

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the Fortieth Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain

Hofstra University, Hempstead (New York)
Thursday April 2—Saturday April 4, 2009

The Politics of Gender Parity in Equatorial Guinea: Toward a more Sustained Political and Social Civility in the Twenty First Century

Mitoha Ondo'o Ayekaba

I. Introduction:

Recent approaches of public policy focusing on strengthening Equatorial Guinea's (EG) democratic system and tackling the country's social and economic inequalities have normally taken two distinct although not necessarily irreconcilable approaches: 1) one agenda gravitates toward a purely political laissez-faireism, promoting policies that encourage letting things take their own course. This approach is based on the basic assumption of the trickle-down effect of EG's oil economy, in which the poorest will gradually benefit as a result of the increasing wealth of the richest, and that in turn, might also lead to a more efficient and updated political system. 2) The other approach targets the perceived need for institutional reform; therefore, embracing the notion that institutional inefficiency or ineffectiveness is a source of political deficit and social

and economic inequalities. Target areas of this policy approach have mainly covered the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

Although both approaches have signaled the need to empower civil society, it is fair to say that neither of them has really included one essential aspect of this idea in their respective policies. Therefore, in this paper I will present the benefits of prioritizing the empowerment of civil societies in EG as an essential component policy tool in which lies the achievement of a real, organic, and lasting democracy in the country. I address the peculiarities and conditions of women's organizations in EG by analyzing the potential causes that may inhibit or hinder progress of women. I will do so by analyzing and exposing the past and current state of the politics of gender and status of the political power of women in EG. While considering that task, these are some of the basic questions we might want to keep in mind: 1) Is EG's female elite a product of a broader political coalition of women? 2) What is the nurturing relationship between women in positions of power with the broader condition of the rest of women in EG society? 3) If nurturing does not exist, what are the determinative conditions that might limit the emergence of women's coalitions and civil organizations as a political force in EG politics?

These questions have obvious policy implications. They tend to respond to and expose the ecological factors that limit or influence the emergence of internal and genuine processes of development and democracy in EG. Because of the experience of poor women in their struggles to ensure basic survival of themselves and their families, I believe women should also be the centripetal force of reference in understanding not

only the inequalities in access to power or the political intricacies that limit the possibilities of an effective and real democracy, but also in bringing about change. Women's involvement in politics often comes with unquantifiable political, social, and economic returns because through involvement, they can help transform their families, their villages and ultimately the country. This is the reason why is so important to analyze difficulties that women face in EG as a potential political force.

II. Context and Evolution of the Politics of Gender in EG:

The context and evolution of the politics of gender in EG must be understood from the country's need to fulfill its international commitments and obligations. EG became a member of the UN on December 12, 1968. Since then, the country signed the Bill of Rights, and took the first step to reconcile with international critics on issues of women's rights by creating, in 1980, the Secretariat of State for the Advancement of Women. Initially, it was simply a ministerial office attached to the Ministry of Labor. And it would not be until 1992 that it became the Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Social Affairs. Currently, it is known as the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Status of Women (acronym in Spanish, MINASCOM)¹.

In 1984, EG signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and accordingly, accepted the obligation to grant women equal treatment. The signature also recognized the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the country's obligation to comply with Article II, which guarantees equal

rights and freedom for all people. The new constitution of 1991, ratified on June 17, 1996, also contains explicit language supporting equal rights among its citizens, and the administration's commitment to this issue culminated in presidential Decree No. 79/2002, in which the government adopted a comprehensive National Policy for the Advancement of Women (acronym in Spanish, PNPM) ⁱⁱ. This policy presents strategies both for the advancement of women and parity in opportunities for both sexes. It includes a range of issues including education, health, community based participation, and equal access to institutions and opportunities.

