2015: A year of opportunity for women’s rights in Nigeria?
Women for Women International UK: Parliamentary Briefing
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Women for Women International (WfWI) works with the most marginalised women survivors of war to help them move from poverty and isolation to self-sufficiency and empowerment with support, resources and knowledge. Since 1993, we have worked with almost 420,000 women across 8 conflict-affected countries. The core of this work is delivered through an intensive 12 month programme which aims to ensure that women can earn and save money; their health and well-being improves; they can influence decisions in their homes and communities; and that they have access to social networks for support.

Purpose of the event: 2015 could be a year of opportunity for women’s rights in Nigeria, filled with events such as the national elections, the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals and the reviews of international commitments on women’s rights (Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolution 1325). These opportunities, however, are situated within growing insecurity, ongoing governance issues and where 62.6% of Nigeria’s 166 million people live below the poverty line. Nigeria’s commitments to promote gender equality under the Millennium Development Goals continue to be ‘off-track’ and unlikely to be met before 2025. This parliamentary briefing was hosted by Lord Mitchell and Women for Women International UK to examine the opportunities (and threats) for women in Nigeria in 2015, and look at what the UK could be doing to support women in Nigeria more effectively.

Event Summary:

Lord Mitchell and Brita Fernandez Schmidt (Executive Director, WfWI UK) welcomed the guests to the event, expressing hope that this would be an informative session where all attendees could share concerns, views, and specific recommendations to pass onto the UK government. They emphasised the value of shedding light on the current state of gender issues in Nigeria from different angles through panellists holding various perspectives and backgrounds. Brita chaired the event.

Ngozi Eze (Country Director, WfWI Nigeria) highlighted instability in Nigeria since independence in 1960, including insecurity from extremist groups under civilian rule and the recent postponement of presidential election to 28 March. WfWI Nigeria strives to leverage women’s existing knowledge and capacities to catalyse sustainable economic empowerment, and ensure they are able to advocate for their rights, and has created a safe haven for women, many of whom have gone through traumatic experiences including rape and loss of loved ones.

Ngozi emphasised the critical role of men and highlighted WfWI’s pioneering efforts in developing a men’s engagement programme in 2002, which has now reached more than 4,500 men in Enugu State. In such sessions, men from diverse backgrounds such as traditional community leaders, religious leaders, and youth leaders are given a platform to discuss topics such as violence against women, girls’ education and family planning. She also highlighted WfWI Nigeria’s additional initiatives, including a partnership with the International Federation of Women Lawyers to support women whose rights have been infringed, and provide educational training on their human rights. An additional partnership with four microfinance institutions and two commercial banks is reaching over 5,000 women a year, by bringing bank officials directly to the communities, where they educate women on the benefits of owning a bank account and assist in opening the accounts so that they are able to gain access to financial services and products. Ngozi emphasised the critical value of economically empowered women – when women earn money, they can support their families and gain respect as members of communities.
Ultimately, Nigeria continues to confront a multitude of political and social issues where “abnormal things become normal, and normal things become abnormal”. Security for women and girls fails to be protected in both law and practice. She concluded by stating that the government should work with civil society organisations to put in place plans to protect the lives of women and girls, and provide education and empowerment programmes to create a future that is stable and democratic for all.

Marina Narnor (Head of Africa and Rest of the World Programmes, Westminster Foundation for Democracy - WFD) WFD was established in 1992 to support political party development programmes and the development and implementation of parliamentary strengthening in Africa, including within Nigeria. A 2010 assessment visit made by WFD identified several priorities and issues concerning women in politics – among them, a key concern was that while there are women in key strategic positions within the federal government, women comprise of only 7% of the National Assembly. WFD thus developed a programme to support women parliamentarians through activities such as the facilitation of an exchange of experiences with Ugandan women MPs, which provided Nigerian women MPs with an understanding of challenges and opportunities facing women parliamentarians in other countries and how they could apply such lessons in Nigeria. Following the exchange, the Nigerian MPs lobbied for the reinstatement of the gender technical unit so that they could gain access to technical skills needed to support their role as parliamentarians and inform policy-making processes.

The launch of the gender empowerment fund, and five federal ministries signed memorandums of understanding to receive a budget for women’s empowerment under the fund. WFD began working with local organisations, including Budget, to develop mechanisms like infographics and online evidence-based checking tools to track projects implemented under the President’s promises to support women’s empowerment. WFD additionally supports the development of a gender budget module, which has enabled staff members to provide better advice to National Assembly members when they participate in committees working on the fund. The module has now been embedded into the National Institute for Legislative Studies, so that the members will be able to understand gender issues from the onset.

