Challenges facing women empowerment in contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

There is a widely held view that Nigerian women, like their counterparts in most African countries, are comparatively deprived socially, economically and politically in relation to their male counterparts. This article wishes to explore this view. It will examine the effectiveness of public policies designed to rehabilitate the position of women, look at the individual and collective resources available to Nigerian women in their desire to be better mistresses of their destinies before focusing attention on some of the obstacles that vitiate the accomplishment of such a desire for empowerment.

Keywords: women empowerment - gender inequality - gender disparity - women assets and resources - women organizations

Résumé

De nombreux observateurs pensent que les femmes nigérianes, comme leurs consœurs de la plupart des pays africains, sont moins loties socialement, économiquement et politiquement que les hommes. Afin de vérifier cette hypothèse, nous allons évaluer plusieurs politiques publiques qui visaient la réhabilitation de la position des femmes. Nous examinerons ensuite les ressources tantôt individuelles tantôt collectives dont disposent les femmes Nigérianes pour devenir autonomes, avant d'étudier quelques-uns des obstacles qui entravent un tel projet d'autonomie et de renforcement de leur pouvoir.

Mots-clés : renforcement du pouvoir des femmes - inégalité hommes/femmes - écart hommes /femmes - atouts/ressources des femmes - organisations de femmes

Introduction

A number of difficulties stand in the way of any well-meaning discussion of the position of women in contemporary Nigeria. The key difficulty is the diverse nature of the condition of women in the country, itself the consequence of inter-regional, inter-religious, inter-generational, inter-occupational and residential differences. The position of the young thirty-something old educated Christian Yoruba woman living in a plush neighbourhood in Lagos is hardly comparable to that of a fifty-year old Muslim woman residing in a remote village in one of the twelve states that function under the sharia legal system in the northern part of the country. The diverse nature of the condition of the Nigerian woman is however not a sufficient reason not to embark on an exploration of how women generally fare in the country. This is all the more pertinent given the officially repeated desire by several Nigerian governments to promote the position of women and gender equality nationwide. The question of gender equality and women empowerment was on the agenda of the Nigerian government well before the formal approval of the National Gender Policy for Nigeria in 2006. Since the observation by the United Nations of the International Women's Year in 1975-1976 and the proclamation of the decade for women in 1975, there has been a multiplicity of efforts by federal, state and local government actors in Nigeria to improve the status of women and remove the many constraints that place women in positions of relative economic, socio- cultural and political deprivation. In 1979, a Women Development Section was created in the then Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth and Sport to further the cause for the advancement of women. In the same year, the United Nations adopted the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women). This led to the creation of the National Commission for Women, upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry of Women Affairs in 1996. One of the objectives of this Ministry is to formulate and implement policies designed to achieve 'women empowerment and elimination of laws and discriminatory practices against women'[1].

This paper attempts to take stock of how this objective has been attained. We will begin by presenting a situation report of the position of women relative to men in various sectors to gauge the extent of gender disparity. Then we will try to examine the perceived disadvantaged position of women by adopting an approach based on an identification of existing constraints and opportunities in the environment within which Nigerian women live. We will first explore the constraints, including legal, political and socio-cultural elements that inhibit women self-actualization. Then we will assess the opportunities or resources women possess and determine how effective these are in making women key actresses in managing their destinies as well as the destiny of the society to which they belong. Finally we will present

the perceptions by a sample of men and women who were interrogated during a recent field research in Nigeria on some key issues concerning the position of women in the country in order to make useful observations on prospects of women empowerment in the country.

Literature Review

The concept of women empowerment seems to have been used in the 1980s by third world feminists 'to address the issue of gender differences that exist in the control and distribution of resources' (Datta & Kornberg, 2002).[2] There is however lack of consensus on its major characteristics. According to Datta and Kornberg (2002), women empowerment refers to 'strategies that women use to increase their control of resources and generate decision making capacity'[3]. Other authors like Batliwala (1994) however have a wider definition. According to this author, empowerment is the 'process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (Batliwala, 1994)[4]. The conclusion that logically flows from these two definitions is that empowerment is about the ability to exert power over people and over resources. However other authors like Parpart and Rai (2002) disagree with such a conception. For them, empowerment 'is not simply the ability to exert power over people and over resources [but] involves the exercise rather than the possession of power'[5].

The lack of consensus on the nature of empowerment extends to other questions. For someone like Moser (1993)[6], women empowerment is essentially individual or personal while for others like Kabeer (1999)[7], it is the collective dimension that is worthy of examination. Jo Rowlands (1997)[8] believes both the individual and collective perspectives should be used. For her, empowerment involves both individual conscientisation ('power within') as well as ability to work collectively, which provides the basis for being able to bring about change more easily.

Empowerment thus has a highly multifaceted nature. This is because it is at the same time a process, a goal and an outcome. It is a process because it involves the action of enfranchising. It is a goal because its objective is to rearrange power

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1   *Democratic Dividends for Nigerian Women and Children*. p. 7

2   Datta, R. & J. Kornberg., (eds.), *Women in Developing Countries: Assessing Strategies for Empowerment*. p. 2.

3   *ibid*

4   Batliwala, S., « The Meaning of Women Empowerment : New Concepts for Action » in Gita Sen et al, (eds.), *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health Empowerment and Rights*. pp. 130-131.

5   Parpart, J. L. & S. M. Rai., (eds.), *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/ Local World*. p.2.

6   Moser, C., *Gender Planning and Development. Theory, Practice and Training*. pp. 74-75.

7   Kabeer, N., « Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment " in *Development and Change*. pp. 435-464.

8   Rowlands, J., *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*.

relations in a given society or context. It is an outcome because it is the result of demands made and of struggles initiated by specific social categories wishing to better master their destinies.

