

## **Are Women's Rights Organisations (Wros) Effective Agents of Social Change? The Efforts Ofwrosin Overcoming Challenges In Legislative Advocacy Ofthe Violence Against Person Prohibition (VAPP) Act In Nigeria.**

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**ABSTRACT:** Women organisations have been struggling for women's rights but despite constitutional guarantee of political participation for groups, they are faced with many challenges that inspire the adoption of practical measures. This brings one to the question as to whether WROs have the capacity to successfully influence decision makers to bring about social change. This article examines the efforts of Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) in overcoming challenges in the legislative advocacy that led to promulgation of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act. Data were collected by way of document review and in-depth interviews conducted with 10 WROs members. Findings indicate that WROs innovatively sought support from development partners to overcome financial constraints and incorporated National Assembly Administrators and key male legislators to deter further delay in the law reform. In conclusion, WROs represent key societal forces that challenged personalized rule and organisational inadequacy to instil change in the society.

**KEYWORDS:** Democracy Political Participation Legislative Advocacy Women's Rights Challenges, Participation in Legislative Advocacy, Nigeria, Violence Against Person Prohibition Act, Women Right Organisations.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Political participation is guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as the right of *everyone* to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through chosen representatives (United Nations Human Right, 1976; United Nation, 1948). This denotes that women, just like men, have equal rights to participate in socio-cultural, economic and political practices. In addition, specific emphasis on women participation was echoed by the United Nations (UN) through the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), because women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in advancing women's rights. Therefore, women need to be active to integrate their perspectives at *all levels* of decision-making in order to accomplish the goals of equality, development and peace (United Nation Division for the Advancement of Women, 2005). This holds important implications for enhancing essential global and national values in democracy, particularly considering their historical marginalisation from the decision making process (United Nation Division for the Advancement of Women, 2005). Women's Rights Groups are well aware that political participation is an imperative tool for empowerment, one that they have been unapologetic in using.

After a long period of military rule in Nigeria and the transition to democracy in 1999, necessary constitutional changes were made to support once-foreign democratic values such as political participation, civil and political liberties, freedom of expression and association. This led to improved participation of individual women and emergence of autonomous women's organisations (Ekundayo & Ama, 2014). Unfortunately, this drastic transformation to freedom coincided with alarming rates of violence and psychological assault directed at women and girls. For instance, a national survey in Nigeria indicated that 19 % of family heads mistreat their wives (UNICEF, 2001), 78.9 % of women are assaulted by their male partners in Imo state and 24% of young women are violated in Ibadan (Okemgbo, 2017). Women have to live with these threats which have negative impact on their psychology, health, social lives and self-confidence (Falade, 2014; Emakhu, 2013). Majority of

studies on individual women participation established that intimidation, socio-cultural, religious and legal problems hamper women's effective participation, especially in politics (Abdulrahman, 2017; Fatile, Adepoju & Adepoju et al., 2017; Lamidi, 2016; Awofeso & Odeyemi, 2014; Ejimabo, 2013; Chika & Umejiaku, 2014; Ogbogu's 2012). The level of violence specifically directed at women is indicative that democracy may have been institutionalized in Nigeria, but the mindset of society has not changed much. Women are still easy targets for violence. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the efforts of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to enhance women's political participation met minimal success (Chukwudi, 2015; Ekundayo & Ama, 2014; Ochanja & Terwase, 2013).

WROs felt compelled to take up a key role of promoting women's rights, and worked towards transcending political and religious inclinations in order to advocate for women's rights and correct misconceptions on issues of inheritance, sexual harassment, reproductive rights and domestic violence, as well as challenging laws that uphold gender inequality (Onyemelukwe, 2016). However, legislative advocacy were not always successful in Nigeria. For instance, the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill of 2017, CEDAW Bill and legalization of abortion were *deliberately* rejected by law makers on the pretext that the contents are not aligned with religious and cultural beliefs of most Nigerians (Makinde, Onyemelukwe, Onigbanjo-Williams, Oyediran, & Odimegwu, 2017; Adamu & para- Mallam, 2012; Oye-Adeniran, Long & Adewole, 2004). These challenges are attributed to patriarchy, lack of female and gender-sensitive representation and effective gender policies that are meant to safeguard women's issues (Ajadi, Adebisi, & Alabi, 2010; Eze-Anaba, 2005; Amnesty International, 2005). However, studies outside Nigeria found that female parliamentarians build alliances to pursue their interest (Johnson & Josefsson, 2016; Costa, Sawyer, & Sharp's 2013; Wang, 2013). It is unfortunate that generally, the participation of women, whether as an individual or as a group, is often situated in a position of being unable to effectively overcome challenges in political participation.