However, none of the above normative progress has permeated nor affected the existing reality of women's rights in the country, perhaps because of the lack of political will to enforce the law. The problem is not a lack of good policies that might address difficulties faced by women. The problem is that the state has become a system that is divorced from the need of society and some of the incremental changes in term of the political gains and freedoms are to be understood more from the context of international politics than an organic process. Therefore, and beside international pressures and collaborations, today we still find a crude reality in the area of gender parity in EG. As stated by the 2004 UN report submitted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in EG, "The disparity with men remains enormous, and equal representation has not been achieved in any sector or aspect of life."ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, and as late as 2004, women heading households in EG still represent a meager 24% (an indication or sign of women's lack of economic dependence), while only 8.1% of government officials, including traditional chiefs, local

council leaders, mayors, and members of Parliament were women. Of a total of 49 posts in the executive branch, there is only one female minister, one female vice-minister, two secretaries of state, and one woman working as a presidential advisor. This same lack of representation exists in parliament and the judicial branch, where there is only a single woman judge on the Supreme Court, and four women serving as district judges^{iv}. These statistics suggest that, while women have gained the right to be visible in almost every aspect of governance and society, there still is a general persistence of lack of political power and influencing capacity.

For example: a draft law designed to regulate customary marriages attempts to provide a legal framework for dowry, consent, inheritance, widowhood and other important matters that have, up until now, left women at the mercy of their husbands and/or the husbands' families, has been in the drafting stage for almost three years. Obviously a threat to a patriarchal society, its adoption has been consistently thwarted.¹

III. The Importance of Empowering Women and Women Right Organizations:

The emergence of an organized civil society and its relevance in relation to levels of democracy has been well documented for some time now. Iris Marion Young, in *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000) makes a strong case regarding the inevitable and necessary partnership between state and civil society to develop a strong democracy^v.

¹ Ibid, 10-11

Myer and Anver agree with her in the sense that, citizens, through non-formal or non-electoral political participation, can expect to make change and effect society and politics. The other option is through formal electoral participation^{vi}. However, there is substantial dissent from those (such as Samuel Huntington or Giuseppe Di Palma) who do not see the role of civil society as a necessary ingredient in the initial formation and later evolution of democracy^{vii}. Huntington for example, argues that, “some cultures are inherently antidemocratic and thwart the possibilities for democratic openings”^{viii}. Di Palma, on the other hand, states that, while recognizing the benefits of political culture and citizen engagement, it “is not necessarily (a) precondition for democratization; such a political culture shall evolve on its own”. For him, the great challenge is to convince others, non-democratic actors, to play by the rules of democracy^{ix}. This lack of relevance has drawn sharp criticism from scholars such as Iba Khalum and Mehran Kamrava who still recognize the important role of civil society as a central and necessary piece toward effecting positive change. Kamrava states that political culture is itself a sociological process that emerges once there is a collective desirability for organizing and articulating along democratic lines. Therefore, he maintains that, “civil society is crucial to a viable democracy; without a well-developed civil society, it is nearly impossible to foster an atmosphere supportive of democracy”^x. This statement resonates with an assertion of Lisa Baldez. She states that, “in the eyes of many development specialists, policy analysts, politicians, activists and academics alike, a strong civil society is essential to the proper functioning of democracy”^{xi}.

Although scholars and policy makers recognize the important role of civil society for democratization; its ultimate configuration, impacts on democratic institutions, as well as the specific role of NGOs in civil society, are still a subject of ongoing debate. There is, however, a general concurrency on vision. They all share the idea of civil society as a sphere of public activities by citizens and that lie outside formal political institutions and market activities.

