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## Women Professional Associations: A Response to Gender Inequality Between the Private and Public spheres

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Men and women across racial and class divides have disparaged women's organisations at various times and places (Abdullah 1995; and Molyneux 1998). The literature is replete with the tendency to categorize and label women groups and as 'elitist, middle-class, academic' (Reddock 1991:19). Other descriptions have included 'militant', 'short term', and 'propagandist'. But a critical look at such categorization suggests that the rapidity in condemnation can be traced to an inadequate examination of women's organisations. Moreover, as Reddock (1991) opines, it is necessary for gender scholars to study all organisations, to find out who joins them and why such groups continue to be popular. This is even more important for this researcher, as there is little reference to women's participation in worker's organisations (Sokunbi et al. 1995) and especially little reference in existing literature to their involvement in professional associations. Despite the waves of new social movements (NSMs) in Western Europe, North America, Latin America and Africa, which include ecological associations, women's movements and indigenous movements that are independent of trade unions and political parties, reports on women's movements say little about women's participation in professional associations, or about the emergence of women's professional associations and their impact on a changing world. In Africa, Reddock (1991) notes that studies on women's movements and organisations have focused on the general areas of anti-colonial struggles (Van Allen 1972; Ifeka-Moller

1975; Rogers 1980; Mba 1982), nationalist movements and struggles (Denzer 1976), national liberation movements (Urdang 1979; Bie Nio Ong 1986); traditional women's associations (Amadiume 1987a, 1987b, 1990), and contemporary women's organisations (Ekejiuba 1985 and Amadiume 1990). The silence on women's professional associations calls for remedy, especially as their popularity seems likely to continue.

This paper focuses on women's professional associations in Nigeria. It examines the impact of these women's associations and highlights their relevance to the general quest for gender equality in the public and private spheres. The study investigates the various efforts that have helped to change the status and raise the profile of Nigerian women and improve the atmosphere in which they live. It places the efforts by Nigerian women within the context of three feminist theories: Liberal, Marxist and Radical Feminism. Among other things, it questions why women in Nigeria, still continue to face the old problems within both the public and the private spheres of activity, and thus undermining modern developments which have helped to advance equality between men and women. It tries to answer the questions why they experience discrimination in the work place, why they have to carry undue burdens as career women, wives and mothers, why they are constantly harassed by male colleagues, and exploited by their husbands, undermined by clients and subordinates, and intimidated by government policies. It is clear that educated women in Nigeria have to bear different burdens from those carried by uneducated women. Anand (1983) notes that education is the golden door to success and the equal participation of women in the development process. So how far educated Nigerian women (especially women professionals: lawyers, doctors, accountants, journalists, health-care workers, military professionals, academics, social workers and bureaucrats) have been able to negotiate higher standards and equal rights for themselves and for women in general in public and private spheres of activity.

The research for this paper was carried out between August 1998 and January 1999. Historical and survey research methods were used. They included documentary sources (institutional records, bulletins, official records, books, articles in journals, diaries and newspaper reports) and both structured and unstructured personal interviews. I adopted a quota sampling method for the interviews, as I could not interview all the leaders of existing women's professional associations and their parent associations. Interviews were conducted both formally and informally. Appointments for interview were booked with some members of the aforementioned associations, but informal interviews were also conducted at various seminars and workshops in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja, where some significant members of women's professional associations were found.

### **Gender Inequality in Nigeria: An overview**

Research on gender indicates that women the world over suffer wide range of discriminatory practices in the cultural political, religious and social spheres (Ifeka-Moller 1975; Obbo 1980; Elshtain 1981; Ogunshye 1982; Imam 1989; Abdullah 1991; Meena 1992; Kerr 1993; Alamu 1997; and Imam et al. 1997). From the perspective of some of these authors, women's lives and their status are primarily conditioned by culture. Women are usually regarded as inferior to men. They get less pay for the same work, and in some cases, they are treated far worse. Ogunshola Bandele (1996), citing Sartin (1978) and Sherma and Meighan (1980), observes that in Europe, the division of sex (gender) roles in the labour market is partly due to cultural assumptions about men's and women's work and their capabilities. In Africa, the situation is more glaring with the pressures of time-honoured traditional practices and vestiges of the colonial experience. These are the two 'monsters' that have placed women in subordinate roles in the public and private spheres of activity. Gender roles in Africa have always favoured men, partly because African society is patriarchal (even in matriarchal African societies, men still wield state power) and also because the sovereignty inherited by Africans from their colonial masters was not a liberal one. It was based on the use of force, which was typical of colonial rule and power. The male was seen as forceful, militant, authoritative and therefore, capable of ruling, while the female was seen as weak, passive and submissive, and thus only fit for being ruled. According to Rathgeber (1992), these antiquated notions about gender roles were entrenched during the colonial period. The distinction between the 'powerful' male and the 'powerless' female relates to what Steihn (1983) calls the ideological relations between male 'protectors' and female 'protected', and explains the continued subjugation of women by men.