The challenge encountered by WROs is illustrated in the recent passage of the Violence Against Person's Prohibition (VAPP) Act. The bill's methodical delay for over a decade finally came into force in 2015, and this was attributed to the work of WROs (Onyemelukwe, 2016). This research therefore focuses on the efforts of WROs in overcoming challenges of participation, particularly in the legislative advocacy. Proponents of the liberal democracy theory ((Dahl, 2006; Held, 2006; Truman, 1951; Bentley, 1908) affirmed that groups possess different kinds of resources to influence and represent their interests before the government and that groups reach consensus, act based on their established rules and struggle towards attaining their goals (Held, 2006). However, efforts of WROs in overcoming challenges in the legislative advocacy of the VAPP Act remain far from understood. This paper therefore contributes to this understanding by adopting documentary review and in-depth interview of WROs members in order to determine the methods employed by WROs, which enabled them to successfully push for the promulgation of the VAPP Act.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the case study design because a holistic investigation was required to illustrate the efforts of WROs in overcoming challenges faced in the legislative advocacy of the VAPP Act (Liamputtong, 2013; Yin, 2009). The study was conducted in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Data was collected through an in-depth interview in combination with documentary review, which provided detailed description of WRO efforts. Ten (10) WRO members were purposively recruited as informants. Informants were anonymously labeled using Nigerian states such as Adamawa, Abia, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano etc. (owing to their networking engagements). As a result of the flexibility and exploratory nature of this study, data analysis began thematically alongside data collection (Viasmoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013) and codes were continuously reviewed until the larger overarching themes of incorporating development partners and collaboration with National Assembly Administrators and key male legislators were attained.

### WROs: EFFECTIVE AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

The study revealed that the WROs faced many challenges and setbacks in the pursuit of the VAPP Act. It is interesting to note that all 10 informants revealed insufficient fund, delay in the passage of the law as well as the legislature's lack of interest on women's issues as bottleneck that negatively impacted their efforts. However, this paper only focuses on how these challenges were effectively overcome. The findings indicate that the WROs were creative and resourceful in to have collaborated with national assembly administrators and key male legislator and incorporated development partners in their struggle. These are discussed below.

### Collaboration with National Assembly Administrators and Key Male Legislators

Collaboration with the Nigeria National Assembly and key male legislators indicate partnering with powerful stakeholders and strategic bodies. This practice was acknowledged by all informants as central in the

decision making process and instrumental to the passage of the VAPP Act. An informant reported that they closely worked with relevant bodies in the National Assembly to speed up the passage of the Bill, stating that: we carefully selected offices...such as the Bill Office, the Legal Department, Offices of the Clerk, Table Duties Office and other strategic offices and we work with them to schedule the Bills and sought their advice, which actually facilitated the speedy passage (Kano, personal Communication, and June 28, 2015).

It appears partnership with these strategic bodies enriched WROs with knowledge of legislative bureaucracy that aided the passage of the Bill. In addition to working with the administrators, all informants pointed out their collaborative engagement with key male legislators which revealed that working with them was another strong factor that facilitated the passage of the Bill in 2015. They all stated that initially, they were working closely with the female as opposed to male legislators but later came to realise that the attention of the key male legislators were pertinent to support the cause of WROs. An informant reported that:

We got to know that our leaders got to be engaged. From the House of Representative there are over 300 legislatures, at the Senate we have 109 or so Senators. We were initially into some male but more on the female legislators who are very few. We had to get to a point where we map the male Senators and identify the ones we believe will do justice to our course, working with the male champions became the alternative which wrestled the long delay of passage (Sokoto, personal communication, August 17, 2015).

The aforementioned finding indicates that in the earlier process, the Bill lacked the necessary support and was hindered by lack of significant support by the male legislators, who made up the majority of those in the National Assembly. Considering the vastly disproportionate number of women parliamentarians (6%) in Nigeria and the key positions of the males in the decision that affect the entire society, engaging these categories of people therefore is instrumental to legitimize WROs priorities and political participation (Kumar, 2012). This finding complements the argument that women parliamentarians build alliances with critical male actors to overcome challenges in the parliament, facilitate easy passage and push for women-friendly bills (Johnson & Josefsson, 2016; Costa, Sawyer, & Sharp's 2013; Wang, 2013). This is in line with postulations of the liberal democracy theory, whereby groups possess different kinds of resources to influence and represent their interests before the government (Dahl 2006; Held, 2006; Truman, 1951; Bentley, 1908). In addition, another informant explained that the partnership with the legislators was built on recurrent sensitization and engagement. The informant contended that:

We employed what we called the *male gender champion* in the national assembly to work for this law from 2010. In the collaboration process, we kept engaging, educating, advocating... At a time they embrace our idea and began to absorb their colleagues. We were doing our thing in 2003-2007, we got them involved, enlarge the base, and took off in 2010, it became everybody's game, and the Act is today a reality (Kaduna, personal communication, September 23, 2015).

