

# Women's Movement and Visions: the Nigeria Labour Congress Women's Wing <sup>1</sup>

Kole Ahmed Shettima\*

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**RÉSUMÉ.** Dans les travaux de recherche, le rôle de la nigériane dans le développement économique, politique et social du pays est négligé. La lacune est encore plus évidente dans le cas de l'histoire du syndicalisme qui insiste surtout sur le syndicat des hommes au détriment des ouvrières. Cela ne fait que refléter l'idéologie patriarcale concernant la place de l'homme et de la femme dans la société. Le secteur public qui est le plus gros employeur des hommes au Nigéria l'est aussi pour les femmes. La plupart des nigérianes se sont auto-employées ou sont employées dans le secteur informel. Dans ce secteur les salaires sont bas et elles ne disposent pas de syndicats pour s'occuper des problèmes spécifiques auxquelles elles ont à faire face et mobiliser les femmes dans le syndicalisme. La création de l'aide pour les femmes de la *Nigerian Labour Congress* (NLCWA) cherche à s'attaquer aux problèmes spécifiques auxquels les ouvrières doivent faire face ainsi qu'à d'autres problèmes d'envergure nationale comme la privatisation et les programmes d'ajustements structurels. La discrimination dans le travail, l'éducation, les bourses, les tracasseries sexuelles, la discrimination sexuelle dans le ménage, l'absence ou l'insuffisance de congés de maternité, la discrimination dans la distribution des compléments de salaire, des pensions, avancement et formation sont autant de problèmes qui se posent aux femmes. Les responsabilités familiales, les temps de réunions, les attitudes négatives des collègues hommes et les traditions sociales plus larges empêchent les femmes d'assister régulièrement aux activités syndicales. Cependant, actuellement, le NLCWA n'a ni protection constitutionnelle ni autonomie financière.

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## Introduction

The role of Nigerian women in the economic, political and social development of the country is often relegated to the background. Scholars tend not to focus on the specific role of women in the country and even when an effort is made, it is limited to praising of elite women. One would have thought that labour scholars for example<sup>2</sup>, would have been able to transcend the class and gender bias of many contemporary writers on women but alas women labourers receive very little attention, if at all.

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\* Department of Political Science and administration - University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri.

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- 2 Otobo, D., *Foreign Interests and Nigerian Trade Unions*, Heinemann Educational Books, Ibadan, 1986. Anaba, W., *The Trade Union Movement in Nigeria*, Ethiope, Benin City, 1969. Cohen, E.R., *Labour and Politics in Nigeria*, Heinemann, London, 1974.

The history of trade unionism in Nigeria concentrates mostly on male trade unionists as if women have not played any significant role in trade unionism. This is a reflection of the patriarchal ideology of women's place is in the home and man's place is in the street, and, the extreme class ideology which considers a woman worker just as any other worker. This preliminary investigation is an attempt to bridge the gap of 'woman's place is in the union', and a 'woman worker is a woman' from the perspective of the Nigeria Labour Congress Women's Wing (NLCWW). Towards that end, the paper is divided into the following namely: a discussion on women in the labour force, the development of the NLCWW, the condition of women in the work-place and the society as the bases of understanding the visions of NLCWW, the strategies adopted and envisaged and a concluding remark. However, the compartmentalization of the subsections is not all that rigid.

### **Women in the Labour force**

According to the 1962-63 census, of the labour force of 18 million persons registered, 4.4m were women i.e. about 24.4%<sup>3</sup>. The number of women in the labour force increased slightly to 35% of the total labour force surveyed in 1983<sup>4</sup>. The figure of women in wage and salaried employment increased from 5.1% in 1960 to 6.9% in 1965 of the total number of employed persons. Of this figure of women employed about 7%, 14% and 65% were employed in manufacture, agriculture and service subsections<sup>5</sup> respectively. The public sector is the largest employer of labour in Nigeria and it is also the largest employer of women. In 1977, about 68% and 32% of women were employed in the public and private sectors respectively<sup>6</sup>. This is not only because the former developed much earlier, but also because the latter discriminated against women's employment<sup>7</sup>. The number of women employed in the Federal Civil Service increased from 4,715 to 11,447 between 1967<sup>8</sup>.

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- 3 Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, "Nigeria Country Statement to Second Regional Conference on the Integration of Women in Development", Lusaka, December, 3rd - 7th, 1974, p. 10.
  - 4 Bello, V. M. "Women and Labour", Paper presented at the 31st Anniversary of Women in South Africa Day Organized by the Nigeria African National Congress Friendship and Cultural Association and Nigeria Labour Congress, Kano State Council Women's Wing, March 15, 1987, p. 1.
  - 5 Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, op. cit, p. 10.
  - 6 Fapohunda, E.R., "Economic Recession and Employment Patterns among Women in the Modern Sector" in Fashoyin, T. et al *Women in the Modern Sector Labour Force in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects*, Department of Industrial Relations and Personal Management, University of Lagos, 1985, p. 39.
  - 7 Group Discussion Workshop on "Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force", op. cit.
  - 8 Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, op. cit., p. 10.

