



Club Of Madrid And Women Leaders

By Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf

The city of Brussels in Belgium, the headquarters of the European Union hosted seventy women leaders from Africa from September 5-9 2008. They met under the auspices of the Club of Madrid, an independent organization whose purpose and priority is to contribute to strengthening democracy in the world. The Club has 70 democratic former heads of states and government as members and membership is opened to former Heads of State and governments of 50 democratic countries and most of the members are former presidents and prime ministers. There are honorary members such as Mr. Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General and the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson is the Vice President of the Club of Madrid. The political experience, credibility, and networks of these leaders would provide high-level, targeted and time sensitive support to encourage increased women's political participation and place it more centrally onto regional and national political agenda. The organisation's bye law makes it mandatory that 80 percent of its members must be from the transitional democracies and 20 percent from consolidated democracies.

The Club also has access to the world's leading experts and scholars on democracy issues, a focus on democratic transition and consolidation, a commitment to practical programmes with measurable results. With these resources, the Club of Madrid acts as a consultative body for governments, democratic leaders and institutions involved in processes of democratic transition. It is supported by a network of world class experts who work together to assist countries and offer assistance on a range of democratic reform issues.

In 2007, the Club of Madrid launched a project the African Women Leaders Project (AWLP) to increase women's political participation. The initiative has received support from the European Commission and Canada's International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Hunt Alternatives Fund's Initiative for Inclusive Security. Three associate organisations also support this project. They are the United Nations Development Fund for Women, (UNIFEM), the Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians (NEWMAP) and the Council of Women World Leaders. The project has been providing support to high level women leaders in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Three missions have been undertaken to these countries by the Club of Madrid members and experts where they shared leadership experiences related to increasing women's access to decision making in the political, social, economic sectors. The club's slogan is 'Democracy that Delivers'.

The main objectives of the project are:

- To provide women political leaders with new resources and skills to strengthen political leadership
- Identify and share best practices from the region and internationally for increasing women's political participation, including gender quotas and other affirmative action policies
- Facilitate the sharing of experiences and dialogue between national women parliamentarians and outstanding women political leaders in Africa and throughout the world;
- Establish high level specialised networks among reform minded leaders in the region and internationally, to enable the sharing of knowledge and resources.
- Promote greater gender awareness of the obstacles to women's political participation and the centrality of equal political participation to a functioning democracy.

- Increase women's political participation in target countries through devised relevant advocacy strategies and identifying feasible policy options.

To achieve these, the Club of Madrid has been organising various activities such as leadership capacity building and experience sharing workshops for women, gender awareness workshops, gender political participation baseline report, high level meetings with national authorities to advance the policy agenda for women's political participation, a final international conference to present key findings and recommendations; and publication with main conclusions and recommendations. It was in carrying out the last two activities that the women leaders from Nigeria, Uganda and Sierra Leone gathered in Brussels. The delegates to the Brussels conference were those who have been involved in the implementation of the AWL Project for increased political participation in the three countries. Most of them were former heads of states, ministers, parliamentarians, party leaders and a host of civil society leaders who have been associated with the project implementation. The various Non Governmental Organisations that implemented the project in the three countries were the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) for Nigeria, the European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA) for Uganda and the Campaign for Global Governance (CGC) for Sierra Leone. These implementing organisations invited and sponsored the delegations from the three countries to present their activities during the project, share experiences and strategise for the future. The Nigerian delegation was led by Saudatu Mahdi, the Secretary General of WRAPA, the implementing organisation and its Programme Officer, Rabi Musa Abdullahi. It included Distinguished Senator Umaru Tambuwal, the Chairman of the Senate Committee for Human Rights and Law Reform, Hon. Beni Lar who is the Chairperson of the Women Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives, Chief Josephine Anenih, Member, Board of Trustees of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Amina Ibrahim, the Senior Special Assistant to the President on the MDGs, Dr Jibril Ibrahim, the Executive Director, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and a member of the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC). Others were Oby Nwankwo, Executive Director of the Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC), Sindi Medar Gould, Executive Director, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, Hamza Makarfi, News producer and anchor from the Nigerian Television Authority, (NTA). There were organisational managers of the project, among them Lawal Liman, Henry Anoliefo, the Assistant Project Officer, Esther Habu from the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and my humble self.