We will define women empowerment as the relative ease with which women have access to decision making roles and can mobilize available legal, economic, social and political capital to make and take decisions that affect their lives and those of others around them. This is close to the definition given by Akomolafe (2006) according to which women empowerment is the development of the mental and physical capacity, power or skills in women, for them to operate meaningfully in their social milieu, thereby experiencing a more favourable level of social recognition and subsequently enhance their economic status. Empowerment so defined has both an individual and a collective focus. Individually, there is focus on the self-actualization of women and on the capacity of each woman to control her life both within and outside the home. On the collective plane, the capacity for individual self-actualization is more or less dependent on the extent to which women organize themselves as a group and engage in collaborative work to react to the multiple layers of subordination to which they are subjected as a category. These layers of subordination are political, socio-cultural, economic and legal. This collective dimension is important if we agree with Batliwala (1994) that the goals of women empowerment include challenging patriarchal ideology and transforming the structure and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality.

Women empowerment is thus transformative. We will try to examine how far such transformation has occurred in Nigeria by adopting an analytical approach in terms of constraints and opportunities. We will examine the legal, economic, political and socio-cultural bottlenecks against individual and collective women self-fulfillment. The objective is to find out the nature of the environment within which women live and work and determine to what extent such an environment is enabling or debilitating to their self-actualization. Afterwards, we will look at the assets of women, at an individual and collective level, to see what types of resources they can mobilize in their attempt to be what they want to be, do what they want to do and have a better say in their lives.

The Environment within which women stand: Enabling or Debilitating?

It is appropriate to begin this section of our examination by presenting a situation report of how women stand compared to men in some sectors in Nigeria. This is shown in Table 1. Several remarks can be made based on the data from this table. The high imbalance between men and women is the first and clearly visible information. In a country where men constitute 51% of the total population and

women 49%, their respective access to resources is skewed in favour of men. Almost twice as much women as men are below the poverty line with between six and nineteen times more men than women either holding managerial positions in firms, possessing land or other properties disposable at will.

It is necessary to explain the source of such gender disparity. Our thinking is that this is the result of an environment where numerous ceilings are placed on opportunities for women empowerment. These ceilings are legal, political and socio-cultural.

Legal Constraints on women empowerment

There are many legal constraints on women self-actualization in Nigeria. A Report compiled by the National Centre for Women Development in Abuja (2005) clearly enumerates the multiple discriminatory gender-unfriendly legal dispositions that are applied in Nigeria[9]. Such gender-unfriendly legal provisions are contained in Federal, State and Local Government rules and regulations. For example, Section 42 of the Federal Constitution provides that:

> (1) 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:-
> (a) be subjected either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action of the government, to disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria of other Communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religion or political opinion are not made subject; or
> (b) be accorded either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any such executive or administrative action, any privilege or advantage that is not accorded to citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions.
> (2) No citizen of Nigeria shall be subjected to any disability or deprivation merely by reason of the circumstances of his birth
> (3) Nothing in subsection (1) of this section shall invalidate any law by reason only that the law imposes restrictions with respect to appointment of any person to any office under the State or as a member of the armed forces of the Federation or a member of the Nigeria Police Force to an office in the service of a body corporate established directly by any law in force in Nigeria.

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9   See *A Compilation of the Constitution, National and State Statutes and Regulations, Local Government Bye-Laws, Customary Laws and Religious Laws, Policies and Practices and Court Decisions Relating to the Statutes of Women and Children, Applicable in Nigeria.*

There are clear contradictions between sub sections 1 and 3 of the above provisions of the Federal Constitution because there are many gender-biased laws governing recruitment to the Nigerian Police Force for example which though inconsistent with sub section 1 are maintained by sub section 3. The Nigerian Police Regulations provide among others that women police officers, who wish to get married, unlike their male counterparts, must apply for permission to get married and be so permitted before they can get married or that an unmarried police officer who gets pregnant shall be discharged from the Force, and shall not be re-enlisted except with the approval of the Inspector-General of Police.

In addition to the above-mentioned contradictions, there are other clearly gender-biased provisions in the Constitution. One of these is contained in Section 26 which provides that only a woman who is or has been married to a citizen of Nigeria can become a Nigerian citizen by registration. This means that the husband of a female Nigerian citizen cannot become a Nigerian citizen, a woman being thus rendered incapable of conferring such a status on her husband unlike a man who can confer it on his wife. Many of the gender-biased male-friendly and women-unfriendly provisions of the Constitution have been highlighted in a Review of the Constitution published by the National Center for Women Development.[10]

Many other federal laws are gender-biased. These include some provisions of current federal labour laws. According to one of the provisions of the *Labour Act* of 1972,

'Any citizen who is recruited for service in Nigeria may be accompanied to his place of employment and attended during his employment there by such members of his family (not exceeding *two wives* and such of his children as are under the age of sixteen years) as he wishes to take with him' (bold print added).[11]

The above provision is clearly to the advantage of the male worker and established a legal foundation for gender inequality in public service employment in Nigeria to the detriment of women. Other gender biased federal laws also include the Marriage Act in which parental consent to marriage required for a minor is specified as being the consent of the father, unless *he be dead or of unsound mind or absent from Nigeria*, when the consent of the mother will be acceptable according to section 18 of the 1914 Marriage Act.[12]

At the State levels, there are differences between states in terms of discriminatory legal provisions. Nigeria is divided politically into States which are grouped in six geopolitical constellations or zones, the North-East, the North-West, the North Central, the South-East, the South-West and the South-South which do not have

10   *Gender Review of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.*
11   *ibid.* p. 28.
12   *ibid.* p. 36.

similar legal traditions. For example, while some States in the three zones in the North have the Sharia penal code, all the states in the southern zones have the criminal code. There are therefore inter-State differences in legal dispositions concerning the rights, liberties and duties of individuals and particularly of women.

For example states differ in terms of the rights of women to own property. While in some States like Oyo in the South-West zone and in all the States in the South-East zone, all women can acquire, hold and dispose of property, in such northern States like Kaduna, Sokoto and Zamfara, only married women have such rights. Inter-State and inter-zone differences also obtain in the area of marriage laws. Whereas girl-child marriages are legally allowed in the North-East, North-West and North-Central zones with Infant Laws in states like Zamfara and Sokoto which encourage child marriage and infant marriage settlements, such provisions are absent in the laws of many of the southern states. In some of these southern states such as Cross River State where a law was enacted in 2000, girl-child marriages are officially outlawed. The conclusion that can be made from our research findings is that it is impossible to make a generalizable statement about the legal constraints placed on women self-fulfillment at the state level since States maintain either empowering or disempowering legal provisions depending on the questions at stake and the dominant legal codes that inform their legislative enactments.

