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WIFEISM AND ACTIVISM IN THE NIGERIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The Nigerian population is composed of more than three hundred distinct ethnic groups, which were brought together under British colonial rule in 1914. Long-standing ethnic and religious rivalries, reinforced by the British, remain a dominant feature of Nigerian political and social life. In general, the north is dominated by the Muslim Hausa and Fulani; the southeast, by the predominantly Christian Igbo and the southwest, by the Yoruba, who include both Christians and Muslims. Since independence in 1960, competition for control of the nation's economic and political resources has led to brief efforts at democracy interrupted by prolonged periods of military rule. Most recently, the military government spent years proclaiming its commitment to a return to civil rule. After numerous delays, presidential elections were finally held in June 1993. When the government's candidate appeared to lose, the results were promptly cancelled.

The government influences every sector of Nigerian life through layers of administrative structures that reach far into rural areas. Despite increasing urbanisation, approximately 70 percent of the population still live in rural areas, where

they engage largely in agriculture and small-scale economic activities. Agriculture was traditionally the core of the Nigerian economy, a situation that dramatically changed with the discovery of oil in the 1970s. This vast oil wealth has brought some infrastructure and industry to Nigeria.

However, the country's enormous economic potential has remained largely unrealised. Much of the country's oil revenue has been concentrated among a small elite or lost to poor economic planning and corruption. Few, if any, of the benefits have reached the majority of Nigerians. These problems, combined with the severe global recession of the 1980s, led the government to adopt a mandated structural adjustment program (SAP) to increase foreign exchange earnings to service the country's foreign debt. This has dramatically curtailed funding for social programs and has had severe effects on the standard of living of Nigerians at all levels.

In many areas, the brunt of these economic problems have been felt most acutely by women as few women are steadily employed in the formal economy. In urban areas, women's work is concentrated in the informal sector, especially in food production and sale and in trading. In rural areas, women generally work in food crop agriculture, food processing, petty trading, and a host of time-consuming, unremunerated household tasks. Most household, especially those in rural areas are large and multigenerational; approximately 40 percent of Nigerian marriages are polygynous and the total fertility rate, while declining, still averages more than six births per woman.¹ This rate reflects prevailing attitudes, which value large families and base women's status primarily on their roles as wives and mothers, especially of male children.

These familial roles were traditionally the basis on which Nigerian women organized within their villages and communities around activities such as circumcision, childbirth, and marriage rites. The groups organized around these

activities as well as savings societies and work groups formed the basis of women's rich associational history in precolonial times. Women were also active in organisations established to protect their communities. These associations unquestionably provided women with necessary support and camaraderie. However, in keeping with the values that underlay 'tradition' and religion, these activities also tended to reinforce and reproduce the structures of patriarchy through which women were subordinated.

During the British colonial period, women continued to address their traditional socioeconomic and political concerns, while also protesting against the economic and political policies of the colonial government. Two well-known examples of women's activism are the Aba women's riot of 1929 and the Egba women's protest of 1947. In both cases, women organized and took to the streets to protest the colonial administration's most egregious taxation policies and those prohibiting assembly. Out of these anticolonial struggles emerged the first women's association that crossed ethnic, religious, and class barriers. The National Women's Union was started in 1947 by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a dynamic leader who organized the Egba women's protest.²

Women's Emancipation and Empowerment

In contemporary Nigeria there is at least some general level of national awareness of the importance of women's roles in development. A host of women's organisations operate at the national and/or at the grassroots community level. Of necessity, these groups are primarily concerned with conventional issues of livelihood and welfare. However, questions of women's emancipation and empowerment are also debated, and women's organisations are posing significant challenges to patriarchal structures.

Concomitant with the onset of the ongoing Nigerian economic crisis, since the 1980s rural and urban Nigeria

women—sometimes joined by men—have increasingly organized to empower women and help them devise strategies to combat the effect of the economic crisis. These organisations have tackled not just the difficulties posed by the relics of traditional cultural practices but also newer problems caused by the dynamics of 'modernisation'. Generally, rural women's groups identified with traditional activities such as initiation rites have declined in number and significance as cultural values and practices have changed.