Four world leaders also represented the Club of Madrid and actively participated in the various sessions. Among them were former Presidents, Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka), Ketumile Masire (Botswana), Benjamin Mkapa (Tanzania) and Cassam Uteem (Mauritius). Their commitment to the issues, the humility with which they made their presentations and interacted with other participants was worthy of emulation. I could not resist making a comparison with Nigeria. While the Club of Madrid leaders are out offering voluntary services, sharing experiences and making a difference in the world, our own leaders wear a stunted local profile, living in perpetual fear of what their hands have wrought. They remain paranoid and cocooned in the comfort of their palaces or farms, unable to relate freely with citizens to share their experience. Here at home, we have two types of former leaders, those who are at peace with themselves and their community. They move around with minimum security and seek relevance in establishing foundations through which they inform and influence policies and offer services to their communities. The other type include those who seem to have difficulty adjusting to normal life after the transitory limelight of public office. They have such a myopic vision for the country that they are unable to conceptualise life outside the Presidential Villa and Government Houses and therefore do their best to hang on to power. When they fail in their ability to perpetuate themselves in power, they metamorphose into all shades of sadists and saboteurs, masquerading as party barons and godfathers and constituting major stumbling blocks to sustainable democracy. They meddle in the processes of governance and perfect the art of imposing inept, corrupt and least competent candidates on voters. Those who refrain from doing this adopt an evasive posture, haunted by their past, their misuse of power and the havoc they wreaked on the poor people who gave them the mandate to lead. They should be invited to the Club of Madrid for a training on democracy and governance by their colleagues.

On the first day of the conference, the three country delegations met to discuss African Women's Political Leadership: Challenges, Opportunities and Strategies, review activities in their countries and highlight the key issues to focus on. The Nigerian delegation discussed the topic: Assessing the Situation of Women in Politics in Nigeria and the following issues were highlighted as the challenges facing women who aspire to political positions: economic barriers, traditional and religious barriers, political parties lack commitment to gender and affirmative action and the absence in the Constitution and the Electoral Act of provisions such as affirmative

action that would assist to increase the number of women in politics. The four critical areas of focus were identified as constitutional review, electoral reform, structural and institutional reforms and socio-cultural and economic issues. Several recommendations were made under these sectors, key among them were intensifying capacity building for women and integration of quotas and proportional representation electoral systems into the Constitution and the Electoral Act.

The panel sessions in which all the three countries participated were chaired by the four former heads of states in attendance and several topics were discussed. Among them were: The Use of Gender Quotas to Promote Democratic Governance, Impact of Political Representation of Women on Policy Reform and Change and How to Ensure Gender Equality in Politics in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda: Policy Implications for Sub Saharan Africa. An interesting aspect of the session was the similarity in the presentations made by the Nigerian, Sierra Leone and Ugandan delegations in identifying barriers to women's political advancement.

On the second day, the conference moved to the Egmont Palace where a keynote address was presented by Veronica Arnault, Director for Multilateral Relations at the Directorate- General for External Relations of the European Union. The Plenary session discussed the topic: "Why Equal Participation and Leadership Matters to Democracy in Africa and Beyond", while the panel sessions that followed focused on, "The Use of Gender Quotas to Promote Democratic Governance". Former heads of state and women leaders also shared experiences and six concurrent sessions were organised on the following topics: networking, caucusing and coalition building, leadership skill building: what works, gendering the African political landscape: use of affirmative action strategies and resources. Others are domesticating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW) and the African Union Protocol on Rights of Women; Engaging gender machineries in peace and security systems and transforming attitudes towards women in politics: the role of the media. The Nigeria Country Report and contributions from the leaders will be discussed next week.