At the level of local government byelaws, there doesn't seem to be any clear visible and generalizable pattern of discriminatory legal provisions against women on the items over which local governments have institutional competence. These items include licensing, ownership of shops and imposition of levies. It appears that local governments all over the country have gender-neutral bye-laws in these fields.

Political Constraints

Nigerian women are comparatively speaking quite invisible on the political scene. This means the number of women who hold important elective and administrative positions is extremely low. A presentation of the position of women at the Federal, State and local government legislative and executive branches between 1999 and 2007 in Table 2 provides us with data to make some useful comments on this question. The principal information provided by the data in this Table relates to the low representation of Nigerian women in key public decision making structures irrespective of the level of political and administrative activity used. It is at the Federal and State levels that this gender inequality is the most blatant where women account for an insignificant percentage of executive and legislative positions between 1999 and 2007. The Report of the Nation-wide Gender Data Capture written by the National Centre for Women Development in July 2009 very rightly concluded that 'Even though there is a gradual increase of female elected

and political appointees in 2003 and 2007, the margin is still very wide compared to the requirements of the ...Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the National Gender Policy'.[13]

Several reasons can explain this low visibility of women in positions of power and responsibilities. These can be divided into self-imposed constraints on the one hand and systemic constraints on the other. Both types of constraints are mutually reinforcing. The self- imposed constraints include the relative unpreparedness or unwillingness by women to take part in the wear and tear of electoral and partisan political activities. Such unwillingness is linked to many other systemic constraints, the most important of which is male dominance and monopoly of decision making since independence compounded by a relatively long spell of military dictatorship with very minimal female presence at federal and state power structures. Therefore women have been less socialized and acculturated in public decision making. Added to this male dominance is the violent nature of political activities which has frightened many women from partisan politics. According to a Manual on Promoting the participation of women in Nigerian elections jointly published by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and the United Nations Development Fund for Women, 'one of the most important deterrents to women's political participation is the violence which is a dominant feature of elections in Nigeria...The politicking in Nigeria can be seen as a dirty game and results in women not wanting to be part of such a corrupt and violent process'.[14]

Other systemic reasons include cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding the traditional role of women which relegates these to passive followership rather than active or assertive leadership roles in society. The apparent rarity of women leaders means that there are no female role models to which aspiring women candidates can look to for support or inspiration, which combined with traditional beliefs about the woman's role in housekeeping hardly incites women to taking the risk of deviating from their assigned positions.

In addition, there is the phenomenon of indigeneity. According to the Report on promoting the participation of women in Nigerian elections, 'Women have been eliminated from running because although they may live and work in the contested area, they are not indigenous to the area. In addition, if they have married a man from another state, they lose their indigene-ship from their original state and are not granted indigene status in the husband's state because indigene-ship is based on blood relations.[15]

A final series of systemic constraints on the presence of women in the political arena is the godfather model of political activities in Nigeria. This is the practice of having rich male political sponsors who control political party nominations. Apparently, godfathers frown at women candidates as many do not have the required financial resources to convince them and have a limited ability to pay back financial favours.[16] Politics in Nigeria has thus been overtly and excessively monetized and this marginalizes women from active participation.

Socio-Cultural Constraints

One of the key reasons usually given to explain the relative disempowerment of Nigerian women is the patriarchal system and 'the age-long inferior status the society bestows on women' (Sani 2010).[17] The patriarchal system is accompanied by a motley of cultural and religious beliefs some of which are integrated into customary law and infringe on the rights of women. One of the areas where the rights of women are infringed is in household management where the relative decision making powers of men and women are shown in Table 3. The single most important observation that can be made from the data presented in this table is the stark disenfranchisement of the woman in household management, where the man is the sole depository of decision making even in matters concerning the woman's health. There is no male-female co-governance in the home, women being reduced to the role of aide-de-camp to their master-husbands. The overriding position of men has led to a number of negative effects on the situation of women in several fields.

The first is on their identity. They are spouses of men and in that capacity traditionally lose their origins especially if such are different from those of their husbands. This is the question of indigene-ship to which we have drawn attention earlier on. This question is especially salient in the South-East and South-South zones where there seems to be 'an unwritten law that marriage confers on the woman the nativity or indigene-ship of her husband. The woman loses her separate identity and her natural indigene-ship, and is subsumed in her husband's home. Ironically in practice, however, she is not fully accepted as a full member of that family when benefits accrue her way as a result of the marriage. Such benefits may include representation of the family or sharing in the family property'.[18]

13   *Report of the Nationwide Gender Data Capture.* p. 100.

14   *Voter Education Manual, Promoting the Participation of Women in Nigerian Elections.* p. 7.

15   *ibid.* p. 8.

16   *ibid.* p. 9.

17   Sani, H., *First Ladyship and Empowerment Programs in Nigeria.* p. 7.

18   See *A Compilation of the Constitution, National and State Statutes and Regulations, Local Government Bye-Laws, Customary Laws and Religious Laws, Policies and Practices, and Court Decisions Relating to the Statutes of Women and Children, Applicable in Nigeria.*

The second is on the abuses that such an overriding male decisional presence may lead to, some of which are legally justified. One of these is the question of violence against women or wife-beating, customary in many communities in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, 'In all the communities, moderate violence is accepted for purposes of correction of the wife, as a man is deemed to be entitled to chastise his wife reasonably for corrective purposes'[19].

The third is on the direct consequence on child upbringing with particular reference to the childhood of girls. According to Hajo Sani (2010), not only is the male child preferred to the female at birth but also 'the female child suffers various forms of violence such as genital mutilation or female circumcision, and in the home she is denied education in preference to her male counterpart and subjected to heavy burden of household chores'.[20] It is reported that Nigeria accounts for more than 25% of circumcised women in the world and that 95% of female circumcisors are unskilled persons (Whyte, 2002)[21].