This shows that the WROs advocacy strategy of exchanging ideas with key male legislators and administrators was essential to the passage of the Bill. It cannot be denied that involving men is critical to promoting women's rights and the successful creation of gender equality but this finding indicates that WROs were able to overpower past obstacles to their political participation, such as patriarchy values, insufficient female parliamentarians (Eze-Anaba, 2005; Amnesty International 2005), deliberate rejection of their demands by law makers, intimidation, as well as socio-cultural and religious factors (Abdulrahman, 2017; Fatile, Adepoju & Adepoju et al., 2017; Lamidi, 2016; Awofeso & Odeyemi, 2014; Ejimabo, 2013; Chika & Umejiaku, 2014; Ogbogu's 2012). Similarly, this finding aligns with the liberal democracy theory assumption, whereby groups reach consensus, act based on their established rules and struggle towards attaining their goals (Held, 2006). Consequently, the Bill earned its passage with surprising huge legislative sponsors (Nwankwo, 2008). The WROs documented a description of their partnership with the legislature in their journal, stating that:

The gain of well managed partnership in harnessing resources and creating synergies in the vision and activities of demand and supply actors... elected male representatives at both State and national levels demonstrated support and commitments to being part of the change... (Mahdi, 2010:12).

Therefore, it can be understood that political will is needed from stakeholders. Partnership with them becomes vital for WROs to overcome challenges of the male dominated and patriarchal legislature. In doing so, WROs have managed to move past the restriction on their political participation and strong elitist biases (Arum, 2010) to get the task accomplished.

### **Incorporating Development Partners**

The incorporation of development partners entails working together with international donors or bodies to support the organizational activities and goals of WROs. Informants affirmed that they were financially constrained to execute their activities, which greatly held them back before. An informant explained:

Our effort to continue the VAPP struggle was diminishing due to lack of fund. We sought financial assistance from developing partners like the United Nation and DFID... the development partners helped us to reach

everywhere to the extent that I can assure you that there is no state capital now that you will go and the issue of violence against women is not known (Kaduna, personal communication, September 23, 2015).

Another informant similarly explained that:

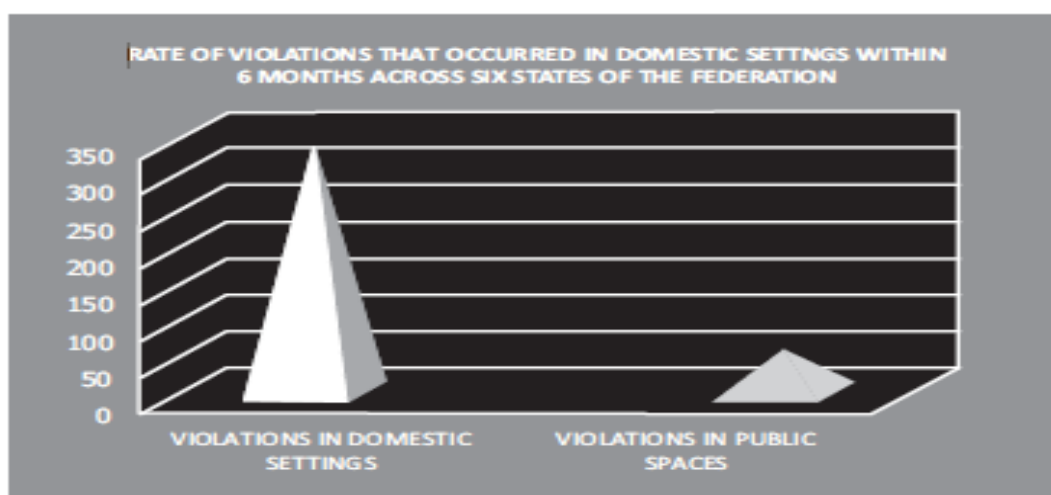
...we had trainings and support from the international donors... we got support from British Council, Ipas, DFID, OXFAM, and other groups that actually came in later (Enugu, personal interview, December 13, 2015)