By 1981 the picture was as shown in Table 1.

Most women employed are in professions like nursing, teaching, secretarship and banking<sup>9</sup>. However, even in those professions men occupy the leadership positions.

Until recently women were discouraged from being employed in the immigration police and prison services. In the prison and police services, only unmarried women are employed and they are not expected to marry until after about 3 years. This portrays the gender bias of the socialization process in the society - there are certain jobs which require 'a feminine temperament' and 'caring' as against 'masculine' jobs like construction. This is also an extension of women's role in the family to the outside world. For example in the city of Kano there are about 500 women employed in the banks, insurance and other financial institution. Perhaps because of the numerical strength of women in that sub-sector and the ideological posture of the National President of the Union of that sub-sector, it is one of the two unions with a strong women's wing (WW). There are about 50 women trade union activists and 4 fully paid trade unionists<sup>10</sup>. The immediate past President of the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) is a woman. This too might perhaps, be a reflection of the numerical strength of women in that profession.

The above situation is in contrast to construction, railway and other supposedly 'masculine' jobs. Although women are employed in these areas, they are mostly at the clerical and non-skilled levels.

For example, the highest concentration of women in the Nigerian Railway Corporation is in the administration department and even there, women are telephone operators, clerks, secretaries and cleaners<sup>11</sup>. This is also the case in the military where most women are in medical care and administration.

A study by Dennis<sup>12</sup> of the Odu'Atex textile industry has shown that most of the women were employed as cleaners and clerks and carry out, low paid, and respective tasks, the type of work that is not considered as requiring physical strength and those without prospects for promotion and training. This is despite the fact that some of the women had better educational quali-

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9 Workshop on "Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force", op. cit. Discussions with Mairo, V. Bello, Chairperson NLCWW Kano State and NUBIFIE Kano State, Kano, September 1987. F.C. Sanni, Chairperson NLCWW Oyo State, Ibadan, March 1987.

10 Discussion with Mairo V. Bello, Kano, September 1987.

11 Discussion with Asabe Malgwi, Nigerian Union of Railways National Executive Council Member, Bauchi, April 19, 1987.

12 Dennis, C., "Capitalist Development and Women's Work: A Nigerian Case Study", *ROAPE* No 27/28, 1984 See also Pitun, "R. Gender and Class in Nigeria", *ROAPE* No. 31 1984.

fications than their male counterparts. This is a case of discrimination in employment which sometimes reflects as wage discrimination. Men were employed in relatively better paid positions and move from one department to another to gain experience and therefore better their prospects for promotion and training. In the food and beverage sub-sector, women employees are at the lower level without prospects for training<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 1: Distribution of total employees by type of employer and by sex.**

Type of employer	Male	Female	Total employees female. 9% of total employment	%share of total emplo- yment
Federal Government (Civil Service)	101,764	21,558	17.0	11.2
Federal Government (Corporation)	154,352	19,427	11.2	15.8
State government (Civil Service)	199,583	48,398	19.5	22.6
State Government (Corporation)	55,199	10,385	15.8	6.0
Local Govt.	92,628	14,171	13.3	9.6
Voluntary Agencies	10,844	4,251	28.1	1.4
Joint ownership by Government & Private	62,450	4,088	6.1	6.1
Private enterprises	266,602	21,452	7.4	26.2
Others	9,738	1,818	16.5	1.1
Total	953,160	145,648		100.0

Source: Adapted from Ojo, F. "The Prospects for Modern Sector Employment Generation for Women" in Fashoyin, T. (ed.) et al *Women in the Modern Sector Labour Force in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects*, p. 217, 1985.

**Table 2 - Percentage of women workers in traditional (Men's) jobs**

Occupation	Female Percentage
Architects	5.0%
Surveyor	4.0%
Chemists	3.8%
Engineers	2.7%
Construction	0.4%
Mining and quarrying	1.4%
Total	17.3%

\* Figure given is for 1983.

Source: Fashoyin, T. and Idowu, T. "Women in the Modern Sector Labour Force: A Preview" in Fashoyin T. (ed) et al *Women in the Modern Sector Labour Force in Nigeria: Issues and Prospects*, p. 19, 1985.

