

# Untold Histories of Nigerian Women



# Untold Histories of Nigerian Women:

*Emerging from the Margins*

By

Tayo Agunbiade

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Cover image:

Top row (from left): Olu Solanke, Gambo Sawaba, Stella J. Thomas

Bottom row (from left): Margaret Ekpo, Grace Ogbemi, Bintu Balogun

In loving Memory of Mother, Esther Omotayo Afolabi



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**Tayo Agunbiade**

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# INTRODUCTION

## VISIBILISING NIGERIAN WOMEN INTO HISTORY

Nigeria's historiography mostly comprises male-authored narratives which pay little or no recognition to the accomplishments and biographies of women. This one-sided approach to the preservation of history has left an imbalance in global knowledge. The resulting gap made it imperative to write this book in order to un-silence and visibilise the histories of women and move away from a gendered form of documenting Nigerian history.

*Untold Histories of Nigerian Women: Emerging from the Margins* redefines Nigeria's historical texts. It consists of narratives about women's agency in the country's colonial and contemporary history which otherwise have largely been marginalised or treated as micro-narratives within the broader celebrations of national feats. The narratives also offer a gender perspective to discuss the importance of reclaiming women's histories.

This book documents and normalises their voices and contributions to the shaping of the past and modern Nigerian society. It covers a period of one hundred years (1922-2022) and provides detailed information of their lives and experiences to fill in the missing information in narratives about Nigeria's national history. Through this book, Nigerian women are now textualised as an essential part of African and global histories.

Chronicled in twenty chapters are the deeds, as well as the professional, social, economic and political struggles of women for rights and inclusion. Historical evidence about daring women-led resistance, challenges and rhetoric against violent colonial and indigenous patriarchy have been extensively documented.

Women's actions during nationalism for example, are minimised in the annals, yet they are far from being irrelevant in shaping the journey towards independence. This book salvages and empowers the hitherto unknown voices for their rightful place to enrich and complete Nigeria's public history.

To successfully textualise their histories, a number of long and remarkable speeches made by women have been included in some chapters.

The content and richness of their views and perspectives are deliberately kept intact devoid of any summarising. The idea is to quote these women verbatim so as to preserve their thoughts for future generations.

Women's experiences in public affairs in modern-day Nigeria are also included in the narratives. This serves as the basis for a detailed comparative analysis because as current day facts show, a comment made by one of Nigeria's suffragettes, Oyinkan Abayomi, in May 1944 that "the interests of women are sorely neglected," is unfortunately, still applicable. The unearthed empirical evidence from then to now, forms a fundamental part of women's stories in this book.

Research for this body of work, uncovered the uncomfortable hard facts of the historical pattern of gender imbalance in the management of Nigeria's public bodies. At least three chapters document narratives which catalogue themes around an endemic model of male hierarchy in politics, decision-making processes and state institutions. To analyse the heights of the dominance, the names of men are included in some chapters. However, this detailed male-focused data should not be regarded as a celebration of the entrenched and entitled male hegemony, but rather should be seen as an exposure of the depths of women's underrepresentation in Nigeria's constitutional, electoral, political, and administrative systems. To give one example, a comprehensive analysis is devoted to the nation's honours and awards system as a form of 'protest' against the wide disparity in the recognition of women's contributions as stakeholders in nation building.

Buoyed by such compelling evidence, the narratives in these chapters boldly question the structural inequalities and demographic imbalance which have collectively captured virtually all aspects of Nigeria's national life. The under-recognition of the participation of one-half of a country's population in development and the experiences of women themselves in fighting against these anomalies, also forms a substantial part of the history recounted in this book. The acts of violence experienced by women resisters in historical and contemporary times also importantly receive attention in this book.

The narratives contained in this text are principally based on colonial-era documents such as women-authored petitions, as well as letters, minutes of council meetings; colonial reports and public notices etc., discovered in some branches of Nigeria's national archives located at Abeokuta, Enugu, Ibadan, Kaduna and Lagos. Other treasures uncovered include trails of correspondence authored by British colonial administrators which are rooted in patriarchal thought. The notes reveal patterns of gender and racial hierarchy towards women, for instance in recruitment policies into the civil service. These thoughts and conversations which have been

gathered and interpreted from piles of documents and discussions are included as part of memorialising the experiences of Nigerian women during British imperial rule.

