



Religions and Development Research Programme

The role of religion in women's movements: the campaign for the domestication of CEDAW in Nigeria

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The UN Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by the Nigerian government in 1985. In 1998, following the return of democracy after thirty years of military rule, a coalition of over fifty civil society organizations formed (the Nigerian CEDAW coalition) and, alongside other women's organizations and coalitions, began to campaign to bring about the domestication of CEDAW into Nigerian law. This was believed to offer the best chance of protecting women's rights. However, the *Abolition of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in Nigeria and Other Related Matters Bill, 2006*, introduced by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, was rejected by the Federal House of Assembly in 2007, despite extensive campaigning by women's organizations.

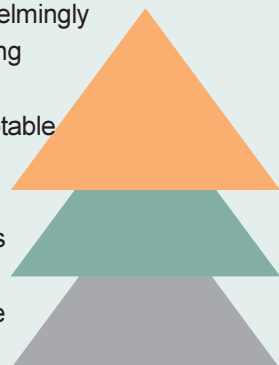
While ostensibly supporting women's rights, religious leaders and members of the House of Assembly opposed gender equality and various clauses in the Bill. A review of secondary material and semi-structured interviews with key informants in six cities enabled the researchers to analyse the role of religion and religious organizations in the campaign and the fate of the Bill. Interviewees included nine principal actors from NGO members of the CEDAW coalition, two from the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, one from the National Assembly, one from UNIFEM, nine working in four key faith-based organizations, and eleven religious leaders (six Muslim and five Christian).

It emerged that:

- The CEDAW coalition had underestimated the extent to which religious actors would regard aspects of CEDAW as controversial, as well as their capacity to mobilize

formidable opposition that cut across various faith communities, sects and denominations. Few attempts were made to investigate the views of faith communities and engage with them and their leaders to explain the content of the Bill, address the contentious issues included in it and solicit their support.

- Lobbying focused on members of the House of Assembly, but coalition members made fewer efforts to create awareness of the content of CEDAW and garner support among religious leaders (or traditional/community leaders and grassroots women). As a result, the religious leaders interviewed, including those who had opposed the Bill, were often unaware of the specific content of CEDAW. In addition, grassroots organizations engaged in programmes to address women's practical needs were not integrated into the campaign.
- Although faith-based women's organizations were consulted by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and others, there appears to have been little effort to involve them in the CEDAW campaign itself. Given their influence and acceptability in their faith communities, the coalition's failure to enlist them as allies was a tactical error.
- Muslim and Christian leaders and FBO activists interviewed support the principle of women's rights, but some (and many members of the overwhelmingly male National Assembly) expressed strong reservations about the concept of 'gender equality'. Their preference for more acceptable terminology, such as gender equity or partnership hints at resistance to gender equality on their part and among believers more widely. Conservative interpretations of sacred texts, which are perceived to be



compatible with indigenous cultural norms and practices, were central to the opposition, although it is difficult to disentangle opposition on religious grounds from men's fear of a threat to their dominant roles in the family and other social institutions and appeals to 'culture.'

- Christians and Muslims have similar views on some aspects of CEDAW, but not others. They identify different aspects as being contrary to their religious tenets. None of the major religious organizations or faith communities has issued a statement supporting or opposing CEDAW. Views about it vary among adherents within and across both religions.
- Opposition to CEDAW focused on specific issues contained in Articles 10, 12 and 16, which relate to reproductive rights (mainly Catholics but also Muslims), women's rights in marriage and its dissolution, the minimum age of marriage (Muslims), and gender roles in marriage, religious spaces and society (both Christians and Muslims). Many, especially Catholics, saw the Bill as attempting to surreptitiously legalize abortion. It was regarded by its opponents as anti-family, anti-God and part of a Western feminist agenda.
- Some research participants highlighted the role of the media in perpetuating misconceptions about CEDAW, as well as the coalition's ineffective use of media advocacy in the campaign.
- Despite the failure of the Bill, the campaign is ongoing. For example, the CEDAW coalition submits its own reports to the UN Committee that reviews national progress in achieving CEDAW's aims to counter what it perceives as the Nigerian government's exaggerated claims. In addition, there is some agreement that religion can play a positive role. Some religious leaders

and FBOs have identified scriptural references to use in campaigning, arguing that unlike traditional culture, Christianity and Islam recognize women's rights. Activists in civil society organizations and government believe that lessons have been learnt from the campaign, but lament the lack of a solid financial base for pursuing it to its logical conclusion.

Some implications of this experience are:

- Secular and FBO activists believe that a more pragmatic approach to domesticating CEDAW might be to: a. extricate its more contentious aspects and incorporate the remainder in a partial Bill or include them piecemeal in a variety of national laws, and b. focus on the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (2004) as a more acceptable alternative.
- Campaigners need to identify potential sources of opposition to proposed legal reform, seek to address their concerns and solicit their support, including not only elected representatives but also religious leaders and organizations, men and grassroots women's organizations.
- To address the deficiencies in media support, informants suggested that sensitization workshops on CEDAW, the AU protocol and the National Gender Policy should be held to generate support for the campaign among media personnel.

Based on Oluwafunmilayo J. Para-Mallam, Bolatito Lanre-Abass, Fatima Adamu and Adebayo Ajala (2011) *The Role of Religion in Women's Movements for Social Change: The campaign for the Domestication of CEDAW in Nigeria*, Birmingham: Religions and Development WP 59.

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