

# Speaker of Assembly, Women's Groups Fight It Out

by Remi Oyo

LAGOS—Rights groups have criticised the Speaker of Nigeria's Bauchi State Assembly for insulting a female legislator who demanded to be addressed and treated like her male counterparts

They said the Speaker, Bappa Dishini, told Habiba Sambo: "You are still a woman and women are in the armpit of men."

The problem began during a recent swearing-in of the 32-member Bauchi State Assembly when Sambo, the only female member, had protested her exclusion from the leadership of any of the House Committees.

Sambo also demanded that she be addressed as an "Honourable" member just like any of her colleagues.

Dishina's statement enraged women's groups.

"The story of the lone woman in Bauchi vividly captures the status of women in the Nigerian patriarchal state," said Nkoyo Toyo, executive director of Gender and Development Action (GADA) in a statement made available to IPS.

"A legislator who represents the largest constituency in her state is unable to hold her head high and pursue her mandate," said Toyo, wondering whether the dispute "could be the product of Dishina's religious persuasion, culture or outright ignorance."

Toyo demanded a public apology and threatened that "if such sexist language persists" women's groups would "call for the removal of the Speaker."

In the eastern state of Enugu at least 10 women's groups have threatened legal action to press for the inclusion of women in the decision-making process.

The women, who met in Enugu last week, criticised Governor Chiramaoke Nnamani for not including women in the 10-member state executive council.

"The current discriminatory policies and practices in appointment to the state executive council (cabinet) at the dawn of the 21st century is unacceptable," the NGOs said.

"No woman was elected into the Enugu

state House of Assembly because of male chauvinism," they said. "How can women's interests be protected by this government if they are not part of the decision-making?"

Women are also poorly represented in a cabinet list sent by President Olusegun Obasanjo to the Senate for approval.

Unconfirmed reports say only seven out of the 49 names sent for approval are women. Of the six appointments of advisers and their assistants made by Obasanjo, none is a woman.

"This is only 14 percent and not even half of the 30 percent recommended by the United Nations," Onikepo Oshodi of the All Peoples' Party (APP) said at a lecture in the commercial city of Lagos last week.

She said all the women's groups in Nigeria "expect an increase in the percentage of women in public service and government boards of *parastatals*."

Oshodi urged women to lay a new strategy if they want to survive as a people in the next millennium.

"Our strategies," she said, should include "devising tactics for eliciting the enthusiasm and concerted efforts of both male and female members of society for the goal of enhancing the participation of women in politics."

"A programme of sustained reorientation and education for the men to allay their fears and make them respect and treat women as equals," she added, is the only solution to ensure the consistent and significant participation of women in politics.

A male activist, who refused to be named, told IPS that his NGO will work together with other human rights and pro-democracy activists to protest any marginalisation of women.

"In this day and age, I don't see how religion should come in. We have women who are leaders in several fields. It does not augur well for the development of this country," he said.

He said they will solicit the signatures of millions of men and women to protect women's rights.

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