Additional forms of primary sources such as newspapers, journals and magazines etc., that were published during the early nationalist years, as well as more contemporary times, provide a rich body of evidence regarding the lives, roles and contributions of women during Nigeria's march towards independence and citizenship in general. A page-by-page sift through editorials, news bulletins, legislative reports and the like, proved to be a fruitful venture because tucked away in these resources were women-voiced articles, letters, legislative debates, campaign rhetoric, interviews and political statements etc., waiting to be visibilised. As perhaps was the practice of the period, many reports in the nationalist press did not include by-lines. The news items that fall into this category have been itemised alphabetically in the book's bibliography.

The year 1929 was pivotal for women's history. It witnessed the first woman, Stella Jane Thomas (Marke), who had ancestral ties to the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra-Leone and Nigeria, gain admission into what was traditionally known as a masculine domain. Subsequently, on her call to the bar in 1933, more Nigerian women pioneers ventured to become barristers and continued to blaze the historical pathway. A handful of these women are listed in a table of statistics (1935-1960) which was first published in 1988. A chapter in this book is devoted to unravelling the lives behind the names on this table. The children of some of these early women barristers appreciatively shared oral stories and also provided the historical call to the bar photographs of their mothers. Other 1940s archival research of the women unearthed more exciting facts about a few of them such as Olabisi Alakija Awoonor-Renner, Adebisi Adedoyin-Adebisi and Aduke Alakija.

The power of working-class women also received ample consideration in this book. Ahudi from Isidinma in Eastern Nigeria who was labelled the "Ibo Suffragette" in 1930, re-renters the canons of history for her views on social justice. Ideas of women's emancipation and slogans of "Votes for Women" and "No Taxation, without Representation" first emanated in Igbo and Yoruba languages in the 1930s and 40s. These notions gained further traction during the protracted disputes of the Lagos Market women with town council officials which on several occasions ended up before a magistrate and the Supreme Court, are accorded their historical importance. Their activism gave a push to their demands for female representation on municipal councils which the administration in the Colony of Lagos first acceded to in 1944. The women became historical

models to inspire future challenges from other activists against unbridled officialdom.

Although we may be familiar with the name of the Lagos woman market leader, Alimotu Pelewura, but the voices of several other women traders were also discovered to have participated in the collective defiance against the colonial authorities from the early 1930s. Through their civic engagement with the Lagos political elite and the “European agent,” they unwittingly wrote their names into history. Northern Nigeria women activists such as Gambo Sawaba and Ladi Shehu also reclaim their space in this text.

Women’s combined voices now occupy a deserved place to vindicate their suffering, as well as their contributions towards Nigeria’s history.

This book retrieves, restores and memorialises the hidden histories of women in order to build a more inclusive and balanced global record of the past.





## CHAPTER ONE

### “WOMEN OF LAGOS REVOLT AGAINST OLD AFRICA...”

There was plenty of excitement at the 18 Broad Street residence of 47-year old Oyinkan Morenike Abayomi in the Colony of Lagos. It was Wednesday, 10 May 1944 and one of Nigeria's earliest female socio-political activists was in the middle of planning for a historic moment scheduled to be held later in the evening. The special occasion was the launch of her new political party, which she had named the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP). This was hardly surprising as her family was active in Lagos political and social circles, and she was also quite well-known for her welfare events.

At the age of 23, Oyinkan was the secretary of the British West African Educated Girls' Club (BWAEC), one of three clubs founded and chaired by Lady Elizabeth Clifford, wife of Sir Hugh Clifford, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Nigeria (1919-1925). The BWAEC spearheaded a series of fund-raising activities such as concerts and bazaars towards the establishment of a government-owned “ladies' college” in Lagos. The outcome of their advocacy was Queen's College which was formally established for girls by the colonial government under Sir Graeme Thomson in October 1927. Oyinkan became a foundational member of staff and taught English and music at the college for five years. She was also a member of the Rose Band Club and the Ladies' Progressive Club.

The Ladies' Progressive Club where she served as the “indefatigable” secretary, for a period of fifteen years, also offered a few scholarship opportunities for girls to attend the college. By 1930, Oyinkan had become a captain in the Girl Guides Movement, and in 1933 was a founding member of the Young Women's Christian Association. On her retirement from Queen's College in 1933, the Old Girls Association paid tribute to her:

The gratitude of Queen's College girls for all Mrs Abayomi has done for them in numerous countless ways cannot be expressed sufficiently or

adequately in words, so we are asking her to accept this brooch as a lasting token of our deep gratitude of the love we have for her.