Over time, women have been the victims of a threefold oppression: class, religion and gender (Ifeka-Moller 1975; Abdullah 1995; Imam 1991; Issa 1995 and Alamu 1997). They have had to struggle to win concessions from the patriarchal world in which they lived. The ideology of patriarchy dominates most societies, whether patrilineal or matrilineal. Patriarchy is defined as belief in the natural superiority of the male gender, which sufficiently justifies the dominance of the male sex. Everything in society is defined in relation to male interests, needs and concerns (WIN 1985). This is the prevailing ideology in Nigeria.

In traditional Nigerian societies, women were largely confined to domestic activities, such as taking care of children, the aged, the sick and other domestic chores (Onaeko 1995). As caregivers, they attended to the needs of their spouses and their relations. They were confined within the 'shut' private sphere. Although they were sometimes involved in farming and other communal activities, their inputs were usually undervalued. Ajayi Obe (1984), Imam (1985), Okonjo (1991) and Dennis (1998) illustrate how women's labour and their rights were and continue to be exploited within the agricultural and household economy

in traditional African societies. Male farmers usually secured the necessary labour for externally funded agricultural projects from their wives, while the latter still had to perform all their household and domestic tasks as well. The most appalling aspect of these male-female relations was that the yield of such agricultural projects was assimilated into the male economy. Another issue was that women hardly had any access to land. Studies show that they cleared and harvested the land, weeded and transplanted crops, while the men prepared the land for planting (Bohanna 1954; Fapounda 1983; WIN 1985). They were still marginalized over access to land (Schapera 1943; Mathuba 1980; Ajayi-Obe 1984; Perchonok 1985; Marope 1996; and Mbanefo and Nyemuto Roberts 1996). Women had access to land only through their spouses and or their male relatives (ILO 1989). This practice stemmed from the fact that in the various cultures in Nigeria, women were hardly accorded any recognition. A woman was usually (and arguably still is) only recognised as the daughter of a lineage, the wife of a man, or the mother of a child (Aig-Imoukhuede 1990). Consequently, when she married or divorced a man, she lost her right to own land. Quite apart from this, even when farmlands were allotted to women, they received much smaller allocations of such land than men did. In the past, the main source of livelihood was land. Women's lack of access to land made their economic position very weak and their status very low.

This economic marginalisation was only one of many that women suffered in traditional Nigerian society. The denial or the non-recognition of women's reproductive rights and of their autonomy over their own sexuality was an equally serious problem (see Ebijuwá 1995). Women also had to contend with a marked disparity in access to education. In a culture that explicitly gives preference to male children, tradition often denies education to girls or allows them only an inferior one (Mbabefo and Nyemuto Roberts 1996). Those women who tried to better their lot, before and during the colonial period in Nigeria, found themselves in typical female jobs, such as nursing, primary school teaching and secretarial work (Dennis 1998). Because so few of them were educated, the majority remained as housewives, sewing mistresses, housemaids and subsistence farmers. They were alienated from centres of power.

Although women in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria had little room to develop outside the private sphere, it could be argued that even after some of them were better educated in the early post-colonial period, which should have raised their status in the public sphere of activity, their position was still not particularly encouraging. Effah et al (1995) notes that very few women participated in the politics of the country during the period before independence. The few that were prominent, however, remained so for some time. The late Funmilayo Kuti was a significant figure. She was the only female delegate to Britain during Nigeria's demand for independence. She earned her position in the Nigerian contingent to Britain because of her education and activism for women. Kuti came into the limelight when she led the Abeokuta women's confrontation with

the colonial government over the arbitrary taxation of women in 1947. But her opposition to the male universe around her cost her time, energy, property, and later on, her life. She died of injuries sustained during a federal government raid of her son's (Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, afro-beat musician and staunch critic of the ills of various post-colonial governments) 'Kalakuta Republic' residence. She was thrown from the top floor of the multi-storey building of the 'Kalakuta Republic'. The assault on her and her death marks one of the instances of violence perpetrated against women, especially women activists, during this period. Hajiya Sawaba Gambo was actively involved in the political struggles and the fight for universal adult suffrage for women in Northern Nigeria. Like Funmilayo Kuti, she also suffered much for her outspokenness and her challenge to the status quo. She was jailed sixteen times for her political activities. Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, who was elected member of the House of Representatives in the first Republic, and Janet Mokuolu are other notable examples of women who challenged patriarchal structures and tried to ensure the public representation of women. Their education and activism turned a spotlight onto the awkward issue of gender equality. Nevertheless, in spite of the laudable efforts and sacrifices of these activists, women were still relegated to the background. The immediate post-colonial governments of Tafawa Balewa (October 1, 1960 – January 15, 1966), Ironsi (January 15 – July 29, 1966), and Gowon (July 29, 1966–1975) failed to give adequate recognition to women.