This finding shows that financial support from Department for International Development (DFID), Ipas, OXFAM, the United Nations (UN) was a wise decision that helped WROs to reach out, maintain their stance for women's rights, engage in training and secure logistics for their struggle. It can be said that WROs have matured to a level of developing an intersectional approach to have its interest recognized and represented in more diverse ways. Similar, observation was made by another informant on the prompt assistance of the development partners. She stated that

Development partner aided the success of our activities ...there was no one readily available... (to) fund independent civil society organizations but development partners ... we were at a time invited for financial assistance after giving them details of what we want to do, they really supported the effort to pass this law. We were able to get such assistance through organisations like Ipas; UNwomen, UNFPA and DFID through its programme, Justice for All (J4A) (Adamawa, personal communication, March 2, 2015).

Furthermore, WROs documented in one of its journal the assistance of ₦37, 895, 470.37 (\$104,683.619) given by OXFAM (2008-2012) "to strengthen national legislation, lobby, and work with poor women activist" (Women Right Advancement and Protection Alternative, 2012:8). The data shows that seeking financial assistance from international development partners enabled WROs to accomplish their course through the passage of the VAPP Act. The finding of this study complements the argument that female parliamentarians build alliances with critical actors as well as ally themselves with donors for financial assistance (Johnson & Josefsson, 2016; Costa, Sawyer, & Sharp's 2013; Wang, 2013) to effectively overcome challenges in the push and passage of women-friendly bills. This is in stark contrast with previous research that indicated WROs in Nigeria lack skills and capabilities needed to ally with international partners in term of standards (Ajadi, Adebisi, & Alabi, 2010). Indeed, WROs are more capable than what is generally thought of them, and do have the ability to influence change.

However, it is not clear whether donors mainstreamed their interest into the VAPP Act as found in other studies outside Nigeria (Reith, 2010; Parks, 2008), but all the independent organisations that merged as WROs (Women's Aid Collective, Women Right Advancement and protection Alternative, FIDA [Women Lawyers association], African Alliance etc.) and participated in the legislative advocacy of the VAPP Act are recognised providers of support to survivors of rape, domestic violence and harmful cultural practices against women (Onyemelukwe, 2016). More significantly, partnership with donors opened an avenue of opportunities for WROs that were unattainable before, such as the ability to travel to other countries (like Kenya and Cameroon) to sharpen their advocacy skills and capacity building. These became valuable skills and resources that aided their consultation activities and enhanced their efforts for sensitization on women's issues. In addition, WROs finally had the financial means to undertake baseline studies in 2010 and 2012 which presented the prevalence of gender based violence in Nigeria. For instance, the finding of the 2012 research could be seen in the figure below:



**Figure 4.6.1:** Comparative Analysis of Location of GBV Occurrence

Source: Mahdi (2010:33)

The above figure illustrates that violence occurs everywhere but it is more prevalent in the private realm (300% domestic violence) than in the public realm (50% of violence in the public). Therefore, WROs concluded that women are the more prominent victims of violence. In addition, the National House Demographic Survey report 2013 indicated that 28 percent of women between the ages 15-49 have experienced physical violence at least once since turning 15, while 11 percent experienced sexual violence (National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF International, 2014). The data from these studies were employed by WROs to build resilience in their struggle despite the National Assembly previous rejection of their demands in advocacy of the VAPP Act. Furthermore, the financial support allowed WROs to build greater networking, earn easier access to legislators through the establishment of the Gender Technical Unit (GTU) in the National Assembly by the Department for International Development (DFID) in 2012 and this greatly facilitated the passage of the VAPP Bill in 2015.

### III. CONCLUSION

Although there is no identifiable benchmark at which WROs effectiveness as agents of social change can be measured, the social improvements and progress made as a result of WROs efforts are a great leap in the right direction of realising their ultimate goals of gender equality. In the course of more than a decade struggle for legislative advocacy of the VAPP Act, WROs encountered many challenges which delayed its passage. Consequently, WROs had to adopt innovativeness in their strategies to ensure that their cause did not fall upon deaf ears. Hence, they developed new networks and interaction which broadened and diversified their alliance with national assembly administrators and influential male legislators on one hand, and international development partners on the other. This paved for even more access to the decision making process, which was previously denied to them that consequently resulted in the passage of the VAPP Act in 2015. This paper therefore concludes that WROs have pushed past the institutionalize restrictions on their political participation and slowly influenced the decision makers to adopt laws and policies leaning towards issues within the concern of WROs. In conclusion, WROs are indeed agents of social change that can, and have, effectively challenged personalized rule and organisational inadequacies to pursue their interest.

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