13 Discussion with Muibat Adejunjwo, Treasure NLCWW Lagos State Council, Lagos, September, 1987.

Even in the public sector women are mostly employed in the non-technical sub-sector. For example Cecilia Onyeka, the NLCWN Chairperson in Anambra State is a Cartographer but faced a lot of hurdles before she could transfer her service from the Federal to the State Civil Service because women were then not employed as Cartographers<sup>14</sup>. Despite the relatively small number of women employed as technical staff, the Civil Service Technical Workers Union of Nigeria (CSTWUN) is one of the few unions which actively encourages women's participation in trade unions<sup>15</sup>. This is not surprising given the radical tradition of the Union since colonial times.

As already mentioned, even where women are employed they are mostly in the lower echelons in repetitive jobs with no prospects and with disastrous consequences for health and job satisfaction. This is the case also in the public sector. For example, an analysis of women employed in the public sector in 1979 showed that about 5,436 were employed in grade level 03, and 4,997 in grade level 06. That of Women employed between levels 10-15 "shows a down ward trend and by the time the graph is traced to levels 16 and 17, it simply vanishes to 1"<sup>16</sup>. The differential between 'masculine' and 'feminine' jobs is reflected in the difference of salary grades between women and men.

While the increase of women in the labour force from about 24.4% to 35% in 1962-63 and 1983 is appreciated. Some qualifications will have to be made. The 1970s was the period of the oil boom and therefore one would have expected a much higher expansion than that which was recorded. Although statistical data on production fails to indicate a comprehensive picture of employment trends, most Nigerian women are self-employed or in the informal sector of the economy. In the 1963 figures above, for example 70.2% of women in Lagos were street and market vendors, 6.3% were domestic workers and 6.4% were sewing mistresses<sup>17</sup>. In the recent past, there has been a massive increase of women as hawkers, in the service sector such as restaurants and hotels, petroleum attendants, nannies, maids and domestic servants as well as in small scale food processing. This is as a result of the economic crunch which has endangered women's employment and access to education and other facilities. Women are forced to the informal sector where the competition is steep amongst women and where it does not require formal training and skill. However, women bring skills which they

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14 Discussion with Cecilia Onyeka, Chairperson NLCWW Anambra State, Lagos, September 3, 1987.

15 Ibid.

16 Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, op. cit., p. 11.

17 Bello, "Women and Labour", op. cit., p. 2.

have learnt as part of their "domestic training" and other forms of informal apprenticeships.

The informal sector has very low remuneration and no trade unions. Women have to spend the whole day in the market or in the street or as nannies and maids and yet earn a token amount. Domestic workers are paid in the median Naira 60 per month i.e. about 9 US\$ at the official rate of 1 US\$ to Naira 7.14 (13/7/1989) or 5 US\$ in the parallel market at the rate of 1 dollar to Naira 12 (13/7/1989). Where women are employed as in construction<sup>18</sup> and agriculture, they are not paid on the basis of the national minimum wage nor are there any conditions of service. It is important to point that the (grossly inadequate) national minimum wage is Naira 125.00. Agriculture which was said to constitute about 14% of the organized labour force in 1963 is a sub-sector where workers are not paid the minimum wage under the guise of attracting foreign investment. The work of Jackson has shown that Hausa women workers were paid 1 kobo to 36 kobo per day compared to Naira 2.20 per day earned by males<sup>19</sup>.

The official figures on women labourers is also suspect because they do not take into consideration and recognition other "feminine" jobs like housewifisation (child bearing, and rearing and other family chores) as productive labour nor is it a true reflection of the participation of women in agriculture<sup>20</sup>, Fourth National Annual Conference of Women in Nigeria, Ilorin, May 1983).

To illustrate the point related to the underestimation of domestic work, it is worth recalling the experience of Domitila Barrios de la Chongara. Her husband objected to her attending Union meetings an hour weekly and refused to give her money. He accused her of wasting time doing nothing and suggested that she ask the Union to give her money. In order to make her husband realize that she was doing something, Domitila Barrios de la Chongara quantified the domestic work she was doing for a month. It amounted to 240 pesos per month against her husband's approximately 80 pesos monthly wage i.e. three times more than the wage of her husband. Thus at the end of the month she confronted her husband with the productive labour not recognized by society. She said "*well, Don Rene, now we must sort out the money. I have washed and ironed so many clothes, and cooked for so many days, and I've been working out, and the total is such and such*"<sup>21</sup>. If the

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18 Zack-Williams, A.B., "Female Urban Employment: The case of the Construction Workers in Jos".

19 Jackson, S., "Hausa Women on Strike". *ROAPE* No 13, 1977.

20 See for example Shettima, K et al. "Women's participation in agriculture in Borno, Bauchi and Gongola States: A Pilot Study".

21 Davies, Miranda, 1983 *Third World Second Sex Women's struggles and National Liberation* Zed Press p. 48.

Islamic position that women are not under obligation to cook for their husbands is followed to the letter, the productive work done by women would have been much better appreciated in the Islamic world.