The end result is the institutionalization of gender inequalities to the disadvantage of girls and women and the establishment of a gender hierarchy that is internalized by women themselves. This renders them quite passive and less inclined to question such stereotypes as the weaker-sex tag as well as possible problems at the workplace such as their being given non-challenging tasks or the non-acceptance by male subordinates of the authority of women managers (Whyte, 2002).[22]

Women Assets

The second strand of our analysis concerns the opportunities and resources possessed by Nigerian women and which constitute potential leverage points for their self-fulfillment. We will focus on two types of resources. The first relates to individual resources or the possession by the average Nigerian girl or woman of the qualities or assets that will make her less dependent on others and especially on men for her existence and success in life. The second are collective resources and are linked to the capacity of women as a group to constitute such an indispensable pressure group, actor, ally and stakeholder in the management of societal problems and particularly problems that are gender sensitive. The capacity of women as a group to mobilize needed public attention to gender-sensitive questions, to inscribe such questions on the agenda of government and to obtain the desired gender-friendly outcomes will be treated.

Individual Resources

We will focus on two principal types of individual resources possessed by women. These are educational qualifications of women and their access to key economic resources. Our thinking is that the more educationally qualified girls or women are, the less likely they are to be dependent on men for subsistence and the more power and control over their lives they have. In addition, the more economic resources they have, the more financially autonomous they are, which makes them equally more inclined to be mistresses of their lives. On the question of educational qualifications, Table 4 presents findings on university degree output by year and sex between 2000 and 2005.

The gender imbalance in the size of university graduates to the disadvantage of girls and women appears from the table. This imbalance does not mean that girls perform academically poorer than their male counterparts who graduate more. It reflects something deeper: a relatively lower number of girls are enrolled for university programs than boys. This translates something deeper because it portrays a lower literacy level for women when compared to men, which places the individual woman at a disadvantaged position compared to her male counterpart. The literacy level of women has been consistently well below the national average. In 1999, the National literacy rate stood at 49%. In the same year, the literacy rate for men was 59% whereas that of women was 41%. In 2005, the national literacy rate increased to 65.7%. The literacy rate for women remained lower at 56.8% while that for men stood at 74.6%.

This gender imbalance in the area of educational qualifications finds expression in the concentration of women in some career paths and their absence in others. Typical female professions are nurses/midwives, teachers in kindergartens and primary schools and secretaries while typical male professions are engineering, banking, veterinary medicine and university lecturers.[23] Because women perform tasks which are comparatively less demanding in terms of educational achievement levels, we opine that their positions feed the weaker sex stereotype and the feeling of inferiority that they might individually have before their male counterparts.

The next element in individual resources concerns economic assets. We have data on three of such assets. The first is the proportion of wages earned by men and women in the non-agricultural sector. Our research findings indicate that in 2007, the proportion of wages earned by men nationally stood at 67.7% and that this was more than twice that of women which stood at 32.3%. Of course there are inter-State variations in these proportions, the gap being narrower in the southern as

19   *ibid*. p. 37. The penal code authorizes this. See *Penal Code*, Section 51 (1) (d).
20   Sani, H., *op cit*. p. 8.
21   Whyte, A., *The Plight of the Nigerian Woman*. p. 29. See also Kisekke, M. N., *Women's Health Issues in Nigeria*. p. 4.
22   Whyte, A., *ibid*. p. 6.

23   Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development., *Nigerian Gender Statistics Book*. p. 43.

compared to the northern states.[24] The second is on the number of micro credits granted to men and women. In 2007, the number of micro credits granted to men was more than two-thirds higher than that granted to women who benefitted only from 29% of the total number of such credits granted. The third item on which we have data is on landownership. Whereas in 2007, 38% of men owned their land, only 7% of women did, the figure rising to 8.5% for women in rural areas compared to 46% for men.[25]

Women thus have few assets and individual resources to live on without depending on their male folks. It is necessary to see if they collectively have the wherewithal to bend such a male-biased system to their needs, wills and demands.

Collective Women Resources

If women cannot individually be agents of their lives and correctors of the gender imbalance, nothing stops them from deriving strength in their numbers through women organizations which they use to inform public policy making. We can identify three different types of women organizations. The first are national umbrella organizations such as the National Council of Women's Societies, the Women in Nigeria and the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria. These federate professional, social and religious women groups and serve to aggregate and articulate the demands of women and to draw the attention of public authorities to the plights of women. They therefore perform useful public agenda setting functions as they incite governments to include gender-sensitive questions on their programmes. The second category of women organizations are those inspired by successive Nigerian First Ladies which are always well advertised and so occupy public attention. The third category are local level women associations such as market women associations. It is important to evaluate how each of these categories of women organizations is able to establish women as indispensable actors in public problem solving and as central deciders of the fate and opportunities given to women.

The National Council of Women's Societies was founded in 1958 before Nigeria's independence. It is an umbrella organization since it federates hundreds of smaller women's groups. Its central focus is to draw attention to gender imbalance in public appointments and to demand for more women in visible positions of political and administrative authority. Its method is consensual rather than confrontational. The model of inter-gender relations which this organization implicitly recognizes is one founded on complementarity, support and collaboration. Therefore it has hardly tried to overturn existing customary and religious laws that discriminate

against women in such areas as property rights, marriage, divorce and child custody (Okonjo, 1994).

On the other hand, Women in Nigeria, WIN, established in 1982 by some radical feminist left-wing women, was much more ambitious in its focus. Its declared aim was to end discrimination against women, to eliminate patriarchy, to promote democracy and human rights and to mobilize women for increased roles in the political and economic fields. The model of inter-gender relations targeted was thus one founded on opposition, challenge and counter action. Though Imam (1997) believes that this organization has been quite vocal in fighting against cases of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence and sexual discrimination, it is debatable if it has been able to modify existing power relations in favour of women. Our examination of the percentage of women in top political positions clearly indicates the very wide gap that exists between some of the objectives established by WIN and reality.