The limited achievements that emerged from the struggles of these leading Nigerian women, which I see as the first wave of feminism in Nigeria, can best be understood in the context of liberal feminism. The actions of liberal feminists are marked by their emphasis on the representation of women. Their approach consists of campaigning for changes in laws that discriminate against women as well as campaigning for rights for women that were previously enjoyed only by men, as in the women's suffrage movement (Etta 1998). What Nigerian women such as Funmilayo Kuti, Sawaba Gambo and Janet Mokuolu did, from the pre-colonial to the early post-colonial period (Amadiume 1990; Mba 1982), was to fight for the representation of women, rather than for equal rights for them. Their actions were largely reactionary, and this explains their inability to achieve equal rights for women. It is not surprising that later struggles took a different form. With the advent of modernity, women began to see their problems as a consequence of their inferior access to education and the very small number of them who were in positions of power. They also perceived that it was their lack of power that made them invisible in the public domain. Women thus realised that reactionary movements were not enough to advance their quest for equality. They had to become educationally and economically empowered, in order to fight against a myriad of factors that kept them and their work invisible and blocked their access to positions of power.

The pattern of their subsequent struggles follows that of the Marxist feminist approach. Marxist feminism is the first theoretical position to provide an explanation for the differences between men and women (Etta 1998). Marxist feminists locate the cause of the dichotomy between the public and private spheres of activity and the mechanism for the entrenchment of inequality within a capitalist structure. Following the argument of Karl Marx, a capitalist system encourages and empowers the owners of the means of production to exploit their workers. Women and men are both class actors within a capitalist structure. Hutchful (1998) infers that men are the 'bourgeois' and women the proletariat in a class structure. It follows that men are the operators and determinants of production and, by implication, the dominant figures in the public sphere, where production takes place. Women are located within the domestic sphere and enjoy only relatively restricted access to paid work (Etta 1998). Marxist feminists argue that the rise of private property in societies brought about a strict division of labour, with men as public workers and women as private workers. They hold that women should endeavour to participate in the labour force, in order to become economically empowered and independent and consequently to participate effectively in society. From the Marxist feminist perspective, the public sector provides more opportunities for women, and they should, therefore, aspire to enter the public domain in order to achieve equality.

The approach adopted by Nigerian women both before and after the United Nations Decade Resolution for Women's Development (1975–1985) can be classified under Marxist feminism. The Resolutions made a tremendous impact on Nigerian society and encouraged women to question the status quo. Women increasingly demanded equal and fair rights as individuals and citizens. They were sensitised to compete with men and to participate in the body politic. From this period onwards, several women moved from the private to the public sphere of activity and rose to prominence in both formal and informal sectors. A 1985 Women in Nigeria (WIN) document shows that at least a small number of women who had received formal education were able to find employment, in both the public and private sectors, as clerical workers, secretaries, nurses and teachers. Women even began to enter what had previously been exclusively male professions, and become lawyers, university teachers, journalists and administrators (WIN 1985:15). Today, there is no profession or occupation that is the exclusive preserve of any gender, although women still predominate in the nursing and teaching professions.

The fact that women came to be better educated in this period enabled them to form such networks as the National Council of Women Society (NCWS),<sup>1</sup> the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN), and Women in Nigeria (WIN), in order to advance their struggle for an equal participation with men in the public sphere. It was clear to women that they were not going to achieve any positive change, if they remained isolated from the

forces of change. The organisations they floated were structured to pose significant challenges to patriarchal structures. Abdullah (1995) observes that although these organisations tackled many problems and obstacles raised by the relics of traditional practices and other more contemporary encumbrances, they still operated cautiously within the traditional gender boundaries, articulating the theory of complementary roles rather than competitive ones in gender relations (Abdullah 1995:211). Operating within existing traditions<sup>2</sup> was not the only short-fall of these organisations. The National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) was criticised for being extremely elitist and irrelevant to the collective struggle for Nigerian women, particularly those in the rural areas. Mba (1982) notes how the women leaders of the NCWS were accused of being ignorant of the plight of rural women and of propagating only the interests of a few professional women. But this was inevitable. The council's concerns and activities depended on educated women. According to one of its leaders (see Mba 1982:51), the council was a discussion forum for women of diverse interests and professional backgrounds who had to render national and international services and deal with an assortment of people. The NCWS was also condemned for its interest in preponderantly Christian concerns. This is what led to the creation of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN). It is on record that FOMWAN also exhibited negative attitudes similar to those identified with NCWS. But the most significant criticism of the NCWS and FOMWAN was their pro-establishment position. This too was inevitable, as the funding of the groups came from the government, but it impeded the quest for equality for women in the public domain.