The unequal development of the country, as well as cultural, religious and societal differences are also reflected in the different levels of women's participation in the labour force. The concentration of women in domestic labour and lack of access to the formal sector is higher in the northern part of Nigeria than the South. For example, in 1976 and 1980, women from the north and the south constituted 3.6%, 11.2%, 4.6% and 10.2% of Federal employees<sup>22</sup>. This however does not preclude the participation of women in the informal sector in the north<sup>23</sup>.

#### **The development of the Nigeria Labour Congress Women's Wing**

As mentioned earlier, there is a dearth of literature on women's participation in trade unions. For example, although there were no less than six women during the Apena Century Declaration in 1974, there was no mention of women's participation in any of the existing literature<sup>24</sup>. Even with the development of the NLCWW, the situation is only slightly better.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Charter, all regional and national trade unions are supposed to have a department of women in recognition of the rights of women workers. This is also reflected in the provision of the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU). The Third Congress of OATUU in Mogadishu resolved that:

- Aware of the immense contributions of women in general and the African working women in particular could make in the development of their countries;
- Conscious of the seriousness of the conditions of the working women in Africa;
- Considering Resolutions No.9 and GL/79/14/19 adopted by the Third and Fourth General Council meeting of the Organization of African Trade Unions Unity in fulfillment of the Charter on the Economic, Social, Political and Trade Union Rights adopted by the First Conference of the African Women held under its auspices in Accra in October 1976.

Reiterates its appeal to all national trade unions to:

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- 22 Ogbuagu, S. *"The Place of women in the Nigerian Economy. A look at the Federal Civil Service*, a Paper presented at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Seminar on Women's Studies: The State of the Art in Nigeria, Ibadan, November 1987, p. 6.
- 23 See for example Pitin, R., "The Documentation and analysis of the invisible work of invisible women". *ILO Review* 1984.
- 24 Group Discussion Workshop on *"Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force"*, op. cit.

(a) seriously study the best ways and means of encouraging the effective implementation of the charter within the framework of socioeconomic realities and to keep the OATUU Secretariat informed of the steps taken on the implementation of the Charters;

(b) encourage women trade union activists to leadership positions within the trade union structure;

(c) establish women sections within their national trade union centres for those who have not yet done so<sup>25</sup>.

OATUU has now established a Pan African Women Trade Union. The NLC in 1983 resolved to establish the NLCWW (Ibid.). The first branch was set up in Lagos. So far only eight states have done so viz: Lagos, Oyo, Anambra, Imo, Bendel, Rivers, Benue and Kano<sup>26</sup>. Although the NLC has no provision for a women's wing in its constitution, at the 1981 congress convention, a proposal for a women's Department was unanimously adopted. The department was charged with the following responsibilities:

(a) to ensure equal pay for work of equal value;

(b) to ensure non-discrimination in job opportunities based on sex;

(c) to ensure observance of ILO convention on women labour;

(d) to create recreational, and domestic centres;

(e) to set-up sewing institutions including home economics centres<sup>27</sup>.

Why NLCWW? In the words of Ali Chiroma, the President of the NLC, the NLCWW:

*are expected to act as specialized Congress Committees on women affairs that will discuss problems of working women generally and married women in particular and bring them to the attention of the NLC. They are equally to work towards the effective integration and participation of women in trade union work<sup>28</sup>.*

According to Rebecca Oliseh, the Chairperson of Lagos State Council of NLCWW, women were formerly excluded in trade unionism. The NLCWW is to fill the gap.

*Women are now very much aware of their rights and wrongs as far as Trade Unionism is concerned. They now want to be represented at all levels of negotiations so that they will negotiate better what they think is*

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25 *New Horizon*, Vol. VI, No 8, September 1986, p. 9.

26 Chiroma, A. "Address at the opening ceremony of the NLC Women Education Workshop (Batch II)", August 31 - September 4, 1987, Lagos, p. 2.

27 Okoronwko, A.O., "Women's Participation in Trade Unions", in Fashoyin et al, *Women in The Modern*, 1985, p. 85.

28 Chiroma, "Address at the Opening" 1987.



*good for them. Men can negotiate on our behalf, but there are certain aspects of it which I think women will do better... We want to be at the forefront to fight for ourselves. For example, when we talk of creches for working mothers, men may support it but they do not know the impact it will make because we women know what it is to have creches in our working places... A woman will definitely tackle her own matters better than a man<sup>29</sup>. (sic)*

Women in trade union also want to be recognized as human beings with rights and obligations, who can make positive contributions to society and not be viewed negatively as parasites and lazy housewives, as well as speak with one voice as women workers. The development of the NLCWW will also build up the self-confidence and organizational ability of women and enable them to participate effectively in trade unions. Prior to this women have not been active in trade unions<sup>30</sup>.