The second category of women organizations are those initiated by Nigerian First Ladies. The two most important of these include the Better Life for Rural Women programme initiated by Mrs Maryam Babangida in September 1987 and the Family Support programme launched by Mrs Maryam Abacha in 1995. Even though these programmes had women and women empowerment as targets, they all adopted a top-down mobilizational approach that defeated the demands of empowerment. The many women organizations that were offshoots of these programmes at the state and local government levels were in the limelight and benefitted from financial resources that tickled down to them from the Federal government as long as the founding First Ladies remained in power. None of these have continued to flower after the end of tenure of the concerned First Ladies. As a means for the collective husbanding of women resources on a continuous basis, First Lady-based women organizations have thus not been very effective.

It is perhaps at the local level that women organizations have some clout. In a very illuminating study of women organizations in the Niger Delta region, Augustine Ikelegbe (2005) shows how numerous grass-root women associations provide the means for women to engage in the struggle for access to resources and empowerment. For him 'Women's indigenous cultural, socio-economic, development, mutual support and informal social groupings are important associational formations that are vital in local governance, economic empowerment, local participation and local cushions in society' (Ikelegbe, 2005).[26] The main women associations that have been able to establish women power in resource allocation at the local level are market women, cooperatives and informal credit (Trager&Osinulu, 1991). Such

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24　Federal Bureau of Statistics., *Women and Men*. p. 41.
25　*ibid*. p. 46.

26　Ikelegbe, A. « Engendering civil society: oil, women groups and resource conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria" in *Journal of Modern African Studies*. p. 245.

associational forms 'constitute an effective collective structure for confronting increased scarcities, creating support, and relating to needs in the context of persisting crises of the economy, development and governance' (Ikelegbe, 2005).[27] Grass-root women associations enable women to participate in crime control, to mediate conflicts between communities, to resolve problems of youth violence, sea piracy and low school enrolment and to mutually support themselves against poverty and economic crises (Ikelegbe, 2005). Local associations in the Niger Delta empower women at three different levels. First, they provide a forum through which women can directly petition, complain to or protest against multinational oil companies and the state. Secondly, women act as the moderators in the interaction between al the stakeholders involved in the conflicts in the Delta region including multinational oil companies, youth and other groups and opinion leaders (Ikelegbe, 2005). Thirdly these try to contain the excesses of some protests.

Local level women organizations are therefore resources for women empowerment because they provide a forum through which women mutually support themselves on the one hand and determine the pace and direction of gender-friendly social change on the other hand. We believe however that the mobilizational capacity and zeal of local-level women is directly linked to the nature of the local environment and the problems being faced by women. Women in the Niger Delta are mobilized because of the specific nature of the environment in which they live, which makes it indispensable for them to pool their energies together if they wish to survive. Loss of viable farmland due to oil exploration, degradation of potable water resources and subsistence fishing have among others direly affected women activities and made it indispensable for them to try to collectively contain further degradation in their conditions, hopes and future.

Though local level women associations provide a forum for women to collectively exercise power to their benefit, we have tried to measure a final possible resource to women empowerment: public belief in the need to improve the position of women in their respective societies. We asked a cross section of Nigerians about their views on the question of the place of women in their respective communities and we will now try to present some of our findings and make some tentative observations.

How Nigerians view women

We conducted a field survey in Nigeria in which we asked a cross section of the Nigerian population several questions regarding the position of women. We administered a questionnaire to more than 600 Nigerians drawn from both sexes, Christian, Muslim and traditional religions and all the regions. Our sample was

therefore quite representative of the Nigerian population. We had a 50% return rate and are now going to present how our respondents have reacted to some of our questions concerning women.

The first relates to their perceptions about the treatment of women in their respective ethnic communities. The results are shown in Table 5. A number of observations are possible on the table. First the dominant perception on women seems to be that they are well treated in their respective ethnic groups with three-fifths of male and female respondents combined having such an opinion. It is only among women respondents that we have a diametrically opposed result. Almost two-thirds of them believe that they are not well treated. Ill treatment will include such things as wife beating, genital mutilation, unequal access to education and the unattractive unchallenging types of roles devolved to girls and women in comparison to their male counterparts. A second significant reading of the data concerns the religious aspect. We find it note-worthy that a relatively higher proportion of muslim than Christian respondents find that their womenfolk are well treated. Some people may want to take such a finding with a pinch of salt but it appears to negate the usually held stereotype of women bondage in the 'traditional' Islamized North in contrast to women freedom in the 'westernized' Christian South. What is equally note-worthy is the divided opinion held on this question by Christians since half of our respondents share the view that women are not well treated.

We tried to determine the key roles that respondents think women should play. We asked them if they were willing to encourage women presence and participation in a number of sectors. Their responses are given in Table 6. Data from this table presents some interesting reading. First irrespective of gender, religious or geographical origins, there are comparatively more people wishing to encourage women presence in sectors like agriculture and petty trading than in the top civil service. The reading is a possible equation of top civil service positions with skills and competences which are stereotypically assumed to be lacking within the Nigerian womenfolk. This conclusion is clearly established when viewed against the background of responses by men where less than twice as many men think women participation in the top civil service should be encouraged as compared to petty trading.

However the findings do not show a total closure to women presence in the supposedly skilled sectors. For example, three quarters of respondents would like to encourage their presence in the management of large industries irrespective of religious, gender or geographical origins. Even in the top civil service sector, globally over half of all respondents believe women presence there should be encouraged with the notable exception of respondents from the North where only 45% hold this opinion.

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27   *ibid.*

A third interesting question we asked respondents concerned their willingness to accept women in some key political or professional positions. Their responses are presented in Table 7. The gender-based dichotomy in openness or closure to executive positions by women is perhaps the most remarkable conclusion possible from the findings in this Table. Whereas majority of women respondents 'naturally' accept women in visible positions of power and authority, only a negligible proportion of their men folk are on the same wavelength. From a religious point of view, a relatively higher percentage of Christians are willing to accept women in positions of power. In addition, people from the Middle Belt are comparatively more open to having women in top executive positions than their colleagues from other parts of the country.

These findings point to a variety of readings on public perception on the position of women. The first is that Nigerian men and women have diametrically opposed views on how women fare and what opportunities they should have for their self-actualization. Whereas most men think that women fare quite well in the present state of affairs, most women have a contrary view. Similarly a higher proportion of women than men are women-executive friendly.