The Women in Nigeria (WIN) organisation emerged from the academic world, therefore, to counter the passive approach of the government-sponsored women's groups. But WIN also came under severe attack. Its relations with radical anti-government groups and its opposition to government policies were a major shortcoming. WIN is radical in its approach and is essentially anti-establishment. It seems that this is the only way for WIN's campaigns for women's rights and benefits to be articulated, particularly since it is the state that enacts the laws that oppress women. As we shall see later in this paper, there is no doubt that WIN's activities provided the impetus for women's professional associations to emerge.

It is significant that in spite of their educational attainment, their professional diversification and the existence of pockets of women's organisations, women still remained alienated from power. Their prominence was limited to what the men who controlled state power allowed. The Nigerian Government, however, still fanned the embers of women's hopes. To show that government was responsive to their needs and aspirations, a Federal Ministry of Women Affairs was created. The Ministry serves as a cesspool, where all matters relating to women that require government attention are directed. Women's commissions at both Federal and State level were also instituted to cater for the interests

of women in Nigeria. Quasi-governmental organisations such as the 'Better Life for Rural Women Programme' (BLP) and 'The Family Support Programme' (FSP), which were both pet projects of the spouses of Nigerian military heads of state, also emerged to encourage a better platform for action on women's issues. The BLP was floated by Mrs. Maryam Babangida, while the FSP was launched by Mrs. Maryam Abacha. Various criticisms greeted their inception. Critics regarded them as cosmetic, sectional and not suitable for bringing about any meaningful change in the status of Nigerian women in general. In its nomenclature, the BLP targeted a particular category of Nigerian women – the rural women – who had been marginalized in previous women's groups (NCWS, FOMWAN and WIN). The BLP specifically encouraged the formation of 'women only' cooperative societies, concerned with health, sanitation, agriculture, education, civics, social welfare and cottage industries. It catered for grassroots women and largely excluded elite and middle-class women. Udegbe (1985) underscores its potential for bringing about a positive change to the advancement of women, but summarises its programme as a failure. The demise of the programme after its initiator left public office validates this view. The FSP's programme also did little to change the status of Nigerian women. Apart from providing 'visible support' for the women elites, including the wives of State Governors, female Commissioners, women leaders of state commissions and non-governmental organisations and others who used the umbrella of FSP to access wealth and traverse the country and some African and European countries, the FSP did not leave any significant memorial. Although huge sums of money were expended on the programme, it is clear that working class and grassroots women did not feel much impact from it. The BLP and FSP programmes were considered by many as counter-productive state projects. According to Abdullah (1995): 'Ideologically, the BLP reinforced gender subordination in the guise of women's activism. As a state-sponsored women's group, it mirrored the state's conservative image of women as wives, mothers and secondary income earners'.

A common strand that runs through the literature on the activities of the BLP and FSP is that they were essentially state tools that were used by men to control and curtail the activities of women. The Nigerian government's focus on rural women, who are rarely brought into the public domain and their neglect of radical women's groups, was hardly likely to create the much-desired room for women in the public domain or even ease their travails in the domestic sphere. It comes as no surprise that women should later seek refuge and power in women's professional associations.

## The Emergence and Impact of Women's Professional Associations

Given the few successes and the many failures of pioneering women's associations, both traditional and contemporary, it was imperative for a new current of feminism to emerge in Nigeria, which could adequately sensitise women about what they could achieve with the radical line adopted by organisations such as WIN. Feminists envisaged that radical ideology would bring about a meaningful change to the inequality between men and women that existed in the public and private domains. The approach they conceived was to form women's networks within the working-class groups, primarily in order to counter patriarchal structures, which denied women any appreciable visibility. From the precedents set by market women associations, credit cooperatives,<sup>3</sup> ethnic groups, peer-group associations,<sup>4</sup> and class-based middle-class unions<sup>5</sup> in Nigeria in the past, it was noted that women were best organised around definite economic, religious, professional, ethnic or class interests (Ogundipe-Leslie 1985). Groups with economic and professional concerns are often more successful and enduring than others in Nigeria. When groups of women began to organise themselves according to their professional interests, observers and feminists viewed their emergence and the increase in their numbers as an interesting and a long-awaited development. In view of divisions among women and the unfriendly social and political climate, the women's professional associations, which transcended ethnic and religious divides, were likely to be the safest refuge for women. But why create new women's professional associations created when various parent organisations existed already in Nigeria?

