

Chapter 2

Nigerian Women's Trust Fund to Strengthen Women's Political Participation, Nigeria

2.1 Context

Since the cessation of military rule in Nigeria in 1999, the state has made a steady and remarkable transition to democracy. However, the participation of women in this democratisation process has been far from equal with that of men. There are major and continuing constraints against women's participation in political processes at all levels, stemming from resource limitations, traditional gender roles and associated cultural norms. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been a small, but significant, increase in the number of appointments of women to leadership positions at the national and local levels. Whereas in 1999 women represented only 1.2 per cent of the officials occupying seats in local government councils, in 2007, women accounted for 9.4 per cent of local councils and held 4.6 per cent of the positions of council chairperson (Government of Nigeria 2015). There has been a surge in women's participation, for example, in the design and implementation of environmental policies and programmes; currently, a woman occupies the position of Chair of the Senate Committee on Environment. Previously, women also held the positions of Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Environment and Honourable Minister, Federal Ministry of the Environment (Government of Nigeria 2015).

This case study focuses on one specific initiative, the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund (NWTF), launched in 2011 to expand women's political participation.

2.2 Key institutional actors

NWTF is a multi-stakeholder initiative backed by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and a coalition of civil society, private sector and international development agency partners, including UN Women (Government of Nigeria 2013b). A small core management team of chief executive officer, finance officer and programme officer work with the support of a 10-member board of directors and a 14-member advisory board representing a cross-section of mainly women from government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), plus academics, activists and other public figures. NWTF builds on and is supported by a range of other initiatives by the Government of Nigeria, in partnership with local civil society organisations and international organisations. It works across the country to expand women's political participation in the National Assembly and state legislatures, supporting women to step up and represent a population that is 49 per cent female.

2.3 Theory of change

In an effort to carve out space for women in politics – including a greater number of elected seats, and leadership and involvement at all levels – the government has launched a host of legislative and policy-based interventions. These are rooted in the following theory of change: if gender equality and good governance are to be achieved in Nigeria, then both men and women must enjoy unrestricted access to spaces of power, where they can realise their leadership potential and contribute to the democratising efforts of the nation. With regard to NWTF, if women who aspire to political office are supported with funds and skills training in their efforts to develop political platforms, launch successful campaigns and exercise effective leadership once elected, then a shift will occur in the Nigerian political landscape. More women will be inspired to enter politics and more will succeed in that arena. In other words, critical barriers to women's participation in politics – their inexperience, lack of confidence, lack of funds and insufficient support networks – will be reduced.

2.4 Social institutions and discriminatory norms

The national women's machinery (NWM) in Nigeria and its partners recognise that specific social institutions and discriminatory norms must be challenged for programmes such as NWTF to be successful and for women's political empowerment to be achieved. As such, NWTF fits within a multipronged strategy, elements of which are described below, to address barriers to women's political participation and empowerment:

Formal laws, policies and accountability: The National Gender Policy, which promotes women's political empowerment and stipulates that 35 per cent of political offices at all levels be held by women, '...seeks to ensure that there is a gender perspective in all sectors of development, making gender analysis an integral part of all policy articulation, implementation and evaluation' (Government of Nigeria 2013b). In 2012, three memoranda from the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (MWASD), the National Council for Women's Societies, and Gender and Constitution Reforms in Nigeria, respectively, urged the National Assembly to enact amendments to the constitution in order to enable the election of more women to public office. Implementation of constitutional reforms has been supported by local as well as external stakeholders, including representatives from UN Women and the Democratic Governance for Development project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Access to resources and opportunities: Few women are registered members of political parties and fewer still enjoy the support of a multitude of party members – necessary if they are to stake a claim to executive leadership and exert influence. The Nigerian delegation to the March 2013 Consultation of Commonwealth National Women's Machineries highlighted inhibiting factors to women's participation, linked to financial and human resources and associated opportunities. Besides low membership in political parties, women struggle with limited avenues for their

political advancement, due to restricted opportunities to cultivate relationships with political mentors, insufficient networks to galvanise public support and limited funds to finance campaigns. In an effort to address these gaps, in 2006 MWASD, in partnership with local women's NGOs, established a series of regional offices to serve as resource centres for women aspiring to enter the political arena. These zonal women political empowerment offices have facilitated the accelerated political participation of women in states like Osun, Imo, Gombe, Rivers, Zamfara and Nasarawa (Government of Nigeria 2013b).

Informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices: Constraints to women's participation in political processes stem from traditional gender roles and associated cultural norms, as well as an aggressive, male-dominated political culture that has taken root in the country, characterised by outbreaks of violence, and incidents of corruption and other malpractice. Moreover, there are deep-seated cultural norms and religious beliefs, which dictate that women should not assert themselves as outspoken leaders in their communities (Government of Nigeria 2013a). In addition, the overwhelming burden of care work – in other words, women's considerable investment of time and other resources into childrearing and homemaking – often precludes political involvement (Government of Nigeria 2013a). In recent years, the government has mobilised public support for women's political participation through: high-profile action like the 2010 National Summit for Women's Participation and Representation in Decision-making, organised by MWASD in the lead up to the 2011 elections; advocacy initiatives like the Women for Change Initiative of Nigeria's First Lady, Dame Patience Jonathan; lobbying groups like the 100 Women Lobby Group, which aims to significantly increase the appointment of women to public office; and issue-based coalitions led by women's NGOs and faith-based organisations such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria.

Women's and men's consciousness: In Nigeria, there is a pervasive view that women's place is not in politics, but in the community and the home. By opening up a space for women in politics, NWTF seeks to: a) alter perceptions of the appropriateness of women as politicians; and b) generate confidence in their capacity to exercise leadership within political parties and in local and federal governing bodies.

2.5 Strategies

Despite positive changes wrought by the initiatives highlighted above, there remain considerable obstacles to women's participation in politics – one of which is a lack of funds to finance campaigns. In an effort to address this challenge, the NWTF for female politicians was launched in Abuja on 24 March 2011. A multi-stakeholder initiative, its main objectives are to:

- Provide aspiring female politicians with financial and other resources to support their campaigns, through transparent processes irrespective of their political inclinations.
- Enhance the leadership capacity of aspiring female politicians and women in appointed positions.

- Sustainably raise funds, invest and manage resources for women's political participation, in fulfilment of Nigeria's affirmative action quota, designating at least 35 per cent of seats in political bodies to women.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for female politicians, with support from relevant organisations.
- Promote and carry out research and advocacy that raises awareness about the current situation of women in politics, and that generates support for women who currently hold or are seeking high elective or appointed positions in government.

Although managed by a small team, NWTF has achieved considerable visibility and planted the seeds of future change. Since 2011, it has grown into a robust political network-building and knowledge-sharing platform, with an active web presence. Its two flagship projects, 'Create Her Space' and 'She Should Contest', seek to carve out a greater space for women politicians to participate in political activities and debates, and to inspire a national dialogue on the urgency of addressing gender imbalance in elective and appointed offices in Nigeria (NWTF 2015b).

2.6 Outcomes to date

During its first grant cycle, in the run-up to the 2011 elections, NWTF disbursed support to 154 women out of a total of 220 eligible candidates, representing a range of political parties and electoral districts across the country (NWTF 2015b). Since then, NWTF has created a diverse set of initiatives to promote women's political participation. One such initiative is the 'She Should Contest' campaign, which aims to incite change – not only in formal institutions, but also in informal attitudes and practices. By starting an online conversation about getting more women into the political sphere, and enabling ordinary citizens to participate in processes of candidate nomination and election through a simple 'type-and-click' forum, NWTF has opened up new avenues for democratic decision-making. Most importantly, it has removed a critical barrier to women's participation in politics – lack of information and access to resources – and challenged a common perception that women's exclusion from political office is acceptable and culturally appropriate. It sends a clear message that women deserve to play an active role in shaping their nation's democracy, growth and development.