The second finding is paradoxically that a strikingly high number of Nigerians are hardly in favour of maintaining the gender status quo. This conclusion derives from the high number of respondents that wish to encourage women participation in traditionally women-reserved professions like petty trading as well as in the more male-associated sectors like the management of large industries. There thus seems to be a subtle wind of change in public perceptions about the skills possessed by women generally. While women might still be regarded as less skilled than their men folks, they are no longer viewed as incapable and under-skilled.

Public opinion thus seems to be gradually becoming more in favour of women empowerment than against it. The conclusion that Nigerian womenfolk are faring better and better may thus appear plausible to some. This is even more so when measured against the success stories of many Nigerian women today who are in the public eye. A recent study of women under the presidency of Jonathan Goodluck between 2011 and 2015 shows that women have occupied several key decision making positions in the political, administrative and economic fields. A National Gender Policy was developed and implemented leading to a number of visible outcomes including for example 'an increase in women's representation in Government, from 10% in 2011, to over 33% in 2013, with the appointment of 13 female Ministers out of 42, representing 31% and 4 Special Advisers out of 18, representing 23%. These appointments have set the stage for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target number three, on Gender Equity and Women Empowerment' (Calebs, 2014). In addition a number of measures to improve the economic self-actualization of women were set up in the form of two micro-credit schemes, the Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE) and the Business Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW). 77 skills acquisition centres were constructed and equipped across the country to increase income generation, through job creation, for women, especially at the grassroots level. These measures and their outcomes tend to portray Nigerian women as having come of age and as being mistresses of their destiny.

Data derived from studies done by the World Economic Forum on gender equality world-wide seems to buttress such a 'positive' appreciation of the evolution of women in Nigeria. Using four key variables, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment, the World Economic Forum ranks over a hundred countries every year. In the area of economic participation for example, Nigeria moved from the 125th position out of 142 countries in 2011 to the 55th position in 2014. It occupied an enviable 14th position on the question of wage equality over the same period. On the criteria of health and survival, its position equally improved from the 121st to the 109th position over the same period. The improvement was even better in the area of political empowerment, from the 121st to the 102nd over the same period.

The above statistics show that some progress has been made. Unfortunately, though a number of highly successful women can be identified in Nigeria, we believe that it is erroneous to posit that the foundations for women empowerment in contemporary Nigeria are strong, viable and irreversible. The success stories are an exception rather than the rule because notwithstanding the appreciable number of women in key decision making positions, over sixty-seven percentage of Nigerian women remain illiterate and thus incapable of having access to such positions. We have already raised the point concerning the enormous disparity that exists between regions, religions, professions, generations and urban versus rural residential areas in the position of women and their capacity to make binding decisions on their lives and on the workings of their communities. Women empowerment still has a long way to go in Nigeria because the same study by the World Economic Forum that we referred to above finally ranks Nigeria as the 118th country out of 142 countries on gender equality in 2014. This ranking translates several key obstacles against women. The first is the high insecurity that surrounds the lives of many women especially in the rural sector. According to Adelaja (2014), a woman dies while giving birth in Nigeria every 15 minutes. About 630 women die out of every 100,000 live births in Nigeria, the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world, according to the World Health Organization. The figure is as high as 1,100 in northern Nigeria and rural communities where women are less educated and access to health is even worse. Then there is the fact that womanhood and especially girlhood remain de-considered in many parts of Nigeria. The abduction of more than two hundred girls

by the Boko Haram Islamic sect in northern Nigeria and the lukewarm attitude by public authorities to their release attests to such a de-consideration. In addition, there is the dominant patriarchal system in the country, which is 'a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females (Asiyanbola, 2005).[28] Such a system generates a crop of men who have an 'inflated hypermasculine view of manhood' that is detrimental to women empowerment at two levels (Asiyanbola, 2005).[29] The first is that men tend to live out their traditional roles especially at home meaning their refusal to share house-holding functions. The second is that this leads to enormous violence against women.

Irrespective of the existence of many gender-sensitive and gender-responsive institutional mechanisms put into place by public authorities in Nigeria, we believe that the global environment in which Nigerian women live is predominantly woman indifferent and woman depreciating even if not openly woman hostile. It is important to determine first if such a situation has always been the norm in the history of Nigeria and secondly if it is specifically a Nigerian story when compared to other West African countries.

A Comparative Perspective

There is considerable debate about when the relative deprivation of women in terms of social, political and economic decision making can be established. Has this always been the case or is it a recent or contemporary phenomenon? An appreciable number of authors posit that the marginalization of women is a direct outcome of British colonialism. Many argue that a high number of pre-colonial societies in Nigeria had dual gender power structures where male and female decision making organs co-existed. For example, in a study of pre-colonial communities in the Midwestern Nigeria, Okonjo (1976) concludes that women were allowed to establish exclusively women political, economic and social organisations through which they had very wide margins of decisional autonomy. In some other regions, such as among the Yoruba in Western Nigeria, women could also occupy visible political power positions and openly make binding political decisions affecting women. For example, '...women, just as men, had their own governing and chieftain council headed by the *Iyalode* , which administered the needs of women and made representation to the various king's institutions' (Kassey Garba, 1999)[30]. It is argued that such a dual decentralized gender-balanced system of decision making and social relations was dramatically altered and replaced by a more centralized

male-dominated and female-marginalizing power structure by British colonialists. According to Kassey Garba for example, 'not only did colonial structures result in the politics of class...it also stripped women of most of their rights to administer their own affairs and protect their own future'.[31] For example among the Igbo, the British transformed the male *Obi* into a salaried official and thus a leverage point in public decision making but totally by-passed his female counterpart, the *Omu,* thereby bringing an end to the dual sex political system which existed before.