Although data on women's participation in trade, professional and other workers' organisations are limited, the available evidence shows that for many reasons, women do not generally do well in workers' organisations. The history of trade unions in Nigeria establishes that women have always been marginalized in them, primarily because unions were seen as a part of male culture and not an avenue for expressing women's interests. Jolaoso-Komolafe (1995:109) citing Elson and Pearson (1981) buttresses this argument

Workers' organisations have failed to recognise and build into their structure the specificity of gender. [This] failure means that in practice they have tended to represent male workers. In addition, the specific problems that concern women as a subordinate gender are often problems which (are) not easy for conventional forms of trade unions to tackle.

Men organise and lead trades unions and use them as political machines and power bases, to perpetrate patriarchal ideology. Women are not given due recognition as equal members of the unions. Star positions are usually kept by incumbent male leaders, who strive at all cost to maintain the status quo. To date, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) the umbrella body of all trade unions in Ni-

geria, has no woman on its executive. It was a man who used to head even the women's department of the NLC.

Women have not risen higher than the post of Assistant General Secretary in industrial unions. Only the National Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institution Employees (NUBIFIE) has seen a change at the National Executive level. It is in NUBIFIE that a female career trade unionist, Comrade Cecy Olajumoke, has risen to the post of Acting General Secretary (Jolaoso-Komolafe 1995). It has been observed that there is no record of a woman National President in the history of industrial unions in Nigeria, not even in such unions as the Nigeria Union of Teachers or the National Association of Civil Service Typists, Stenographers and Allied Staff, which are dominated by women (Ibid). Women have largely taken a passive role, and in most cases have remained ordinary members, whose union dues are continuously deducted from their monthly pay, but whose rights and needs are repeatedly ignored.

The economic superiority of men over women is another factor that enables men to maintain their strongholds in trade unions. Unions are in any case run in a way that allows the marginalisation of women. Milkman (1990) observes that unions are run in a pattern, which is culturally alien to women. Women find it difficult to attend union meetings, which are usually held in bars during nocturnal hours. Women are generally poor attendees at trade union meetings, especially those held during ungodly hours. Outside working hours, women normally have to attend to housework or childcare in their homes, and they are not easily persuaded to sacrifice these activities for union meetings. Even when women do attend meetings as union members, they are often voiceless, because the entire structure and discourse of unionism is built around the image of masculinity. Men set the agenda, maintain the leadership and negotiate standards for the unions. Often, they ignore the needs of women, who are usually not in the key positions needed to protest against their subordination. As Reese Pittin (1984) rightly observes.

Women workers often find themselves alienated from their male co-workers, while the men fail altogether to understand women's reluctance to become involved with or participate actively in what women see as organisations catering for male interests, such as the union.

Women fail to participate actively in labour organisations, because they usually ignore their interests. This helps to increase the subjugation of women. Their professional interests are not adequately addressed and their status as women professionals is not considered. For instance, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) is a union for both male and female lawyers. It is expected that the representation of both genders within the union will help to ensure equal representation of the sexes before the law and remove laws that denigrate, subjugate and oppress the female gender. However, the NBA as a union has not been able to ensure the removal of the laws that discriminate against women in the Nigerian constitution.

In any case, the NBA leadership has been largely male-dominated, with the exception of the early 1990s, when Prof. Mrs. Priscilla Kuye took up the leadership of the NBA. The period of Kuye's leadership, which remains a rare case in the history of the nation's judiciary union, was a turbulent one. Most of the problems experienced were due to the existing patriarchal structures. After Kuye, no other female lawyer has occupied any active position in the NBA.

Another professional association, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), has also marginalized women.

The NUJ is not only noted for the lopsided representation of women in its executive, but also for its discriminatory practices against women on matters concerning rights, professionalism and overall development. Not only does the NUJ marginalize women in its selection of executives to represent the union, it also fails to address issues, which would promote the representation of women in the media. The issue of what kind of media assignments women undertake has been the focus of some research (Odejide 1996; Saror 1996), which has called for the transformation of the professional roles of and the space given to women journalists. It has been observed that women do not generally feature in political stories or in investigative reporting. They usually write about bedroom, kitchen and fashion subjects. Women's political activities are under-reported. Even when they are reported, they appear in inconspicuous inside pages or at best in the woman's columns. This practice is what Epstein (1978) describes as the 'ghettoization' of news in the women's pages. Every newspaper editor and writer knows that how a story is featured makes the difference between prominence and obscurity. Thus:

Placing news about women on the Women's pages even reinforces the view that the material is only appropriate for women and that it is less serious and important than news highlighted as general news. Even if men read the women's page they may decide it is outside their acknowledged sphere of competence. (Tseayo 1996).