Like its partner campaign, 'Create Her Space' aims to induce changes in the political status quo. Its primary achievement has been to reach new audiences by way of social media. A short film, *A New Dawn*, represents an innovative tool through which NWTF has sensitised the Nigerian public to the dearth of women in political office, and the need to take active steps to reverse an emerging trend in which women are securing fewer seats in national political assemblies (seen most recently in the 2007 and 2011 elections). It is the compelling story of a female schoolteacher who, frustrated by corrupt officials obstructing the equitable division of resources in her community, challenges social norms by running for village chief. The film has drawn viewers of all ages and presented an appealing alternative to the top-down, patriarchal model

of political power. It features an array of voices of current and former advocates of women's increased representation in political office.¹

Box 2.1 Fostering participation

The bold slogan at the top of the 'She Should Contest' campaign webpage states: 'Nominate a Woman Today' (NWTF 2015a). It encourages visitors to the website to nominate themselves or other women from their communities to run for elected office, a process facilitated by an easy-to-complete online form. Once nominated, any woman who meets eligibility criteria for campaign-resource support (in the form of paid-for publicity and other campaign necessities) can choose to apply. In so doing, she becomes a member of a robust and celebrated group of feminist change-makers – 'one of 100,000+ women thinking about running for office'.

Source: NWTF (2015a).

Since its debut at a high-profile screening in Abuja, sponsored by the World Bank, *A New Dawn* has been watched and distributed widely. It is accessible to anyone in Nigeria with access to the internet; to date, it has scored record numbers of YouTube views. The film has become a key advocacy tool, featuring in leadership training and awareness-raising workshops facilitated by the NWTF, and by its UK partners at the Department for International Development (DFID) and British Council. NWTF staff point to the potency of its message and the appeal that it carries in a society that is saturated with visual media, but which craves stories of substance and social change beyond entertaining films produced by the 'Nollywood' industry. At each screening, audiences have the opportunity to respond to the film, and are supported to identify and learn from its central themes. *A New Dawn* has enabled NWTF to reach international audiences, and has laid the groundwork for innovative partnerships and grassroots and high-level interventions in support of women's political empowerment, not only in Nigeria but throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Since its inception, the national, international and project portfolio of NWTF has expanded considerably (personal communication with Anthony Abu, Research and Media Outreach Coordinator, NWTF, 16 June 2015). In addition, it has an active presence on social media – publicising events and campaigns through posts on Facebook and Twitter, and through text message notifications sent via WhatsApp and Blackberry Messenger. In 2015, NWTF held a 'Twitter Quiz' to encourage young women to register to vote, in which prizes were offered and participants had the opportunity to submit photos documenting their efforts at peer education and community mobilisation (personal communication with Anthony Abu, Research and Media Outreach Coordinator, NWTF, 16 June 2015). NWTF has launched several initiatives directed at young women, educating them on the 'dangers of staying aloof from politics' and the value that they – as intelligent, competent and active members

of their communities – contribute in the political arena. The response to these efforts has been overwhelmingly positive. As noted by Anthony Abu, Research and Media Outreach Co-ordinator at NWTF, there is a tangible excitement in the room when young women are made aware of their political agency: ‘They get excited, because we make them understand ... that they have what it takes. They are intelligent. It’s not about sex. A man can do it; a boy can do it; a girl can do it’.

Box 2.2 On the importance of male allies

‘We emphasise the fact that women cannot do it alone. They need the support of men. That’s why we are engaging the male political leaders to see how they can help to create better, inclusive policies within their parties... We know that this is a big task, because of the kind of society in which we find ourselves, where traditional, religious beliefs tend to say otherwise. But we intend to go ahead to do as much as we can. To see our parties create more policies to enable women to participate more effectively.’

–Anthony Abu, NWTF

In addition to building alliances among women, NWTF has achieved considerable success in its efforts to cultivate support from men. NWTF has convened several meetings of male as well as female legislators, in which it has championed the cause of women’s political empowerment. At one such meeting, the Male Political Leaders Summit held in September 2014, 50 assembled men adopted a resolution expressing their support for women seeking to hold political office and exercise political leadership, and their commitment to creating an enabling environment for women in politics. Though there is continued resistance to the idea of women being at the helm of affairs within political parties, many more men are supportive of the idea that women should hold political office, and that committed and highly competent women within party structures should hold management positions with relatively high internal and external visibility.

There have already been promising signs of change. Binta Masi Garba’s election to Chairperson of the All Progressives Congress (APC) in Adamawa State (in the more conservative northern region of Nigeria) – the first time a woman has been elected Chair of a national political party – heralded a sea change in Nigerian politics. Prior to her election, a former Vice President spoke openly of his admiration for her stellar political record and unflinching loyalty to the party. Although not a direct recipient of NWTF support, Ms Garba’s election set an example for women across Nigeria and she was subsequently elected to the Senate during the March 2015 general election.