After the directive to state congresses of the NLC to set up their women's wings, the NLC also directed that individual trade unions should set up women's wing. So far only 2 of the approximately 42 industrial unions have strong women's wing. These are the Nigeria Union of Banks, Insurance, and Financial Institutions Employees (NUBIFIE) and Nigeria Union of Food Beverages and Tobacco Employees (NUFBTE)<sup>31</sup>.

Although there are misgivings about women's wing and the notion of - "go and do your thing outside" - there is a strong justification for working women to form their unions, if it is properly handled. As the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions Charter pointed out:

*Women whether organized or not, will judge whether union Organization adequately considers the question of women of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment by the way equality is practised in their own ranks i.e. the extent to which the participation of women in trade union decision making and responsibilities correspond to the number of women members<sup>32</sup>.*

Very few of the Nigerian industrial unions actually make specific recommendations on women or involve women in their activities. One exception is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which in 1983 negotiated with the federal Government to pay its members Naira 200.00 as

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29 *New Horizon*, Vol. VI, No 8, September 1986, p. 14.

30 Discussion with Muibat Adejunjwo, Cecelia Onyeka, F.C. Sanni, Mairo V. Bello, op. cit.

31 Group Discussion Workshop of "Trade Union and the Women Work-force", op. cit.

32 West, J. (ed) *Work, Women and the Labour Market*, Routledge and Kegan, London 1982, p. 167.

vacation allowance in lieu of leave bonus as against the former practice of Naira 196 for married men and single members respectively - married females could not claim allowance for their husbands and it is much easier for male workers to pretend that they are married than their women colleagues.

The NLC itself has not been making specific recommendations on women in its major policy demands. For example in the NLC's *Workers Charter of Demand*, there was not a single mention of the condition of women workers. Even where a case was made against "State Citizenship", the example given did not refer to the situation of many working women and other women who marry outside their state and which affect their access to employment, education, health facilities, etc. Women who marry outside their state of "Origin" are discriminated against in employment, education, scholarship, etc., both in their state of "origin" and the "husband state". While in the woman's state of origin, she is asked to go to her husband's state, in the husband's state, she is asked to go to her state of origin. In both cases, the woman is the loser. Paradoxically Inter-state marriage is encouraged by the state for contributing to national unity e.g. under the National Youth Service Corporation couples who marry indigenes of the state where they serve are given monetary incentive. Similarly the NLC position on the political future of Nigeria made only passing comments on recognizing the importance of women to participate effectively "in all organs of Government and mass Organization" and stressing "the equality of all people without discrimination as to sex and place of origin"<sup>33</sup>.

Likewise, very few of the trade unions have women in their leadership. In Rivers State, the State Secretary of NUBIFIE is a woman, in Anambra State, the State Secretary of NUT (the National Union of Teachers) is a woman, the Assistant General Secretary of NUBIFIE is a woman, and in Oyo State the Organizing Secretary of CSTWUN is a woman. In Lagos State, the State Secretary of the NLC is a woman and the immediate past President of NANNM is a woman<sup>34</sup>. In the Bauchi branch of the Nigerian Union of Railways (NUR) there are two women at chapter and branch leadership. From Bauchi comes also the only woman member of the NUR National Executive Council<sup>35</sup>. Of the 150 delegates to the NUR Triennial Delegate Conference in 1984 only two were women and both were from Lagos District Council<sup>36</sup>. During the NLC national convention in 1984, the only post

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33 Nigeria Labour Congress, *The Workers' Charter of Demands*, Lagos February 1980, Nigeria Labour Congress, *Towards a Viable and Genuinely Democratic Political Future: Nigerian Working Class Position*, Lagos, p. 10.

34 Discussion with Cecelia Onyeka and Mairo V. Bello, op. cit.

35 Asabe Malgwi, op. cit.

36 Nigeria Union of Railways, *Minutes of Second Triennial Delegate Conference*, Ibadan, October 1984, Ibadan, October 1984.

contested by a woman, the National Trustees, was lost to a man. Although the Nigerian Civil service Union, which is the oldest union in Nigeria, has a female membership of about 40%, "only about 8% of the officers at the national and state levels are women"<sup>37</sup>. Most of the elective posts occupied by women are welfare and treasury - an extension of women family roles. Women workers employed by trade unions are mostly clerks and cleaners and where women take up positions of responsibilities in their unions, they are sometimes subjected to ridicule by their male colleagues. An example is the case of Asabe Malgwi who is the only female member of the NUR NEC. She has always ridiculed and called names by her male colleagues during meetings. During the 1986 NUR strike, she was assaulted by a police officer for daring to enforce the strike called by her Union<sup>38</sup>.