It follows that keeping women in positions where their work, activities and contributions remain invisible helps to confirm inequality. By concentrating on the traditional roles of women in the media and ignoring those serious aspects of women's lives, e.g. their political and economic advancement, their educational attainment and their relevance to a changing world, a whole series of generations is persuaded to accept stereotypes about women, which relegate them to an inferior and non-serious position in society. In spite of the fact that women in the Third World make a major contribution to their national economies, they are virtually unnoticed in the media. When they are mentioned, they are presented in stereotyped images as wives and mothers, subservient to men, or engaged in traditional singing and dancing. At other times, they are portrayed as fancy mistresses of young achievers, who wear the latest clothes and hair styles, and promote a lifestyle of consumption. The implication of this is that little effort

has been made by the media to provide women with the information necessary for liberating themselves and harnessing their resources for optimal development (Ogbotu 1996:83). There is so far no evidence that the NUJ has made any serious efforts to help alleviate the problems of professional and gender inequality suffered by women in that sector.

The NBA and the NUJ are not the only unions or professional associations that are giving little or no help to women in their quest for gender equality. Women seem to face myriad challenges on all professional fronts. This means that they need to organise themselves into a force, which their male colleagues cannot ignore.

Women's professional associations that have risen to the challenges of the present age include:

- Nigerian Association of University Women
- Medical Women Association of Nigeria Association of Professional Women Engineers
- Nigerian Association of Media Women (NAMW)
- Society of Women Accountants
- Association of Professional Women Bankers
- Association of Women Industrialists
- Nigerian Association of Women in Business
- Business and Professional Women's Association
- Association of Lady Pharmacists
- Professional Insurance Ladies Association
- Nigerian Association of Women in Science and Technology
- Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ)
- Female Architects of Nigeria (FAN).

The list presented here is based on information obtained during the research for this paper, and may not be exhaustive. The increasing number of these women's associations raises other questions apart from that of their *raison d'être*. We tried hard, for instance, to find out whether the existence of women's professional associations would be able to guarantee equality for Nigerian women in general. We also sought to determine what some women professional associations had been able to achieve since they broke off from their parent associations. Our findings indicate that the idea of creating the NAWOJ was mooted by both men and women. Some ex-student union leaders, namely Owei Lakemfa, (now of Vanguard Media), Lanre Arogundade (*Vanguard*), Ladi Lawal (Africa's Independent Television, AIT), Richard Akinola (Centre for Free Speech), Funmi Komolafe (Labour Editor, *Vanguard*), Agatha Edu (*New Nigerian*) and Judith Okpeki (News Editor, *Vanguard*), who had been members of WIN, deliberated between 1988 and 1989, and decided to float an organisation to cater for the

needs of women journalists. The association was formed in response to the exigencies of the period. There was a marked disparity between male and female journalists. Men dominated the top echelon of the journalism industry. There was an urgent need to enhance the professional status of women who occupied the lower cadre of the media. There was also the need to advance the visibility of women in society. We have noted that the NUJ was insensitive to the needs of women and women were always playing passive roles within the union. By 1989, a national body of Nigerian Association of Women Journalists was instituted, with representatives in every state of the federation. NAWOJ operates a similar constitution to that of NUJ and Brenda Akpan was its first chairperson. The specific aims of NAWOJ are:

1. To address the needs of women in journalism
2. To change the low or inferior representation of women. The argument is that if women do not assume leadership roles it is difficult for them to influence laws, agenda, programmes that could benefit them.
3. To provide immense support for women in politics by giving comprehensive coverage of their political activities such that they also attain prominence like men. Supportive roles, which they render, include, organisation of campaigns, publicity in the media and production of posters and handbills.

Since its inception, NAWOJ has been making a tremendous impact on women and in promoting their interests. Various awareness programmes in the form of seminars and workshops are conducted on a regular basis for women, to ensure that they aspire to get to managerial positions. Surveys are also carried out to indicate the positions of women in the industry. Part of the gain of the sensitisation exercise is the appointment of women to positions that were hitherto male preserves. Raheemat Momodu became the Political Editor of Concord Press and Funmi Komolafe became the Labour Editor of Vanguard Media, Mrs. Remi Ojo was elected President, Guild of Editors Nigeria, and Mrs Bosede Adediran, ex-chairperson NAWOJ, was made Deputy Sunday Editor. The Chairperson of Abia State was also made a board member of a federal parastatal. Before them, the trio of Amma Ogan, Doyin Abiola and Victoria Ezeokoli had risen to top editorial and managerial positions in the print and electronic media and were reference points for younger female journalists. Today, although women still contribute significantly to women's pages in the print media and to women-oriented programmes in the electronic media, they are also prominent in news and investigative reporting. To facilitate the rapid development and promotion of women in journalism, NAWOJ seeks support from organisations that help to fund programmes designed by the union. Notable among these funding organisations are the Johns Hopkins University, United Nations Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Through the collaborations of NAWOJ and funding agencies, women's political empowerment