However, it is still difficult to envision a strong and consolidated democratic rule without the development of an independent and active civil society that demands changes and citizen participation in governance^{xii}. This is a void that women's organizations in EG can fill easily by advocating for issues that affect them most, such as education, healthcare, and poverty. Politically, Women still represent a scant 18% of the total membership of the unicameral parliament or parliamentary chamber (House of Representatives of the People) of the 100 statutory members^{xiii}. Perhaps even more revealing, is the fact that there seems to be little indication that their presence has brought about any substantive changes in reshaping the political landscape, or in seriously tackling many pending issues that affect women in particular, the quality of democracy, and the erosion of certain civil liberties that affect the entire society. In such a scenario, it is easy to understand that a greater political representation is not necessarily synonymous with a greater social transformation of the status of women, and that the government's failure to take serious actions to resolve these problems is perhaps due to the perception that to improve the lot of women would be counter-productive to maintaining tight control of the society and political process. Women's organizations have faced the same

problem of any political organization in the country but they have rarely received as much support as the latter. Rather, pressure from the United Nations (UN) and the international community as a whole have resulted in some of the timid reforms achieved in recent years as it evidenced with the implementation of the PNPM.

This situation can easily be reversed with an acute support of the emergence of women's organizations and their programs, which can stimulate the renaissance of a social contract that would maximize efficiency and overall social benefit. Women's organizations are in better position to build positive political alliances across the board, in an environment often characterized by widespread "brotherhood" mentality (the extended network of social clientele).

As stated by Edgar Pisani, development is a cultural and political phenomenon more than an economic and technological one. Consequently, the capacity to create wealth and prosperity for large number of people will depend primarily on the cultural values prevailing in each society. This culture also determines the broad societal choices, as well as the quality and efficiency of societal institutions^{xiv}. In that sense, women's cries for civil and political liberties in EG is an opportunity to reshape not only the political debate but the male and often ethnically focused approach of doing politics, bringing the potential of renewed social contract that will benefit all by reinforcing the idea of citizenship and democracy.

ⁱ UN Secretariat. (2004). *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*. Retrieved June 13, 2008, from the Division for the Advancement of Women web site: <

-
- <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/245/08/PDF/N0424508.pdf?OpenElement>>
- ii UN Document. (2004). *Committee on the Elimination against Women*. Retrieved June 9, web site: < <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw31/EqGuinea-crp2add2-e.pdf>>
- iii UN Document. (2004). *Committee on the Elimination against Women*. Retrieved June 9, web site: < <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw31/EqGuinea-crp2add2-e.pdf>>
- iv UN Document. (2004). *Committee on the Elimination against Women*. Retrieved June 9, web site: < <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw31/EqGuinea-crp2add2-e.pdf>>
- v Young, Iris Marion. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford University Press).
- vi Myer, Siemiatycki and Saloojee, Anver. (2003). FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL PARTICIPATION BY IMMIGRANTS AND NEWCOMERS: UNDERSTANDING THE LINKAGES AND POSING THE QUESTION. *Canadian Issues*. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from CBCA Reference database. (Document ID: 509713761).
- vii Victoria Stanski (2005). LINCHPIN FOR DEMOCRACY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQ. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(2), 197-225. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 896003471).
- viii Victoria Stanski (2005). LINCHPIN FOR DEMOCRACY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQ. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(2), 197-225. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 896003471).
- ix Victoria Stanski (2005). LINCHPIN FOR DEMOCRACY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQ. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(2), 197-225. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 896003471).
- x Victoria Stanski (2005). LINCHPIN FOR DEMOCRACY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQ. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(2), 197-225. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 896003471).
- xi Lisa Baldez (1998). Women's organizations and the development of civil society. Review of medium_being_reviewed title_of_work_reviewed_in_italics.

American Anthropologist, 100(3), 785-788. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 39076334).

- ^{xii} Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom (2002). Women's NGOs in Russia: Struggling from the margins. *Demokratizatsiya*, 10(2), 207-229. Retrieved June 12, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 181920531).
- ^{xiii} United Nation Statistic Division. (2008). Retrieved April 10, 2008. Web site: <
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw31/EqGuinea-crp2add2-e.pdf>>
- ^{xiv} Eugene Nyambal (2006). *Creating Prosperity in Africa* (In Water Press: Portland)