Presently, the majority of women's organisations that have emerged to champion the rights of women and to advance gender consciousness in society are located in the principal urban centres. In Nigeria, there is general agreement that there is a women's movement comparable to other social movements with a visible presence around the country. However, sociologist Mere Kisekka in substantially right in stating that:

"it cannot however, be accurately inferred that there is a women's movement in the country which is vociferously engaged in the exposure and challenge of gender inequality in most of its ramifications. Rather, most women's associations have striven to operate cautiously within traditional gender boundaries articulating the theory of complementary rather than competitive roles in gender relations."³

Only a few activists take the view that the objectives of the women's movement are similar to those of labour, human rights, and student groups, which clamor for restructuring society. Most see the objectives of women's groups as different:

"The Nigerian women's movement is an unarmed movement. It is non-confrontation. It is a movement for the progressive upliftment of women for motherhood, nationhood and development"⁴.

Very few women leaders accept that the movement is feminist in orientation. Those objecting to the feminist label view it as Western terminology that should not be employed in Africa, as captured in the words of a woman lawyer:

"When African women demand equality, we are only asking for our rights not to be tampered with, and the removal of laws that oppress and dehumanize women. We are not asking for equality with our husbands. We accept them as the bosses and heads of the family."⁵

The concept of feminism should thus be contextualised within each society where it applies. Yet in a certain sense, the Nigerian women's movement can be considered feminist in orientation because it is attempting to transform gender relations in society. To buttress this point, a leader of the group women in Nigeria asks:

"What is Western feminism anyway? African men see nothing wrong in their relationship with Western governments and institutions. Why? Because they feel threatened by the prospect of feminism."⁶

The women's movement is evolving as women build coalitions. Examples of these are the establishment of the Community Development Association by grassroots women's groups, the formation of the National Task Force on Vesico-Vaginal Fistulae (VVF),⁷ and the formation of the Nigeria National Safe Motherhood Movement by women's health groups.

The notion that women are bound together by a common history of oppression and a common struggle to achieve liberation does hold true in Nigeria. There are secondary divisions in any social movement that create obstacles for the realisation of group objectives, even within a single-sex movement like the women's movement.⁸ In Nigeria these cleavages are based on age, religion, marital status, ethnic origin, educational level, and social class. Tensions and conflicts within the women's movement have been based in part on differences over strategy and policy and in part on leadership struggles. The Nigerian movement cannot be faulted for not being a homogenous organized body. Rather, it consists of several groups, all of which are arguing in

different, and at times conflicting, ways about matters affecting women based on differing perceptions of women's interests.

Throughout Nigerian history, numerous individual women have gained national prominence in their own right. It is also the case that wives of men in certain occupations, have had ceremonial responsibilities. The roles of politicians' wives have recently been institutionalised in a manner that has far-reaching implications for an autonomous, genuine women's agenda oriented toward full emancipation. The role of the Nigerian state in relation to the women's movement can be examined in the expression of this peculiar phenomenon of 'wifeism' in women's affairs. In this chapter I examine the emergence of wifeism and the bureaucratisation of women's concerns in Nigeria through state involvement, especially since the early 1980s. I pay particular attention to the relations between state-sponsored women's programs and autonomous groups in the women's movement. Finally, I explore the implications all these issues have for developing and moving forward a truly emancipatory feminist agenda in Nigeria.

Bureaucratisation of Women's Issues

As part of the United National decade for Women (1975-1985), all member governments were encouraged to establish appropriate national machinery to aid women's integration into development. Nigeria's response led to the increasing bureaucratisation of women's issues. The National Committee on Women and Development (NCWD) was established within the federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, and Sports in 1982. The NCWD was set up to liaise between women's nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and the government to coordinate all activities relating to women, to advise the government on women's issues, and to design programs to facilitate women's integration into the development process.⁹ The NCWD's activities were fairly traditional, such as training in home economics, arts and crafts, health and personal

hygiene, literacy, and income-generating activities. The committee's composition reflected an urban, upper-class bias; although 90 percent of Nigeria's female population work in the agricultural or informal sectors of the economy, there was no one to represent their interests on the NCWD's twelve-member board.

After reverting to military rule in the 1980s, Nigeria began for the first time since independence to pay specific policy attention to women's issues at the highest level of state power, the presidency. This interest in women can be understood in the context of the overall objectives of the SAP. One of the SAP's provisions was to facilitate opening up the rural areas by providing incentives to male farmers to increase productivity and generate higher monetary income. This was central to the government's export promotion drive aimed at boosting foreign exchange earnings for debt servicing and repayment.

