is worth considering the impact of Mrs Babangida's femocracy on the position of women in Nigeria, and whether the BLP, the NCW and the Maryam Babangida Centre, all established during the Babangida regime, can be described as creating any democratic space for women. A further question which remains, now that the Babangidas have been obliged to leave the Presidency, is whether the femocracy can be transformed into a viable machinery through which the aspirations of women from all the different sections of Nigerian society can be articulated and realised: can it be converted from a femocracy into a feminist movement?

One way of assessing this is to consider whether the political status of women was improved by the high profile activities of the First Lady and the governors' wives who clearly gained some influence by being plunged into the media limelight. The establishment of the BLP, the NCW and the Maryam Babangida Centre for Women and Development, combined with the frequent appearance of the wives of the military in the mass media clearly planted women firmly in the eyes of the public.

When it came to women's position in governance, there were also a series of women appointed to high offices for the first time by President Babangida. Professor Grace Alele Williams became the first ever woman to be appointed as a University Vice Chancellor, and two state governors were persuaded to have women as deputies: Mrs Celia Ekpenyong in Cross River and Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu in Lagos. Five women were appointed Directors-General at Federal level (including Hajiya Aisha Ismail at the NCW). Several other women were appointed to high offices in parastatals (PID September 1992). In the structures purportedly designed to effect the transition to civilian rule, only one woman was appointed to the National Electoral Commission; and we have already noted that the Federal Government rejected the recommendations of its own Political Bureau regarding women.

When it came to the political parties and the local and gubernatorial elections, not to mention the cancelled presidential primaries, we see that neither the electorate nor the political class has been significantly transformed. In descending order, only one woman was elected to the 91-member senate, none were elected as state governors, and only 13 women were elected to the National House Assembly (8 for the Social Democratic party and 5 for the National Republican Convention). Women appear to have fared only slightly better in the state level assemblies: only 27 women were elected out of 1172 seats nation-wide, leaving 14 of the 30

states with no female representation in the legislature at all. Nor have women made significant inroads into local government councils.

Senator Bucknor-Akerele's motion for there to be a Women's committee to liaise with the NCW and other women's organisations was thrown out by the Senate in June 1993. Interestingly enough, one of the reasons male senators gave for rejecting this proposal was that it would provide another conduit for the BLP and the First Lady (*The Guardian* 19.6.93). This suggests that women are being subjected to something of a backlash, with male reaction to the power wielded by the President's wife obstructing women's political participation. Even more disturbingly, women members in the House of Assembly are reported to have been harassed with insults and cat-calls whenever they tried to speak (*The Guardian* 19.6.93). All of this suggests that women, rural or urban, were going to continue to be grossly marginalised in the Third Republic.

One thing that has changed is that wives of party leaders and presidential candidates are now expected to be in the public eye, so that the non-appearance of Bashir Tofa's wife (or wives?) was criticised by a national media now accustomed to parades of first aspirant first ladies. Abiola and Kingibe's wives were given prominent coverage whenever they appeared on the campaign trail. Since both the SDP leaders are polygamous, this meant that they were able to dispatch different wives to campaign in the different parts of the country from which they originate (*National Concord* 13.6.93). Another is that, in contrast to the Second Republic politicians, both parties found it incumbent upon them to issue statements about their plans, for women, with Abiola promising at least 4 women Ministers, and Tofa pledging 'appropriate' numbers of female appointments and pledging support for ending discriminatory laws.

We can conclude from this evidence that femocracy has affected the gender politics of the nation, but not in the way that one might have hoped. It cannot be said to have enhanced gender equality or to have in any way challenged conservative attitudes to women. Instead 8 years of femocracy has generated promises to appoint token women, and made the parading of expensively attired wives into a political tradition. Absent from the political discourse is any discussion of more fundamental change. In the event of a transition to civilian rule, Nigerian women are therefore faced with the prospect of becoming media adjuncts to their spouses political campaigns, rather than making a more successful entry into politics.

Women's commitment to democratisation has been much in evidence in the months following the return of the military under General Sani Abacha. When the Presidential election results were not released in June 1993, women joined men in taking to the streets and calling for the military to hand over power. Women were amongst those shot and harassed in the repression that followed. With the dissolution of all elected structures and

the replacement of an all-male interim government by another all-male military regime, the prospects for democracy and for women's participation in future governments are bleak. Even the femocracy is no longer in evidence with the departure of Mrs Babangida, because the current first lady, Mrs Sani Abacha, has so far remained inconspicuous. This cannot be deemed to be a great loss because if women's voice in politics is to rely on the personality of the First Lady, the prospects for women having any democratic space are poor, regardless of whether we are under civilian or military administration.

All this leads us to conclude that femocracy is not a viable political phenomenon, and that it does not lead to any sustainable change in women's political status, or to any enduring improvement in the lives of ordinary women. Nor can it be successfully transformed to create a democratic space for women, when the democratisation of the whole society has been set back by a further extension of military rule. The longer term achievements of Mrs Babangida's femocracy were limited to creating more media space for the wives of the ruling elite, and mobilising ruling class women's support for the most populist of the various totalitarian regimes that have ruled Nigeria. Almost as a side effect we have also seen the Federal Government establish several state structures whose democratic potential cannot yet be ascertained. Whatever potential there is within them is unlikely to be realised under continued military rule. Nor is it likely to emerge as long as structures for women remain under control of the President's wife, or the wives of other soldiers and politicians; women who have no mandate in their own right, and who derive their influence solely from that of their spouses.

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