During the Second World War, Oyinkan was a leading member of the Women's Voluntary Service which operated the African Forces Canteen in Lagos for soldiers on transit to the war front. A narration by Lady Violet Bourdillon (wife of the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, Sir Bernard Bourdillon, 1935-1943) about Nigerian women's war service was published under the headline "Women's War-time Work in West Africa" in the *Crown Colonist* of August 1943. She described the practical work done by Oyinkan and her colleagues at the canteen in Lagos:

I went down to see them getting ready to feed 700 men at Christmas. It was a grand sight – heaps of onions, tomatoes, eggs, chickens, and pounds of meat – and the ladies, in native dress, sitting round little fires, plucking and singeing the fowls and making great cauldrons of stew. They had already cooked for 200 men that day, as the canteen is very popular with the troops. In their own homes these ladies have plenty of servants to do the work, and it is fine evidence of their desire to help the war effort that they themselves should pluck and singe hundreds of fowls and do everything else required-and do it remarkably well.

Oyinkan's social work during the war years fetched her an honour. A few months before the launch of the NWP, her name was included on the King's New Year Honours List with an award of Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). This prestigious honour however did not sway her from her vision to promote the emancipation of Nigerian women and when necessary, challenge colonial policy. In July 1949, a newspaper based in Northern Nigeria newspaper the *Nigerian Citizen*, under the headline "First in Nigeria's History," published the following news bulletin about her progress in the Girl Guides Movement in Nigeria:

With so much controversy on the colour question in the last few weeks, the announcement of the appointment of Mrs Oyinkan Abayomi, MBE., as Deputy Commissioner of Girl Guides in Nigeria is indeed a welcome gesture. As the substantive Commissioner for Nigeria. Mrs Catgrave is not in the country, Mrs Abayomi becomes acting commissioner, the first time an African has held such office in the history of the Guide Movement in Nigeria. Mrs Abayomi is undoubtedly an excellent choice and there can be no doubt that she will give an excellent account of herself.

Oyinkan was the daughter of a Lagos high society couple, Sir Kitoyi and Lucretia Cornelia Layinka Ajasa (nee Moore). Her father was a

nominated member of the Legislative Council of Nigeria, as well as a major player in the early nationalist welfare association known as the People's Union. He was also a member of the judicial establishment and was listed as a solicitor in the Supreme Court, Colony of Lagos. Her mother was the daughter of Rev William Odushina Moore who served as the catechist at the Egba Anglican Diocese, in Abeokuta, often called the “Cradle of Christianity in Nigeria.”

Oyinkan had other ties with the political circles in Lagos. Her maternal uncle, barrister Eric Olawolu Moore, was a founding member and vice-president of Nigeria's main nationalist political party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). He also served as both a nominated and elected member of the Legislative Council of Nigeria.

Thus, early in life, Oyinkan developed an awareness of African representation and electoral politics in the Colony of Lagos. She was spent eight years in England where she attended Ryeford Hall Ladies College and the London College of Music. In September 1916, it was reported that she passed the licentiate examination and for the second successive year, won the first prize in music at the college. When she turned 21 in 1918, messages of congratulation were sent from all sectors of Lagos to her family. On her return to Nigeria in August 1919, she was hosted to a reception at St George's Hall by the Lagos Musical Society.

As a young lady, due to the socio-political standing of her father, she was close to government circles. She was a member the inner caucus of the governor's wife and for example was often invited to dinner parties and concerts at government house and was also part of the deputations that received Lady Clifford at the wharf before and after her trips overseas. Lady Clifford was also known to attend the BWAEC meetings which were sometimes held at the Ajasa family home, known as Godstone House, Race Course.

She was also active in the fund-raising circuit for First World War British War Charities. In 1920, Oyinkan organised two concerts for blind soldiers and sailors affiliated with St Dunstan's Hospital, London. The events which were held in January and October at her home and St George's Hall respectively, were attended by the governor Clifford and his wife, Elizabeth, as well as other top colonial dignitaries.