To involve women fully in development, and to counter the negative effects of these export promotion policies on rural families, the government initiated the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLP) in 1987, launched as an arm of the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure. This programme ushered in a new era in the development of the women's agenda in Nigeria. It heralded the twin processes of direct intervention by the state in the formation and funding of women's organisations and the systematic appointment of wives of high-ranking government officials as leaders of these organisations. I refer to these phenomena as state pseudo-feminism. By introducing the BLP, the Nigerian government brought rural women, long excluded from the capitalist nexus, directly into the capitalist arena.¹⁰ While the BLP first targeted only rural women, eventually all rural inhabitants were included in order to encourage men to support the program.

Mrs. Maryam Babangida, wife of the then military president, Ibrahim Babangida, was the founder and national

coordinator of the BLP, which she came to personify. In this capacity, she was assisted by a team made up of the wives of ranking service chiefs and a select group of professional academic women. This pattern was replicated at other government levels, with wives of state governors who were appointed military officers and local government chairman heading BLP branches to their husbands' areas of jurisdiction. Only in the few cases where a woman herself was a local government chairperson were other women appointed as leaders within the BLP organisation.

The BLP's stated aim was to create a 'new rural woman'—economically strong, politically active, socially aware, psychologically fulfilled, and thus equipped to play her role in society to the fullest.¹¹ To achieve these objectives, the BLP began literacy and vocational training courses, social welfare and health programs, enlightenment campaigns, and income-generating projects for women. By 1991, the BLP was claiming 9,422 cooperatives 1,435 cottage industries, 1,094 multipurpose centres, and 495 shops and markets scattered throughout the country. There were BLP branches in all thirty states and the federal district of Abuja, from the ward level to the national level. Their activities were covered extensively in the print and electronic media. By 1992, the BLP had built the ultramodern Center for Women's Development in Abuja, named for Maryam Babangida, appointed the BLP's national patron and the only life member of the board.

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. The BLP leadership structure was both hierarchical and completely unrepresentative of its professed constituency of poor, uneducated rural women. The automatic appointment of women to positions based on their husband's rank in the state political and military hierarchy and regardless of

suitability or merit was undemocratic and reinforced the prevailing societal image of women as appendages to male power.

The BLP's cooptation of the women's agenda and use of government funds were challenged in several ways. Most notable was a legal complaint filed in 1989 by Lagos lawyer and human rights activist Gani Fawehinmi seeking a court injunction to restrain the federal military government from authorizing additional public funds to Mrs. Babangida. Fawehinmi maintained that Babangida had "no legal and constitutional function of duty assigned to her and consequently... no legal and constitutional right or backing to use or expend public funds for any purpose."¹² While the government did not respond to Fawehinmi's suit, it decreed the institutionalisation of the BLP's activities. Shortly afterward, the government created a new body, the National Commission for Women. It was mandated to take over the activities of both the NCWD and BLP, among other functions.

Both the commission and BLP enjoyed patronage from the government in the form of yearly grants. Between 1987 and 1992, the BLP received 400 million naira (\$ 18 million); the commission was allocated 77 million naira (\$4 million) for its three-year plan. These funds have provided office buildings in nearly every state, staff salaries, media coverage, overseas travel, vehicle purchases, and the presence of the top government functionaries at the organisations' events. The impact on actual programs and the lives of rural women is somewhat less clear.

While at first relations between the new commission and the BLP were cordial, discernible cracks soon appeared in their facade of solidarity. In keeping with the mandate to take over the BLP's activities, the commission's board wanted to streamline the BLP and subject it to examination and monitoring. However, the BLP coordinators and advisers refused to submit to this scrutiny. This initially resulted in a

standoff between the two organisations and eventually in a 1992 military decree that replaced the previous decree establishing the commission. This essentially left the BLP and its leaders unaccountable to any constituency or monitoring body.

The new decree dissolved the board of the commission and named a new national advisory council (NAC) in its place. First Lady Maryam Babangida, already the chair of the BLP, was also designated the chair of this new council. Fourteen additional members were to reflect a cross section of national interests but did not include representation of the rural women whose interests the BLP was supposed to advance. One the role of the NAC, the decree states,

"The National Advisory Council shall be charged with the responsibility of advising, guiding, and monitoring the activities of the National Commission [for women] on national policies and programs pertaining to the objectives and functions of the National Commission and the Better life for Rural Women Programme."¹³

The government gave no explanation for these actions. Apparently, the board of the commission had tried to fulfill its mandate of monitoring the BLP by subjecting the wives of the ruling military junta to rules of accountability and the laws of civil society, and in response the board was dissolved. The BLP coordinators, like their husbands, seemed to be above the laws of society and legal procedures. The dissolution of the board of the commission further entrenched the tactics of wifeism. In the eyes of many, this dissolution embodied a thinly/disguised attempt by the military state to completely take over organizing within the female sphere.