We share the thinking that in many pre-colonial societies especially in the southern part of the country, women were not as de-considered as they are today. However, we don't think that the same societies were therefore egalitarian, with men and women having the same status and access to resources. In reality, most of these societies were non-egalitarian. According to Omadjohwoefe , '... in the pre-colonial social structure only fragments of women had political influence as no woman could assume the position of a head of a town. For example, in traditional Yoruba political system, the only chieftaincy title give to women was the *Iyalode* out of a host of other male titles. Hence little chance of upward mobility for women as compared to men'.[32]

Some might argue that such marginalization was logical since most pre-colonial societies were patrilineal as well as patriarchal. The same trend of women disempowerment is thus reproduced in Ghana, another West African country, where most societies in the northern part of the country, because they were patrilineal, registered a relatively low level of access by women to resources and decision making power. However, an examination of the Akan, a matrilineal group in the southern part of the country that constitutes 44% of the national population shows male dominance to be the rule rather than the exception. Although descent and inheritance among the Akan are organized around the female or maternal rather than the male or paternal figure, this does not mean that the society is matriarchal. According to Fenrich and Higgins, "Although the matrilineal system is based on relationships to common female ancestors, matrilineal does not imply matriarchal; men usually occupy the positions of authority within this system".[33] We agree with Sally Baden, Cathy Green, Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Tessa Peasgood that the fact the Akan are matrilineal "does not necessarily imply significantly greater access to resources and/or higher status of women".[34] In other words, the key leverage point in collective decision making and resource allocation remains the man. In Ghana, like in Nigeria, British colonialism served to consolidate male dominance and exacerbate the relative political, economic and social invisibility of women by

28　Asiyanbola, A. R., « Patriarchy, male dominance, the role and women empowerment in Nigeria". p.2.
29　*ibid*. p. 16.
30　Kassey Garba, P. « An endogenous empowerment strategy: a case-study of Nigerian women", in *Development in Practice*. pp. 134-135.

31　*ibid*. p. 135.
32　Omadjohwoefe, O. S., « Gender Role Differentiation and Social Mobility of Women in Nigeria". p. 70.
33　Fenrich JeanMarie & Tracy E. Higgins., « Promise Unfulfilled: Law, Culture, and Women's Inheritance Rights in Ghana". pp. 271-272.
34　Baden, Sally. et al., "Background Paper on Gender Issues in Ghana". p. 4.

putting "a restriction to women's participation in economic, social and political roles outside of their home".[35]

There are thus lots of similarities between how women fare in Ghana and in Nigeria. First in terms of the institutional mechanisms set up by government to address the question of gender equality and women empowerment. The lead mechanism in both countries, like in many other African countries, is the establishment of a Ministry of Women Affairs to promote women-friendly reforms, advance gender-sensitive measures and eliminate visible forms of discrimination against women. In Nigeria, it is a full Ministry for Women Affairs whereas in Ghana it is a Ministry that deals equally with the Family and Children.[36] In both cases, the efficiency of such a bureaucratic approach "where all issues concerning women would be passed on to an institution without the capacity, resources or power to address them" has been questioned.[37] A second similarity between the position of women in Ghana and in Nigeria is the existence in Ghana, like in Nigeria, of active women advocacy groups and movements. The Women's movement in Ghana is led by three coalitions: DV Bill (Coalition on the Legislation of the Domestic Violence Bill), Women's Manifesto and NETRIGHT (Network for Women's Rights in Ghana). These provide umbrellas which federate about 50 gender-based organizations. Their efficiency in advancing the cause of women leaves much to be desired for many reasons including the fact that they are more often than not reactionary rather than proactive and are influential only around the Greater Accra region and not all over the country.[38] The third similarity is in the low level of visible and tangible results on gender equality in both countries. Although Ghana has gone a step ahead of Nigeria in the area of adopting gender-responsive measures such as the Affirmative Action policy that was adopted in 1998 and that imposes a 40% quota for women representation on all government decision making bodies including the cabinet and Council of State, women still remain marginalized in the scheme of things. The implementation of this Affirmative Action is poor even though it enables Ghana to have a better ranking than Nigeria, 101st as against 118th, in the 2014 Global Gender Gap Index established by the World Economic Forum. Comparatively speaking, Rwanda, another African country, ranks very high on the same index (7th position) because the Rwandan Constitution not only provides that women should be granted at least 30% of posts in decision making bodies and the Senate but also provides for legal sanctions in case of non-compliance.

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35   African Development Fund., "Ghana Country Gender Profile". p. 3.

36   United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., "Recent Trends in National Mechanisms for Gender Equality in Africa".

37   *ibid*. p. 6.

38   Kagoiya, R., (ed.), *Freedom of Information (FOI) & Women's Rights in Africa*. pp. 34-35.

The sorry state of women empowerment is thus not specific to Nigeria. In Ghana, like in Nigeria, women are less educationally endowed than their male counterparts. Like in Nigeria, there is in Ghana a dramatic decrease in the presence of women at each higher stage of the educational process.[39] Like in Nigeria, women in Ghana suffer very serious health problems. Maternal mortality is quite high because nearly 600,000 women die every year from pregnancy.[40] Like in Nigeria, girlhood and womanhood are devalued and boyhood and manhood well valued by a dominant mindset. "In Ghana, when a woman gives birth, it is common to hear men ask the question: "Is that a human being (boy) or an animal (girl)?""[41] In Ghana like in Nigeria, household management remains male dominated and mono-cephalous. Like in Nigeria, violence against women is common practice in Ghana. The Criminal Code in Ghana for example stipulates that female genital mutilation is a second-degree felony that can be punished by a three-year prison sentence but the law is hardly applied and so hardly a deterrent to offenders.[42]

It is worthwhile to try to explain why women empowerment remains a mirage in Nigeria as well as in Ghana. Our thinking is that there exists what we qualify as a "male ceiling" in both countries, something that is not openly acknowledged but nonetheless constitutes an intractable barrier against women emancipation and self-actualization. The "male-ceiling" is nurtured by a structure of male-female relations founded on male hegemony. There is an inbuilt system of relations that obey the domination-subordination dichotomy and a socialization on gender disparity that starts right from childhood. In a study on young people's work in Ghana and the Gambia, Chant and Jane (...) conclude that there is a traditional division of labour for children in which "domestic labour is deemed fundamentally to be "women's work"..."[43] Officially, gender-responsive measures abound but there are no real sanctions if these are not complied with.