Attempts at understanding why women are not involved or participated in trade union activities are often limited to psychological constraints and fail to examine the material conditions blocking women's participation. It is often argued that women do not want to participate in trade unions because it is a 'masculine' role or it does not interest women or that they are not supposed to lead. Scholars have to look at the family responsibilities of women, timing of union meetings, attitude of male colleagues and wider societal customs and traditions in order to understand the low level of participation of women in trade unions. For example, it will be helpful to trade unionists to understand why most of the active women trade unionists are advanced in age<sup>39</sup>.

#### **Nigeria Labour Congress Women's wing Views on the work place**

In order to appreciate the NLCWW's views on the work-place, it is necessary to highlight the condition under which women work.

#### ***Sexual Harassment***

This is defined by the British Trade Union Congress as:

*"Repeated and unwanted verbal or sexual advances, sexually explicit, derogatory statement or sexual discriminatory remarks made by someone in the work-place which are offensive to the worker involved, which cause the worker to feel threatened, humiliated, patronized or harassed, or which interfere with the worker's job performance, undermine job security or create a threatening or intimidating work environ-*

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37 Okoronkwo, A.O., "Women participation in Trade Unions" in Fashoyin et al, 1985, p. 86.

38 Discussion Asabe Malgwi Bauchi, April 19, 1987.

39 Field Notes, Ibadan, Lagos, Kano and Bauchi, March - September, 1987.

ment<sup>40</sup>.

It is very common to regard women as objects for exploitation in many work-places. Women are to be "used" by their male bosses and if they resist any such attempts it affects their promotion and career. There are many instances where women who refuse to respond positively to the sexual advances of their male bosses have been victimized. The problem is more compounded for unmarried women workers who are seen as objects of pleasure. This also restricts the movement of this category of workers for fear of being scorned. Likewise in many instances women applicants are tempted to succumb to the sexual advances of prospective employers. Sexual harassment is often not recognized as a problem in Nigeria. One of the aims of the NLCWW is to make society and trade unions recognize sexual harassment as a crime and fight against it<sup>41</sup>.

#### ***Sexual and Marital Discrimination***

It is a common tendency among employers of labour to refuse to employ women because they are women or to provide different conditions of service based on sex and marital status. In the private sector and especially among multinational corporations, they do not encourage the employment of women because women are most likely to go on maternity to look after their husbands when they are sick or seek leave of absence to attend to other family problems. As a result, some women who are employed by private firms abort their pregnancy in order not to lose their jobs thereby risking their lives. In some cases the women take only two weeks maternity leave in order to maintain their jobs which is also risky to their life and that of the child. This is especially the case for single mothers<sup>42</sup>.

Even in the public sector, mothers are only entitled to 12 weeks maternity leave. Single mothers are officially discriminated against in terms of leave payment. However many of them can avoid this penalty because of the ineffectiveness of the Civil Service. Pregnancy and childbirth are considered as a holiday and a woman who takes maternity leave has to forego her vacation leave for that year (or the following one if she has already had it). All these are reflections of the patriarchal and undemocratic structures of society where reproduction - which should have been valued and considered as social production - is considered a liability and counts against women. Moreover, 12 weeks with or without pay runs contrary to the cultural prac-

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40 Onyeka, C.A. "Problems of Women in the Work-force and the Condition of the Nigerian Working Women", Workshop on Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force, August 31 - September 4, 1987, Lagos, pp. 2-3.

41 Nigeria Labour Congress, "Communique at the end of the Week Long Workshop on Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force", Lagos, August 17-21, 1987.

42 Group Discussion Workshop on "Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force", op. cit.

tices of many a Nigerian family. In many families women breast-feed for about one year. This cultural practice has inherent advantages in terms of balanced diet and spacing of the family. The current economic situation in the country which makes it impossible for many families to buy baby food supplements further reinforces the need for a longer period for breast feeding. In Nigeria there is no obligation on employers to provide child care centres or creches. There are also very few private day care centres and nurseries to which working class women can afford to send their children. For example, in some schools like Corona School, parents are asked to pay as high as Naira 450.00 per term per child for nursery<sup>43</sup>.

In terms of leave and housing policies there is a clear gender bias. According to the current government policy, except in a very few places, husbands are allowed to receive wives' leave allowances but not vice versa even if wives are responsible for the transportation and other expenses of the leave. In housing also, couples are paired together if they are working together or in the same town. This saves some amount of money for the Government and could be justified if agreed to by the couples, but it loses sight of the fact that some families are polygamous and therefore, working women may not feel comfortable sharing a house with co-wives. However, these women are forced to accept such a condition. In addition, the lack of housing may force women to stay in marriages that they do not want given the relative scarcity of rented accommodation and its expense, especially as women are not entitled to rent subsidy, as well as the tendency of many landlords to refuse to rent a house to single women on the allegation of their being "loose".