After General Babangida was forced out of office in August 1993, the BLP's and NAC's fate appeared to be in doubt. The uncertainty surrounding the NAC's future was reinforced by the clamor in some sectors of civil society to dismantle everything the Babangidas represented. Moreover,

Mariam Abacha, wife of the present military head of state, General Sani Abacha, had not been part of the BLP but had concentrated on her own activities as president of the Nigerian Army Officers' Wives Association. The BLP anniversary parade and fairs for 1993 were concealed, and Mrs. Abacha indicated that she would launch her own initiative, the Family Support Program. Without the first lady as patron, the future of the BLP remains uncertain.

Conflicting Viewpoints: the State and the Feminist Movement

Perceptions of the state's involvement in the women's sphere and its relationship to the women's movement differ appreciably among Nigerian women leaders. The BLP and the National Commission for Women see the state's role in their formation as an indicator of state recognition of women's centrality to development and the national interest. They expect that this will lead to women's increased participation in government and the economy. They are joined in this view by leaders of the non-governmental National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS).

The NCWS was formally established in 1959, but its history can be traced back to the early National Women's Union which in 1953 became the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS). The FNWS's primary aims were to bring Nigerian women together to protect their rights under colonial rule and to raise the general status of women to win equal opportunities with men.¹⁴ The FNWS allied with the International Federation of Women, which had links with the East European socialist bloc. It concerned itself with several international issues, such as condemning French atomic tests in the Sahara, and with local issues, such as fighting for the enfranchisement of women in the northern region of Nigeria. As a result of harassment of the FNWS leadership by the colonial state and damaging internal rivalry, it was unable to maintain a national presence, although it continued to function

until the 1978 death of its radical and dynamic leader, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti.

A breakaway faction of the FNWS formed the NCWS in 1959 with a very different ideological orientation. The NCWS was far less critical of government since it was dominated by the wives of nationalist politicians and bureaucrats. It was also much more distant from the mass base of the FNWS. It redirected women's protest strategies from mass demonstrations for action to petition writing and dialogue with government.¹⁵ The NCWS is now recognized by the federal government as the only umbrella NGO representing women's interests. All women's groups in Nigeria are required to affiliate with the NCWS if they are to be recognized by the state.

More recently, elections at the NCWS's biennial conventions have been marred by controversy. On the surface, the reasons centre on south-north, Christian Muslim bids for control, which are common divisions in Nigeria. In reality, these divisions only partially explain the elections' contentious nature. The underlying cause centered on the state patronage the NCWS enjoys at the federal, state, and local government levels in the form of ministerial and parastatal appointments, overseas travel grant support, and other favours. In essence, elite women within the NCWS were wrangling on the platform of the state-recognised women's organisation over the state's largesse and over access to political power and available resources.

The NCWS's policy calls for having the wife of the head of state as its patron. The NCWS has thereby maintained good relations with the state, generally giving its unconditional support to the state and its policies. Consequently, the organisation has been labelled a support of the AGIP party — any government in power — by its critics.¹⁶ Confirming this stance, the immediate past president of the NCWS describes the organisation relationship with government as follows:

"it is cordial; we owe absolute loyalty to the government irrespective of the government in power. That is the reason why we have never fallen out of grace. We criticize when necessary, but when we do, we do not publicize it. All in all, we prefer dialogue to confrontation."¹⁷

In recent times, the NCWS's few open criticisms of the state have been based on too few women in federal or state cabinets and the National Armed Forces Ruling Council and on objections to a provision in the national population policy recommending a limit of four children per woman without stipulating any limit for men. This close relationship between the state and the 'nongovernmental' NCWS is interpreted by many more explicitly feminist activists as direct government interference.

In contrast to the close and generally uncritical relationship the NCWS has with the state, other women's activists view the government's recent involvement in women's issues as unnecessary interference aimed at neutralizing women's autonomous actions and promoting patriarchy and male-domination within the female sphere. Proponents of this viewpoint generally take a more explicitly feminist perspective, as typified by the group Women in Nigeria (WIN). Its identification with radical antigovernment groups and condemnation of the SAP, the military junta's unfulfilled transition to civil rule, and the proscription of the democratic formations and labour unions are a far more critical stance than that espoused by the NCWS. In general, WIN's relationship with the state is strained.