has acquired a greater voice. In various parts of Nigeria, such as Enugu, Lagos, Kano and Oyo, workshops and conferences on specific programmes for the political empowerment of women have been held. Johns Hopkins University provided the funds for the inauguration of 'Democracy and Governance Programme'. This programme was designed to know how many women are political reporters; and whether women present themselves for election, and participate in elections. Another programme sponsored by Johns Hopkins is the political awareness workshops for NAWOJ women in Oyo State and for women in general. Apart from external sponsorship, NAWOJ also gets sponsorship from various state governments. The Oyo State Government gave NAWOJ, Oyo chapter, a Peugeot station wagon to help members to establish contacts with grassroots women. Other State Governments sponsor travel for NAWOJ members. It is worth noting that NAWOJ does not concentrate on programmes for women journalists and the elite alone, it also engages in the mobilisation of women in political activities. The union organises political awareness rallies at various locations and sponsors political enlightenment programmes on radio and television. NAWOJ has intervened in cases of discrimination against women in politics, as exemplified by the annulment of the primary elections in Ondo State, where Chief Mrs. Alice Mobolaji Osomo was alleged to have polled 11,653 votes and her opponent, Chief Ade Adefarati, only 2,765 votes. More important, NAWOJ has been involved in campaigns beyond women's rights as voters and politicians, but also advocates for equality and justice. It successfully fought the end of a law, instituted by the media owners, which stipulated that women could not get pregnant until after 18 months of employment. This law infringes the reproductive rights of women, and NAWOJ sees it as gender discrimination and has made moves to have it annulled. To date, these efforts have forced many media owners to rescind the application of this gender-blind law. As of the time of writing this report, only Channels Television Corporation still upholds such a practice.

The tremendous achievements of NAWOJ have generated some conflict between the body and the NUJ, the parent union for journalists in Nigeria (NUJ). The success of NAWOJ in raising funds for its projects and in making in-roads within the government has generated hostility with the NUJ, which now views NAWOJ's increased visibility as a threat. The NUJ even led a failed attempt at scrapping NAWOJ, but did succeed in rejecting NAWOJ's request for autonomy. However, NAWOJ continues to redefine women's positions within the public and private spheres of activity.

The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) is another women's professional association to have made an impact in Nigeria. Unlike NAWOJ, which is indigenous, FIDA, Nigeria is affiliated to FIDA, the International Federation of Women Lawyers. FIDA International was founded in 1944 by a group of women lawyers from Cuba, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico and the USA,

who met in Mexico and formed themselves into an Association for the purpose of promoting women's rights through their legal training. FIDA is now active in 79 countries of the world. It came to Nigeria in 1963, three years after independence. FIDA has spread to different states of the federation and has been involved in gender specific and broad-based activities. Its continue to conform to the objectives of FIDA International, whose main thrust is to protect, promote and advance the cause of women, especially in relation to their rights and responsibilities within society.

A close look at one of its chapters – the Oyo State chapter – shows that FIDA makes pragmatic interventions through advocacy, counselling, participation in decision-making at various levels of governance and judicial activism. Female lawyers enlist in the association and are integrated into its activities immediately they graduate from law school. FIDA organises symposia, which deal with aspects of law that affect women, including the age of marriage, wife battering, female circumcision, abortion, new reproductive practices (in-vitro fertilisation and embryo transfer and surrogate motherhood). For example, FIDA works on the practice that denies women (widows) the opportunity to obtain letters of administration from the law courts, in order to become administrators or executors of the property of their husband's (who have died intestate). The association has discovered that no existing law supports the practice, whose perpetuation is evidence of gender discrimination. FIDA also identifies and denounces discriminatory practices such as (1) shelter discrimination, whereby landlords discriminate against women in Nigeria, and (2) position discrimination. FIDA notes that women continue to be short-changed over access to top-level positions. They account for only one or two percent of high-level executive business positions worldwide. In government, they rarely attain ministerial or sub-ministerial positions. This gap hinders women's impact on important policies, formulated by the state, which affect their lives. Keeping women in purdah and the restriction of movement of women in the daytime, during certain fetish celebrations, are also identified as gender discrimination. FIDA advocates the implementation of laws that promote the cause of women and the annulment of those that depreciate womanhood. FIDA's main strength is advocacy. It collaborates with other women's professional groups and non-governmental organisations, in order to bring about gender equality in Nigeria. Although most of its demands have not yet been met, FIDA is resolved to ensure that women achieve equality and justice in Nigeria. Notable figures in FIDA include Chief Mrs. Folake Solanke (SAN), a life patron, P. C. Ajayi-Obe, Prof. Priscilla Kuye, a former chairperson of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and Ayo Obe of the Civil Liberty Organisation (CLO).