Peter Cunliffe-Jones (Executive Director of Africa Check and Deputy Director of the AFP Foundation). Africa Check was set up in 2012 as an independent fact-checking organisation based in South Africa, which operates with the conviction that society cannot function when there is a disconnect between public debate and realities on the ground. It examines what supportive evidence may or may not exist for claims made in the public arena by the media, politicians, and organisations in Africa.

Peter highlighted examples of such disconnect in Nigeria relating to the empowerment and protection of women and girls in Nigeria, as stated by President Jonathan shortly after the Chibok abductions, with contrary evidence including:

- A 2010 initiative intended to address women’s land ownership which was limited to Abuja;
- The 2003 Child Rights Law was introduced to criminalise child marriage but has yet to be ratified in the majority of northern states (where acts of child marriage are the most prevalent);
- In addition, Africa Check concluded that the government has additionally failed to place pressure on states to pass the legislation due to political concerns.

Virginia Comolli, (Research Fellow for Security and Development at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and author of the forthcoming book “Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency”). Virginia provided an overview of Boko Haram and how its operations directly target women and girls. Since 2009, Boko Haram has caused the death of thousands and displacement of approximately 1.5 million people since 2009. Tactics have become increasingly sophisticated, with a rise in the abduction of local women and girls starting in 2012. Women are targeted by Boko Haram with violence for various reasons, including as a punitive measure for their Christianity, instrumental use (such as domestic service or weapon mules) or be given away as wives in marriage. Increasingly, women suicide bombers is becoming a feature of Boko Haram’s tactics. Nigerian security forces are also targeting women in their human rights abuses, including through beatings, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence. Members of the security forces rarely face prosecution. The targeting of women by both sides of the conflict must be recognised.
Virginia discussed ‘by-products’ of the conflict, in which significant displacement of people has resulted in extensive abuses and trafficking of children and women being carried out in refugee camps. She concluded by highlighting the lack of government support for counselling for victims of sexual violence – as a result of the lack of support and deep stigma associated with violence, many women remain deeply traumatised.

Q&A

Potential threats to women’s rights and services posed by the upcoming national elections and political instability: Ngozi explained that virtually all government projects have come to a standstill as all parties are preoccupied with the elections at this point. While it is too early to predict what the future government will do to address gender equality and women’s empowerment, she expressed hope that women and girls will begin to receive greater support and protection. Peter highlighted the exclusions of women’s rights from Nigerian national politics and referenced that Africa Check was unable to find any significant statement by either party concerning women in their fact-checking review of the 14 main pre-election claims made by the two parties.

Sexual violence in Nigeria: Even in more peaceful regions of Nigeria, client usage statistics in sexual assault referral centres have revealed the widespread patterns of mundane violence taking place on a daily basis. Violence is not only perpetrated by terrorist groups in insecure conflict zones, but occurs across entire societies. The government needs to acknowledge and address the serious, pervasive nature of violence against women. Brita agreed, noting that approximately 80 to 90% of women in WfWI programmes have experienced some form of violence in their lives.

What can the UK and general public do? Ngozi asserted that a combination of financial and media support is ideal; the ongoing issues need to be highlighted through the media to raise awareness and consciousness among the general public. She further reiterated the critical importance of men’s engagement in women’s rights advocacy. Brita stressed the importance of social media as a tool in raising awareness about women’s rights issues, such as through the dissemination of statistics on gender equality in Nigeria and sponsorship opportunities offered by WfWI.

What can be done to support progress in Nigeria on women, peace and security commitments? The influence of the UK government was debated in relation to Nigeria’s geopolitical and resource (oil) position in the region and wider. Nonetheless, it was recognised that the UK government has made seemingly genuine efforts to work with Nigeria for greater peace and security.

Ngozi concluded the discussion by highlighting the fact that the Nigerian people are gaining greater awareness of the ongoing issues, and are increasingly holding the governmental and military actors accountable for their actions.

About Women for Women International Nigeria since 2000, WfWI Nigeria has worked with over 52,000 women survivors of conflict in Enugu and Jos. On average, women begin our programme surviving on $0.29 per day and caring for an average of 5 children. 69% are illiterate. By supporting women through a 12 month training programme, they develop the skills and knowledge to move towards self-sufficiency and empowerment. At the end of the programme, Nigerian women graduates earn a daily average of $1.41, increasing steadily to $2.67 and then to $2.90 at 12- and 24-months post-graduation (respectively). Our work goes beyond supporting women to earn an income, 96% of graduates report practicing good nutrition at 24-months post-graduation (compared to 20% at enrolment) and we see promising increases in women who report participating in a social network/group (63% to 100%) and women graduates who report running for a leadership position (6% to 38%) during this timeframe.