Another rising political star, Mulikat Akande-Adeola, epitomises the potential that can be unleashed when a woman is supported to win an election campaign. In 2011, Ms Akande-Adeola received a NWTF grant and went on to be elected Majority Leader of the House of Representatives. She also lobbied for a gender quota

to be introduced in the Nigerian Constitution, and convened a national political conference for women. Before this, Akande-Adeola had worked for two decades in Lagos and its surrounding areas as a community mobiliser and champion of women's and children's welfare. Her passion, dedication and clear vision of change rendered her an ideal candidate for NWTF support, which in turn helped her to realise her political ambition and become a national symbol of women's strength and skill in the political arena.

2.7 Lessons learned and the way forward

NWTF provides other Commonwealth countries with examples of innovative approaches to increase women's political participation and leadership. The multiple strategies being used to address constraints to women's participation – including social norms about women's leadership, practical issues such as lack of resources to run for office, and practical leadership skills building – are beginning to show positive results. Even so, NWTF has identified some challenges that its staff are working to address and which are offered as lessons for others embarking on similar initiatives.

Despite the many successful initiatives, NWTF remains constrained in terms of human resources and is currently working to build its staffing levels. NWTF's headquarters are in Abuja, and unfortunately it does not have the capacity to extend programmes to rural areas outside Abuja and Lagos, where there is arguably greater need due to the entrenchment of patriarchal gender norms and low rates of education among women. While NWTF enjoys robust support from donors,² and staff perceive NWTF's ongoing and planned projects to be sustainable over the long term, it cannot reach all women who have political aspirations. Women throughout Nigeria are considerably disadvantaged economically and continue to face challenges generating resources to fund their campaigns.

An important lesson learned has been the necessity of closely monitoring the distribution and use of NWTF's resources and being very selective about whom to support – i.e. ensuring that resources are allocated to deserving candidates, who will use them effectively in support of their own campaigns and once elected in support of legitimate causes, including the creation of an enabling environment for women in politics. Instead of directly supporting political candidates with cash grants, in the 2015 election cycle NWTF supported grantees by paying for their publicity materials (print and online) and by subsidising all other campaign related costs. The reorientation of NWTF's mission has meant that while women continue to receive support, this is channelled directly into campaigns and disbursed at the discretion of NWTF.

NWTF is also launching several initiatives to continue encouraging women's engagement in the political process. One such initiative, still in the final stages of development, is the **Young Women Leadership Project**, a political mentorship programme in which adolescent girls and young women will undergo intensive training in political leadership and advocacy, observe sessions of the National Assembly, and lobby their legislators to address a pressing issue in their communities.

The programme designers anticipate that there will be a ripple effect of learning and change, as the initial cohort of 20 girls will each train 20 more – and a network of politically engaged women with access to representatives at the highest level of government will grow.

Similar efforts at political awareness-raising, political party recruitment and party leadership cultivation have targeted an audience of older women. In collaboration with DFID, NWTF launched **Voices of Change**, a nationwide initiative that mobilises women to register to vote and join political parties, and supports women within party structures to participate fully – that is, to play an active role in collective decision-making, and to seek and exercise leadership effectively. The primary agents of change are female political party members, who recruit others in their communities. A handbook, to be published shortly (at time of writing), will support further skills building and leadership training for women who aspire to, or currently hold, political office (personal communication with Anthony Abu, 16 June 2015). This project, like the ones that target young women, places women's competence as political representatives and leaders at the forefront of its message. It also encourages compassion and generosity – not competition – among women in politics, so as to fully support women interested in entering this field.³

Notes

- 1 Including Rep Otive Ugbuzor of the Centre-LSD party, Rep Funke Baruwa of the OSSAP-MDGs party and Chidi Odinkalu, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, NWTF; See: <http://createherspace.nigerianwomentrustfund.org/index.php/a-new-dawn> (accessed on 27 May 2015).
- 2 Including the UK Department for International Development (DFID), National Endowment for Democracy and the British Council.
- 3 Trust Fund staff noted that sometimes well-established female politicians behave in such a way as to discourage other women from entering that space (personal communication with Anthony Abu, NWTF, 16 June 2015).

References

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