Prof. Toun Ogunseye, one of the first few women to study at the University of Ibadan, founded the Nigerian Association of University Women (NAUW) in the early 1950s. After her studentship, she started working in the University and

later ventured into activism. NAUW did not actually emerge in opposition to the existing parent union, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), but as a forum for the actualisation of the aims and aspirations of women in society. ASUU stands out as one union in which women have played active roles in the executive of their domestic unit. Women such as Dr. Bene Madunagu of University of Calabar (UNICAL), Prof. (Mrs.) Sowunmi of the University of Ibadan and late Comrade Ingrid Essien-Obot (UNICAL) have been chairpersons or secretaries of their local chapters.

NAUW started at University of Ibadan and later spread to other universities in Nigeria. At the beginning, it was politically oriented and had immense influence on the government. This was to be expected, as most of its members also belonged to the government-sponsored NCWS. The incumbent president of NAUW, Ibadan chapter, Prof. Mosun Omibiyi-Obidike, informs us that in the past, NAUW used to get a lot of government support and funding. NAUW was often commissioned to carry out studies on women, and the recommendations of such research were often implemented. The proliferation of women's non-governmental organisations has considerably diminished the relevance of NAUW. The shifts of its leadership from the southern zone of the country to the northern parts have also reduced its national activities in the southern parts. This shows how ethnic concerns have started to create invisible divisions between the ranks of NAUW.

### Conclusion

Although this study does not cover all the women's professional associations found in Nigeria today, suffice it to say that all of them, including the non-governmental organisations that collaborate with women-led organisations, operate very similar agenda. The most popular item on their agenda is the need to ensure equality for women in society. The primary objective of women's professional associations is to ensure better working conditions and positions for their members, but the need to achieve equality for women in general in both public and private domains is important on their agenda.

The common strand that runs through their activities is the way they have included in their programmes all categories of women, irrespective of class and religion. I noted at the beginning of this paper that women bear different kinds of burdens, according to their socio-economic, religious and educational situations, and they are divided in their struggles because of these factors. However, the examples set by some women's professional associations, NAWOJ, FIDA and NAUW, shows that a symbiotic relationship can be achieved by women of different class and religious background in the quest for gender equality. Divisions by class, ethnic and religious factors have not helped women very much in the past, but collaborative efforts by more contemporary women's professional groups have helped women to advance the frontiers of gender equality. The

working class women who have access to public activities have realised that the subjugation of a section of women in society is the subjugation of all women. They have also realised that the best way to tackle patriarchal structures that foster the denigration of women and tend to make them invisible in their place of work is to forge networks that will pose significant challenges that men cannot ignore. The radical approach of women's networks like the NAWOJ, which threatened the fabric of male dominance in the journalism industry in Nigeria, and ensured to a large extent that women did not remain inferior to men, are possible avenues that evolving women's groups could explore. These networks have been used to challenge the status quo, and to demand better working conditions and positions for women in their respective professions and positions.

It is clear from this study that women professionals who break away from parent unions, because of their lopsided representation and positioning of women, tend to actualise their goals once they have become independent. It is also evident from our report on the development of women's movements that modernity has laid the foundation for the achievement of equality between men and women in the public and private domains in Nigeria. Women are now building on this, using different approaches. How far the structure built by women will remain and become permanent will depend on the commitment of women and on the approaches they use to eschew inequality and to demand their rights in both the public and private domains.

## Notes

1. The Council was founded in 1958.
2. The Council encouraged and reminded women of their important role as homemakers and nation builders.
3. The associations are noted for providing avenues to administrative power and support for the generals, in cases of mishaps in urban situations, where members need the women's society to act in place of their own more distant families. See Ogundipe-Leslie 1985 (127–128).
4. According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1985), the ethnic and peer-group associations help to maintain cultural continuity among members in places where they live.
5. Class-based middle-class unions also help to forge a link, but they are the most unstable, because there are no concrete objectives, strategies or gains in view. See Ogundipe-Leslie (1985) for further notes.

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