The year 1923 was epochal in the history of the Colony of Lagos and Protectorate of Nigeria. The first elections to the Legislative Council of Nigeria took place in September. In the meantime, earlier in the year, on Thursday, 17 May 1923 at the age of 26, Oyinkan married Barrister Moronfolu Abayomi. The wedding ceremony took place at St Paul's Breadfruit Church and was attended by top ranking colonial officials and

the political elite. As she walked down the aisle with her father, to the tune of "The Voice that Breathed O'er Eden," Oyinkan did not hold a bouquet of flowers, but a small prayer book bound in ivory. She received over a hundred wedding gifts which ranged from silver tea sets, cheques, crockery, gold necklaces, flower stands to native cloths, cutlery, letters cases and rose bowls. The couple resided at Akimosa House, Victoria Street, Lagos Island.

However, on 25 August 1923, their marital bliss was shattered when Moronfolu was shot dead outside the court hall by a convicted prisoner named Duro Delphonso. At the coroner's inquest, it was ruled that "the deceased died from a gun shot fired by Delphonso."

There was an outpouring of sympathy and grief, and Oyinkan's parents published a statement to thank everyone for their "universal expression of horror at the dastardly act." As administrator of his estate, Oyinkan placed an advertisement in the newspaper in May 1924 for "all creditors and other persons having claims or demands upon or against the estate of the late Moronfolu Abayomi Solicitor in Lagos to send the in writing particulars of their claims or demands to her."

A few years later, she married Kofoworola A. Abayomi, an ophthalmologist, who like her father was also an active politician. He was a nominated member to the Lagos Town Council, but later on became an elected member of the Legislative Council of Nigeria. Oyinkan was by his side, when he received a knighthood in January 1951.

When a new political group, the National Youth Movement (NYM) was founded in 1934, she initially registered alongside her husband as a member. As one of the first female members of the NYM, it did not take long for her to become disillusioned with the marginalisation of women within the Movement's organisational and hierarchical command structure. From this point onwards, Oyinkan, was not content to remain the daughter and wife of nationalist politicians and stay on the side-lines.

From the start of the electoral politics in Nigeria in 1922, representation on the Legislative Council was decidedly male. The British colonial government introduced elections as a "democratic" activity purely targeted at men as electors and contestants. The view on who could stand in election and sit on the Legislative Council was announced in the public electoral notices released in Lagos and Calabar: ".....Every male person who is a British subject or a native of the Protectorate of Nigeria, who is of the age of twenty one years or upwards..."

Under provisions of the 1922 Clifford Constitution, the elections took place, on September 20, 1923, for seats in the newly-constituted Central Legislative Council. Four men won seats: three representing Lagos and one from Calabar.

The nationalist newspapers, most of which were affiliated with one political party or the other, also endorsed the male-only electoral process, and offered a gendered view about the place of women. For example, several years on from the election, on 21 February 1937, the *West African Pilot* published an editorial which said in part: “Our women folk should re-trace their ideas to the good old days when women were industrious, free respected and worthy. If not, let them stop talking about emancipation and what not. Let them be content with the kitchen.”

Sometimes, an occasional newspaper editorial would still seek to promote women’s political rights and representation. For instance, the same *West African Pilot* in an editorial in May 1944, argued for women to have seats on the Lagos Town Council. Otherwise, the newspapers and their political affiliations, paid lip-service to women’s political and electoral rights.

Oyinkan saw through the façade. As wryly observed by her when the NWP took off, the several instances of editorial flair for matters on women’s rights published by the newspapers, were not practiced in the organisational structures of their affiliated political parties. The NYM had no women in its top echelons where executive authority reigned.

In February 1938, the NYM’s secretary, Hezekiah O. Davies, in his response to a public lecture by Miss Kofo Moore on Emancipation of Nigerian Women, wrote an article in which he explained that he “did not think that the time is ripe for the full emancipation and equality of women of West Africa, but sees signs that movement is being made in that direction.” His article which was published in the *West African Review* was titled “Emancipation of Women in West Africa,” was a clear sign of the Movement’s stance on women’s rights.