The challenges facing women empowerment in Nigeria, like in many other African countries, thus remain quite daunting. For women empowerment to become a reality, a much more perceptible change in mentalities, in gender stereotypes and in gender power sharing needs to occur. The fact that only 38% of my respondents in Nigeria are willing to accept a woman as President and considerably less a woman as the immediate boss indicates the long and tortuous route that women still need to take in order to finally be the custodians of their lives and destinies.

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39   Akita, Edward. M., *Hegemony, Patriarchy and Human Rights: The Representation of Ghanaian Women in Politics*. p. 78.

40   Hagman, M., « Maternal Mortality: Gender and Access to Health Services – The Case of Ghana". p. 173.

41   Akita, Edward. M., *op cit*. p. 171.

42   Torto, Beatrice. T., « AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN GHANA: CHALLENGES TO A GROWING DEMOCRACY". p. 44.

43   Chant, S. & G. A. Jane., « Youth, Gender and Livelihoods in West Africa: Perspectives from Ghana and the Gambia". p. 192.

The opportunities open to them still appear to be quite limited and their leverage, influence and power over what they get, when and how remain quite low even if not totally insignificant.

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Tables

Table 1: Gender disparity in Nigeria (2005)

Element	Position of men/ percentage of men in National figure	Position of women/ percentage of women in National figure
People below poverty line	35%	65%
Average purchasing power	1,495 dollars	614 dollars
People in Federal Civil Service	76%	24%
People in managerial positions	86%	14%
Medical Doctors	82,5%	17,5%
People working in informal sector	13%	87%
People working in industrial sector	89%	11%
Land ownership	90%	10%
Agricultural work	30%	70%
Food processing	10%	90%
Properties disposable at will	95%	5%

Source: *Democratic Dividends for Nigerian Women and Children.* Report of the Accomplishments of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs in 2005, p. 4.

Table 2: Position of women at federal and State legislative and executive positions between 1999 and 2007

Office	Positions available	Number of women 1999	%of women 1999	Number of women 2003	%of women 2003	Number of women 2007	%of women 2007
President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vice President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senate	109	3	2.7	4	3.7	9	8.3
House of Rep.	360	12	3.3	22	6.1	26	7.22
State Governors	36	0	0	0	0	0	0
State Deputy Governors	36	1	2.8	1	2.8	4	11.1
State Houses of Assembly	990	12	1.2	23	2.3	53	
Speakers of State House of Assembly	36**	1	2.7	3	8.3	3	5.9
Federal Cabinet Ministers*	44	9	20.5	12	27.3	12	27.3
Local Government Councillors		80	1.2	270	3.01	164	9.4
Local government Chairperson	774	9	1.2	0	0	11	

Source: various documents including *Nigerian Gender Statistics Book* 2008 by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Abuja and *Report of the Nation-wide Gender Data Capture*, National Centre for Women Development (NCWD), July 2009.

*includes Special Advisers

** There were more speakers in reality because a few states changed their Speakers during the term of the House of Assembly

Table 3: Decision making on Family Issues in Nigeria

Decision	Woman only (%)	Woman and Man (%)	Man only (%)
Wife's health	12.8	10.3	73.4
Large household purchase	7.1	12.4	77.5
Daily household purchase	19.0	13.9	64.5
Visit to relatives	17.7	20.4	59.7
Food to cook	33.5	11.7	51.0
Child Health Care	7.5	17.3	66.8
Child Education	4.8	16.5	67.7

Source: *National Centre for Women Development Report of the Nation-Wide Gender Data Capture.* July 2009. p. 84.

Table 4: University Degree attained by year and sex (Male/Female) 2000-2005

Degree	2000/2001		2001/2002		2002/2003		2003/2004		2004/2005	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Bachelor's	29782	18009	35989	22316	41252	29109	30105	20314	15314	10715
Post Graduate Diploma	7573	2516	5050	1707	3471	1939	3762	1833	1833	1489
Master's	7714	3106	10994	4157	10748	3308	8529	3963	3963 2033	
Doctorate	546	147	578	143	553	199	577	217	217	92

Source: *NCWD Report of the Nation-Wide Gender Data Capture,* July 2009. p. 71.

Table 5: Percentage of Respondents who think that women are well-treated in their ethnic groups

	Sex			Religion*				Region of origin**			
	Male N=188	Female N=113	Total N=301	1 N=159	2 N=124	3 N=18	4 N=301	A N=98	B N=104	C N=99	D N=301
Yes, well-treated	75	36	60.4	50.3	69	89	60.4	57	63	60	60.4
No, not well-treated	25	64	39.6	49.7	31	11	39.6	43	37	40	39.6

*1=Christians 2=Muslims 3=Traditional Religion 4=Total

**A=The North B= The Middle Belt C=The South D= Total
Source: Field Work

Table 6: Percentage of Respondents wishing to encourage women presence or participation in selected sectors

Sectors	Sex			Religion*				Region of origin**			
	Male N=188	Female N=113	Total N=301	1 N=159	2 N=124	3 N=18	4 N=301	A N=98	B N=104	C N=99	D N=301
Agriculture	80	76	79	82	72	89	79	81	80	74	79
Petty Trade	93	83	89	95	90	89	92	90	93	94	92
Large Industries	65	93	75	80	72	55	75	67	82	76	75
Top civil service	44	95	63	72	52	50	63	45	75	67	63

*1=Christians 2=Muslims 3=Traditional Religion 4=Total

**A=The North B= The Middle Belt C=The South D= Total
Source: Field Work

Table 7: Percentage of Respondents willing to accept a woman in top position

Position	Sex			Religion*				Region of origin**			
	Male N=188	Female N=113	Total N=301	1 N=159	2 N=124	3 N=18	4 N=301	A N=98	B N=104	C N=99	D N=301
President	18	70	38	44	30	33	38	34	45	35	38
State Governor	19	78	42	48	34	33	42	34	51	39	42
Professional Boss	18	52	31	37	24	28	31	22	44	32	33

*1=Christians 2=Muslims 3=Traditional Religion 4=Total

**A=The North B= The Middle Belt C=The South D= Total
Source: Field Work

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