The emergence of WIN in 1983 as a national women's organisation qualitatively transformed the debate on the 'woman question' in Nigeria both in form and in content. WIN's emphasis, activities, and approach with regard to gender and national issues are aimed at the entire transformation of society. WIN's socialist feminist ideology holds that women's subordination stems from both class and gender oppression. WIN is urban based and made up of lower-

middle-class women and men from the universities and other professions.

Although it seeks to represent the interests of poor women and men, the organisation has not successfully recruited or maintained members from this class. This can be attributed in part to a lack of financial resources for programs or staff, conflicts within the organisation over strategy, and the fact that most of its members combine career and family responsibilities. It may also be due to analyses and perspectives that differ from those of the poor. WIN's activities have been mainly in the areas of research and documentation, dissemination of information and policy recommendations, political conscientisation (training and discussion to raise women's political awareness and/or awareness of gender discrimination), and project work.

The emergence of WIN transformed the debate on the nature of gender subordination in Nigeria, as WIN embraced a multidimensional approach to the subject of gender inequality. It moved beyond articulating the importance of income-generating projects to improve women's economic status and independence. WIN also included issues of women's reproductive rights and choice, sexual harassment and violence, and consciousness-raising programs in the broader discourse on women. With its research and documentation programs, WIN has been able to generate data for policymakers and researchers on the conditions of Nigerian women. These achievements notwithstanding, WIN's impact has been limited by its inability to broaden its membership base.

WIN's relationship with the state has been uneasy and at times confrontational. The state has attempted at one level to coopt WIN by suggesting that it affiliate with the NCWS and seek to effect change from within. WIN has steadfastly and publicly refused to join the NCWS. WIN is ideologically opposed both to the NCWS's pro-government stance and the

government's insistence that all women's organisations affiliate with the NCWS. In response, the government has refused to register WIN as a legal entity and has also threatened incarceration and detention of some of its leaders.

WIN, recognizing that its ideals of democratically transforming gender and class cannot be achieved by working on its own, has cooperated and identified with other social movements and progressive organisations interested in democratic change. The only time WIN did work with the state, in a political bureau set up by the Babangida government to discuss the political future of Nigeria, it linked up with other popular democratic organisations in the country.

Other women's groups with an entirely rural base, such as the Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN), have also cooperated with the movement for democracy in the shared objective of popular participation. The achievements of such voluntary development organisations lie not only in providing services to grassroots women but also in articulating the principles that guide such work. Grassroots organisations are generally managed by rural women for themselves and therefore base their programs on the actual needs of their members.

In fact, their success among rural women precisely what prompted the government to establish the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure, the BLP, and people's and community banks all over the country. However, the state to date has not been able to replicate the effectiveness of grassroots organisations. COWAN's leader was in fact imprisoned for 'insubordination as a result of a clash with the BLP, which tried to appropriate and take credit for COWAN's long-standing work with rural women. COWAN's participation in the prodemocracy campaign became even more pronounced after the cancellation of the presidential election results in June 1993.¹³

For one prominent activist-scholar, the mutual relationship of these organisations to the state can be regarded in class/political terms. Groups such as the NCWS, the BLP, and the commission have never threatened the dominant classes that control the state apparatus and have generally been supported by and supportive of the state.¹⁹ As creations of the state, the BLP and the commission have had the closest relationship with the state. This relationship has been likened to that which traditionally exists between a husband and wife, based on the love and obedience of the wife to the husband. In a recent interview, the current director of the BLP aired a desire for Nigerian women "to be grateful to the president before his wife because without his support the BLP would have been an unrealized dream of the first lady."²⁰

A question that emerges is whether the activities of these more conservative women's groups are emancipatory or subordinating. In the period since independence in 1960, there has been continuity in the organisational forms in which women intervene in society. There have also been changes both in the content and mode of organisation of women's associations, indicating important progress. The combination of continuity and change in women's organisations suggests, however, that the question of whether Nigerian women are moving toward achieving emancipation or remain subordinated is not a simple one. While the women's movement is fluid and historical shifts in its class and urban-rural composition are evident, it is clear that winning over the rural women who form the backbone of the nation is key to its continued progress. Thus, the government's selection of rural women as its target, singling them out as state beneficiaries, has the potential to split alliances within the movement.