In view of the demands of the family e.g. taking children to the hospital, women workers are not promoted as regularly as their male counterparts because absenteeism from work under whatever circumstances for women are counted against them. Many a Nigerian father considers family responsibilities as that of the woman. Thus, when it is time for retrenchment, women are most likely to go first after all "they are unproductive workers in perpetual absenteeism". However, it should be noted that the accusations of absenteeism is belied by official records of attendance.

Examples of discrimination against women workers include a German firm in metal production that retrenches its women workers when they are about to go on maternity leave without any bonus or without taking into consideration the number of years they have been in the service of the firm. Another case is that of food and beverage companies like United African Company (UAC), G.B. Ollivant and John Holt where male and female workers are

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43 *The African Guardian* July 17, 1989.

employed on the same scale but the former have the possibility of becoming supervisors while the latter remain on at the same level. One of the participants at the workshop on Trade Unionism and the Women Work Force narrated how she spent 21 years with UAC without promotion. This was partly because of her trade union activities which was considered by the Management as 'odd' for a woman<sup>44</sup>. This is indicative of an institutionalized labour segregation inspite of the supposedly non-discriminatory wage system in Nigeria.

Another interesting case is that of about 5 firms in Lagos which treat their workers like "17th century slave labour". One of these firms is a Lebanese-owned, Nigerians Branching Manufacturing Company limited, which employs about 300 women producing shoe laces. The women workers are not free to receive visitors or speak to any body; they may not be seen sitting down during work hours (6am.-2pm. for the morning shift); Trade unionis are not allowed. Workers refrain from going to the ladies room as they might end up being fired, etc. According to a woman worker "we are treated as slaves. There was a day I was eating a loaf of bread, an expatriate walked up to me and slapped me. And of course I could not protest because my children would suffer if they throw me out of job". Another woman, Patience, was beaten and later sacked for her inability to explain why a machine she was operating stopped and for daring to report the matter to her husband. The terms of employment are terrible in that company. There are no letters of appointment, conditions of service or pay slip. A Ms Pat Bassey who worked for that company for three years earned Naira 54.00 per month. According to the Deputy Secretary General of the National Union of Textile Garments and Tailoring Workers in Nigeria, Alhaji O. Shittu, the Nigerian Branching Manufacturing Company Limited, attempts by the Union to organize the workers were thwarted by the management. In 1981, nine workers who were members of the committee set up to organize the workers in the company were immediately fired by the management. In the words of A. Shittu "The slavery that is being perpetuated there is worse than that which is practised in South Africa"<sup>45</sup>.

In terms of fringe benefits and allowances women are also discriminated against. As mentioned earlier single mothers are discriminated against in terms of their maternity leave. Children and dependant allowances which are supposed to be claimed by all workers irrespective of sex are not uniformly implemented. In some sections like banking and insurance<sup>46</sup> workers are paid uniformly irrespective of marital status and sex, perhaps because of the

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44 Ibid.

45 *Sunday Times*, November, 1, 1987).

46 Discussion with Mairo V. Bello.

strength of their union and the active role of women in that union. However, most women workers cannot claim child allowance because it is assumed that women do not take care of their children. Husbands are supposedly the breadwinners and not women. Even where documentary evidence to the contrary is submitted by women, it is often neglected. The same is the case with dependants. This can be faulted given the lingering extended family system in Nigeria. Likewise wives are not entitled to husbands tax relief although husbands are entitled to wife tax relief. There are many cases of retrenched or retired husbands who are taken care of by their wives but these are disregarded under the patriarchal ideology of domesticity of women. Thus "women earn as a child and pay as a man". Apart from the problem of fringe benefits is also the discriminatory practice of not allowing women worker's children, relatives, husbands and other dependants to have access to medical and educational facilities and other benefits as it is the case for their men counterparts. It is assumed that women workers should have no liability, responsibility or obligation to any person.

Alternative measures have been proposed by the NLCWW in order to combat the above discriminatory practices.

(a) Fringe, benefits, allowances, tax relief, promotion, training and all other facilities should be based on individual rights and competence and not sex or marital status.

(b) Annual and maternity leaves should be separated and workers should be given the right to go on maternity leave for up to two years without pay and the current period of maternity leave should be extended to 18 weeks.

(c) Domestic work and child bearing and rearing should be recognized as social service and be remunerated and should not be a liability to women.

(d) Creches and nurseries should be provided by employers in work places to lessen the burden of working mothers.

(e) Positive discrimination should be introduced to reserve 55% of vacancies in all establishments to women<sup>47</sup>.

#### **Nigeria Labour Congress Women's Wing Visions on the Wider Society**

Some of the alternative visions on problems of the larger society include:

(a) The Federal Government should introduce socialism as popularly demanded by the Nigerian people, stop the current trend of privatization of public properties, allocate specific seats to women and labour in all elective posts and introduce positive discrimination in other facets of life for the next one or two generations.