That same month during one of its earliest internal elections, an all-male executive committee emerged with her husband, Dr Kofo Abayomi selected as president. Evidence shows that other parties of the nationalist period such as the NNDP also practised a system of gender hierarchy. The patriarchal nature of Nigeria’s political parties is discussed further in Chapter Twelve.,

Although the NYM eventually established a Ladies Branch in 1937, but the women mostly comprised wives of members whose interests were not included in the mainstream of the party’s nationalist agenda. As the wife of NYM’s president, Oyinkan was appointed the leader of the Branch and she regularly hosted meetings at her Broad Street residence. During a meeting on 12 May 1938, the women discussed a Torch Light Procession to Government House in connection with the departure of Sir Bernard and Lady Violet Bourdillon to Europe. In those days, it was part of the official

protocol for the governor and his wife to be received by top members of the society whenever they embarked on a journey overseas. Women formed a substantial part of the entourage what gathered at the departure and arrival points at the wharf. As already stated, as a young lady, Oyinkan was part of the delegation that received the Lady Clifford on arrival from her trips. Thus, she was experienced enough to plan for the occasion for Lady Bourdillon. During their meeting, the ladies agreed that they would wear a white dress and blue headgear for the occasion. Other matters discussed at the meeting were a fund-raising cinema ball and costs of tickets, as well as a tea party and practice of the Movement's song.

From the agenda of this meeting, the gendered underpinnings of the NYM's Ladies Branch were undeniable. There was no place for them in the mainstream of the party.

Oyinkan shared her deep concerns about the discriminatory rules and regulations in the electoral laws, as well as her experience within the fold of the NYM, with her circle of friends and associates. It was decided that if national political parties would not allow Nigerian women to participate fully in mainstream politics, the women should form a party of their own.

The foregoing was the context which largely drove Oyinkan's audacious move to plan the "revolt," and this was the reason for all the activity at Abayomi's residence on that Wednesday evening.

Amongst the friends, well-wishers and political enthusiasts that thronged her house on that day, were Madams S. Baptist and Tinuola Dedeke; as well as representatives of market women and traders such as Madam Ashimowu, chairwoman of the Araromi Market Guild. The launch marked the beginning of a long working relationship with the market guilds and unions to advocate for common causes. Members of the press were also invited to the inauguration of the party and wrote notes as she offered the political, social, and educational reasons as to why such an action became inevitable. Several years later, she was to pay tribute to the press for the unwavering support for the party's early journey within Nigeria's political firmament.

As she explained that evening, the political reasons for the creation of the NWP were personal to her, and resonated with other Nigerian women too:

In all political platforms and discussions in Nigeria both in the Legislative and Municipal Councils, women's interests have been sorely neglected; hence the formation of this party should not only champion women, but also reduce the extreme selfish motive of menfolk. Socially, in all important social organisations in Nigeria, women take the foremost part, yet this has not won them their dessert. Educationally, so far, no government scholarships

have been granted to women in Nigeria compared with Sierra Leone, the government of which sent 14 women to England for further studies.... Many women own houses in Lagos and yet there were no African women in the Town Council.

Oyinkan spoke directly to Nigerian men and was particularly displeased by what she recalled was the response of the menfolk, when the government planned to employ African women. She said: “A stream of complaints arose from the men-folk who contended that the proper place for women was the kitchen, and that the salaries offered were far too high.” She also said: “It was agreed that a party should be formed to tackle the vexing problems facing the women.”

So, it was on this basis that the NWP was formally launched with copies of its constitution distributed to everyone present. The document stated *inter alia*:

To shape the whole future is not our problem but only to shape faithfully a small part of it according to rules laid down; to seek by Constitutional means the rights of British citizenship in its full measure on the people; to work assiduously for the educational, agricultural and industrial development of Nigeria with a view to improve the moral, intellectual and economic condition of the country; to work for the amelioration of the condition of the women of Nigeria not merely by sympathy for their aspirations but by recognition of their equal status with men.

Its women-run Executive Committee consisted of the president, vice president, two secretaries, a legal adviser—to study the impact of legislation on the people; two treasurers and seven ex-officio members elected from amongst the members. Its goals were developed in the four key areas of Education, Employment, Economy and Adult Female Suffrage. They actively addressed the pressing issues of the day— girls’ education and literacy classes for adult women; the employment of women in the civil service; the right of female minors to trade freely in Lagos, and securing women’s rights in general, but particularly the right to vote and be voted for.

For Oyinkan, education and enlightenment were very critical for women’s empowerment and this vision was one of the party’s main goals:

Education of women and politics; to become useful and loyal citizens; to know their rights and the right way to demand them, to love and admire the highest standard of morals; to keep women of less average ability busy on industrial or domestic science pursuits; to start mass education of women so that in a year or two there will be more literacy arming women for whom

suitable employment should be given as teachers, midwives and nurses, supervisors, lecturers and in various other departments and capacities.