Women's Agenda for the 1990s and Beyond

What is the vision of the Nigerian women's agenda for the 1990s and beyond? Does it reflect our situation, which is

characterised by economic adjustment policies, repression, and democratic struggles? The National Commission for Women has formulated a national women's policy, which has yet to be signed into law by the government. The policy reflects the agenda of women active in development, which is based on a vision of economic independence, self-reliance, and sustainable development for women.

The policy largely neglects other issues of importance to Nigerian women, including those related to reproductive rights such as contraception and abortion and health issues such as incest. In general, however, the women's movement in Nigeria, despite internal differences and inherent weaknesses, has been successful in putting the woman question, however defined, on the national political agenda. In all this militancy and activism, however, no viable women's agenda has been put forward to lead women into the twenty-first century.

On the surface, it appears as if the state's vision for its development projects in the mid-1980s, characterized by interest in mobilizing women for development, self-improvement, and democracy, has been fulfilled. However, while the state can point to its support for and close involvement with the NCWS, the BLP, the commission, and other groups essentially conservative in nature, the reality of any discernible impact on most Nigerian women's lives is quite different. The bureaucratisation and cooptation of women's mobilisation efforts have meant that in many cases propaganda and fanfare have tended to substitute for substance and results.

The very structure of the state's efforts, top-down and top-heavy, has meant that the projects have been subject to the whims of their initiators, who presented themselves as benefactors to the rural women. Not surprisingly, such benevolent posturing has often degenerated into a patronizing attitude. In the end, we may see that a major factor in the

eventual downfall of the state's efforts at mobilizing women was the selection of a group of urban, privileged women to lead, unqualified except by accident of marriage, whose modus operandi was starkly out of tune with the realities of the poor rural women the programs were supposed to benefit.

Ironically, for all the government's efforts and publicity at mobilizing Nigerian women in general and rural women in particular, women's involvement in the government's other programs, especially those for transition to civil rule, has been minimal. This certainly does not suggest any major departure from the practice of previous regimes. Women have not emerged as a credible political force able to stamp their influence on the local and national political landscape. This can be traced, at least in part, to the bureaucratization of women's issues and the rise of Nigerian state pseudo-feminism, the hallmark of which was the policy of wifeism. Wifeism's effect on the majority of women has been far from emancipatory. To the contrary, it has tended to reinforce the structures and ideologies that have long characterized the domination of women. Rather than emphasizing autonomy, state pseudo-feminism has emphasized incorporation and patronage. The net effect has been apathy at the grass roots.

In order to be sustainable in the long term and achieve results, any programs to mobilize women should have several characteristics. First, the program should have the ultimate objective of empowering women in order to free them from the yoke of patriarchal domination and gender discrimination. Second, it should be aimed at involving economically active women in productive activities that could assist them in increasing their independent income. Third, it should encourage women to become leaders in articulating their own interests and in tackling wider societal issues. Given these criteria, the potential for a lasting impact of the Nigerian government's initiatives on behalf of women is questionable.

The Nigerian feminist movement is at a crossroads. The movement faces at least two alternatives: It can move forward

independently to challenge patriarchy and see to liberate women, or it can risk being completely co-opted by the state and by other interests. Which of these will prevail depends on how the women's movement defines its agenda and how well it succeeds in popularizing its struggle. The movement can embrace its full role in society and become more integrated into the trade union, human rights, and democratic movements. It can develop a women's platform as a basis for negotiating and forming coalitions with other mass movements and as a catalyst for supporting women to take part in party politics. A true feminist agenda challenges the state. If the Nigerian movement believes in emancipation, it must divorce itself from the grip of the state.

A.M. IMAM

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They are particularly common among very young women whose bodies have not sufficiently matured to accommodate passage through the birth canal. VVF result in constantly leaking urine; woman suffering from VVF are commonly ostracized by family and community and often become homeless and destitute. While VVF can usually be corrected with surgery, the cost is prohibitive for most women. The National Task Force on Vesico-Vaginal Fistulae is an unusual coalition among women's groups, lawmakers, and medical experts. It has sought to bring public attention to VVF, prevent them by advocating raising the legal age of marriage to eighteen and improving access to maternity care, and raise funds for medical and vocational rehabilitation of women suffering from VVF.

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19. Ayesha Imam, "The Women's Movement, State, and Democracy in Nigeria," Paper presented at the Akut workshop on Social Movements and Democracy in the Third World, Delhi, India, October 1992.
20. Interview at the National Commission for Women, Abuja, February 2, 1993.