(b) Rural women and peasant farmers should be granted agricultural loans in order to enhance their productivity and self-reliance.

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47 Nigeria Labour Congress, "Communique at the end", op. cit.

(c) Introduce free and compulsory schooling for all children and provide equipment and maintenance of health facilities. Privileged individuals should not be sponsored to go overseas on medical treatment.

(d) Women should have similar rights with men in terms of inheritance.

(e) Workers should determine the introduction of technology in their workplace.

(f) Rank and file workers should be involved in the affairs of their union.

(g) Cultural practice like wife battering and seclusion and disfiguring of women when their husbands die should be stopped

(h) Nigerian women should identify positively with the liberation struggle in Southern Africa<sup>48</sup>.

### **Strategy**

With the formation of the NLCWW, efforts are made to ensure the realization of its visions through various strategies including:

(a) The expansion of the NLCWW to other parts of the country;

(b) Formation of each industrial union's women's wing;

(c) Recognition of the NLCWW by the congress constitution and giving it specific seats in important organs like the Central Working Committee and NEC;

(d) Launching of Women Workers Charter of demands;

(e) Marking of important days like the May Day<sup>49</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The development of the NLCWW should be seen within the context of the new demands at the time of its emergence - new conditions give rise to new demands and new solutions. As pointed out earlier, the trade unions as well as the central labour union - the NLC has done little to incorporate gender issues in their demands and visions. Of course there are a lot of socialist pretences and exhortations. The NLCWW transcends this obvious limitations of the trade unions. Despite the charge by the former President of the NLC, Ali Chiroma, that the NLCWW should be concerned with problems which affect working women in general and that of married women in particular - it incorporates both class and gender issues and to that extent it is more radical than the NLC, the trade unions and all other women's organization except perhaps WIN<sup>50</sup>. For example, when the NLC withdraw the permission to use its premises as the venue of the discussion on an alterna-

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48 Ibid.

49 Group discussion at workshop on "Trade Unionism and the Women Work-force", op. cit.

50 *Women and the Family in Nigeria*, (WIN) CODESRIA Book Series, 1985.



tive to the current structural Adjustment Programme by radical and left scholars and patriots apparently on the orders of the Government, the NLCWW said "it would be in the best interest of the people of this country that the government should allow people to suggest alternatives to SAP". Likewise while the NLC is not against the SAP and refused to condemn the detention of some participants at the *alternative to SAP seminar*, the NLCWW challenged both<sup>51</sup>.

The NLCWW, unlike the situation in other countries, developed first at an upper level before attempting to reach the grass-root level<sup>52</sup>. In some other countries women workers at the shopfloor level formed their unions before attempting to unionize at national level. The bottom-up approach to trade union organization is most likely to be better than the top-down. The former has the potential of creating effective organization and consciousness-raising. Women at the grass-root level who have a better knowledge of their immediate environment and problem will most likely have a better organized and effective organization. Likewise, since it is the local condition that necessitates their unionization, the tendency to have a higher degree of consciousness-raising is brighter. This will also enable the unions to maintain their autonomy and develop local organizational skills.

There are obvious limitations of the bottom-up approach which include the difficulty of unionizing at the upper level because of possible internal bickering and too narrowly focused at the local level. Localized activities may not get the attention it deserves because of inaccessibility.

The top-down approach may bring wider experience to bear on local conditions as well as create networks for the purpose of bringing local issues to the local issues to the national levels. However this approach does not have the advantages of the bottom-up approach. In addition, the top-down approach could be presented as 'a messiah that has come to solve the problems of the ignorant'.

The NLCWW is in an antagonistic relationship with the State Council of the NLC in some states. This is because "there cannot be two captains in a ship". There is a deep suspicion of the women's wing. This is compounded by the fact that the NLCWW has no constitutional protection and no finan-

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51 *Vanguard* July 13, 1989.

52 See for example, Ahmed, Zubeida, *Women Workers in Rural Areas: Their Struggle to Organize*, ILO Asian and Pacific Regional Workshop on Strategies for Improving Employment Condition of Rural Women, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia November 14-18, 1983. Middleton Lucy (ed) *Women in the Labour Movement* Croom Helm Ltd, London 1977. Lowenhak, S., *Women and Trade Union Movement*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London 1977. Canfor, M. and Laurie, B. (ed) *Class, sex and the Woman Worker*, Greenwood Press, London 1977, Ormvedt, G. *We Will Smash this Prison Indian Women in Struggle*, Zed Press London, (1980).

cial autonomy. The NLCWW depends on the NLC for its survival. This lack of autonomy and independence is a great handicap and it obstructs the development of a well organized body. Perhaps this explains why the NLCWW does not have a well established office in any state of the federation, a hindrance to its activities.