Mrs Tinuola Dedeke also gave her inaugural speech at the event. She said: "Nigerian women should be given every privilege as done to women in the other colonies – the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone." The party's executive officers were Mrs Oyinkan Abayomi, president; Madams Tinuola Dedeke and Ayo Manuwa, joint secretaries. After the speeches were made, there was a general atmosphere of optimism and hope for Nigerian women to work alongside men in the building of an independent country, free from imperial rule.

The next day, the front-page headline in *West African Pilot* announced: "Lagos Women Revolt against Old Africa and Organise their own Political Party." The newspaper also noted that: "The women rebelled against the old order that prevented them from serving in the municipal and legislative councils and have formed a women's party to protect their interests."

For that time, the launch of a political party by women was considered ambitious. Still, the women remained resolute in their goal and forged ahead and Oyinkan gained widespread admiration from the public for her audacious step.

She also led the party to advocate for the recruitment of policewomen and the sensitive matter of girl and adult women hawkers, and street traders became rallying points for terse petition-writing and a series of public meetings with colonial officials in collaboration with the market women and traders.

From the day the party was launched, Oyinkan had shown political astuteness by inviting representatives of the market women associations, unions and guilds. They became strong allies in their fight against social injustice and the various forms of discrimination that women were experiencing under the colonial administrators and Nigerian menfolk. Their collaboration placed them as women nationalists in their own right.

It is known that one of the prominent leaders of the market women, Madam Rabiātu Iyalode (*Alaso*), was appointed to the NWP's Executive Committee. Earlier in December 1940, Madam Rabiātu was documented to have led about 100 women to the office of the Commissioner of the Colony, Mr G. B. Williams to find out why several of the women had received Return of Income Forms (Tax Form No. 8). Mr Williams was not in his office, but determined to get an explanation, the women patiently waited for him. On his return, Rabiātu said they "wished to ascertain the reason they had been sent the forms because women had never been taxed." According to the Minutes of their meeting, the women listened to the Commissioner



and in response “asked for the legislation to be repealed.” So Rabiātu was experienced in mass mobilisation of women to engage with colonial officials and became an asset to the NWP.

Oyinkan obviously reckoned that working with someone of Rabiātu’s socio-political credentials at the grassroots, would be a key political strategy not only for the success of the party, but also to display a united front during the plans to influence colonial policy on women’s issues. Besides, her disdain for class divisions was already widely known, especially as a few years back, she had penned an article in a 1935 edition of the *Daily Service* in which she called for the “Killing of uppishness and erasure of all barriers, lest there will be no-one to lead.” Building a liaison with market women and Madams Pelewura and Rabiātu Iyalode was also a demonstration of her belief in equality for all women across the divides.

Oyinkan’s anti-colonial stance may have been surprising or shocking to her father, Sir Kitoyi Ajasa, had he been alive. Although he was considered to be a frontline nationalist and was a member of one of the first set of political parties established, he was known to be conservative in his political outlook with a penchant for pro-British views. One of his famous sayings: “We in West Africa have been for generations under British rule and with that rule we are satisfied,” is a testimony to his mind-set.

During his life-time, Ajasa was described as a close friend of Lord Frederick D. Lugard, the architect of the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigerian provinces in 1914. The colonial administration patronised his newspaper, *The Nigerian Pioneer*, to publicise its policies, news, notices and speeches by government officials, ostensibly to counter any anti-colonial government views. The paper which was a weekly publication produced on Fridays, also received numerous advertisements from merchants and business concerns. Ajasa’s views on women were also steeped in conservatism. On 8 October 1920, his newspaper published this view about the idea of women jurors in Nigeria: “We are firm believers in the possibilities of the other sex, but as for sitting as jurors in Nigeria, we had better wait a bit, and a good long bit too.”

When in 1922, the government under Sir Hugh Clifford proposed elective representation as a provision in a new constitution, Ajasa’s newspaper published a two-part editorial to discredit the idea and expressed preference for the usual practice of nominations to the legislative council. The handpicking of supporters of the colonial project favoured Ajasa and his fellow elites and their business and commercial interests, and there was no wish to see this privilege abandoned for an electoral process. His political alliances with the government are well-documented. He served on almost

all the public boards which included Pilotage and Racecourse Management and Visitors of the Lagos Prison.

In 1923, Ajasa said the aim of his publication was to “interpret thoroughly and accurately the Government to the people and the people to the Government” and he did this to the criticism of other nationalist publications such as the Lagos Weekly Record and the Lagos Standard. His closeness to the Government was also rewarded with a Steam Collier, the SC Ajasa, named after him in 1926. During the 1928 birthday honours celebration of King George VI, he received a knighthood in recognition of his pro-colonial stance. But all of this, as we have seen, did not deter his daughter from her feminist activities through her membership of several young ladies’ clubs in Lagos.

Despite his conservative views, Ajasa was aware of his daughter’s fighting spirit, independent mind and interest in social welfare and education for girls and women. But he did not live to see her also receive the King’s award in 1944, nor did he witness the birth of the NWP or how she joined forces with other like-minded Nigerians to become part of the nationalist movement which went head-to-head with the colonial government.

Ajasa died on 29 May 1937, at the age of 70. His death which was published in the Colonial Report of that year, described him as: “A prominent figure in Lagos and for many years a member of the Legislative Council.”

The NWP came into a society in which the women depending on their class, were largely confined to the domestic space or their small businesses and petty trading at the markets and were excluded from the local administration of their communities. The western-educated women were mostly brought up to embrace domesticity, home economics and Christian values. They were non-income earners and kept strictly out of public affairs and institutions. While they enjoyed the prestige of Christian marriages and church societies, their independence was clearly defined within the boundaries of Victorian gender ideals about the separate spheres of operation for women and men.

At the other end of the spectrum, the uneducated women who engaged in vending activities and petty trading in goods, poultry, herbs, wood, native cloth, fish, oysters etc., populated the eleven markets in Lagos municipal area. Prior to now, these market women sometimes relied on top male politicians such as Herbert Macaulay and barrister Eric Moore to support their grievances on local issues and unfavourable policies from the town council such as increase in rental value of stalls, market tolls, short-notice relocations and demolitions, etc.

The party positioned itself as an active voice for all these women and their complaints. It adopted a direct engagement strategy with the colonial administrators not only by expressing displeasure with policies that affected the interests of girl hawkers and market women in writing, but also visited officials in their places of work to share their views and demand explanations and solutions over the “unjust” treatment meted out to the girls and women in the business of trading.

Undoubtedly, the arrival of NWP sent shock waves within the Lagos political circles. A few days after its launch, a group of men known as the Igbobi Dynamic Stars, clearly aware of a fundamental shift in the mood of some of the Western-educated women and their influence amongst the working-class women, organised a debate at Tinubu Methodist Church School Room in Lagos. The well-publicised event took place on 26 May 1944 under the chairmanship of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, a nationalist politician and publisher of the *West African Pilot* newspaper. According to the public notice, the *raison d’être* for the debate was: “In view of the awakening consciousness among women which is gradually pervading the atmosphere of this country.” This was a clear recognition of the arrival of the NWP and its potential impact. It had become obvious to the male political class that the surge of political consciousness among the women in Lagos could no longer be contained.

What is known about the debate is that the proponents for the motion: ‘That women should be given seats on the Legislative Council of Nigeria’ were Mrs Kofo Ademola (nee Moore) and Mrs O. A. Ajose; while opponents of the motion were the barristers Oluwole A. Alakija and Samuel L. Akintola. The proponents belonged to the female elites in Lagos, while the opponents belonged to the present political class and were prominent members of the NYM.

Kofo Ademola was a known advocate for women’s rights. In 1937, as indicated earlier – she gave a public lecture on ‘The Emancipation of Women in Nigeria’ – to the NYM. During her speech, she declared in part: “... Let the woman fight her own battle. Men are always inclined to be patronising and always plead for women with an air of condescension.” Her co-debater, Mrs O. A. Ajose was also active in the social welfare circles and was a member of the Nigerian branch of the Women’s Volunteer Service which participated in the women’s effort during the Second World War. Although she was English by origin, but she was married to a Nigerian medical doctor, Oladele Adebayo Ajose. Her full name was Beatrice Spencer Roberts, but as was the common practice of the day, she was only identified by her husband’s initials.

The men who opposed the motion were former members of the London-based West African Students' Union (WASU), where Oluwole A. Alakija once served as president. The union, as we will read in Chapter Four was a notoriously male-centred organisation which exhibited all the hallmarks of patriarchy in its structure, operations and programmes. Alakija, was a son of a member of the Nigerian Legislative Council and business magnate, barrister Adeyemo Alakija and was a popular commentator for the *Nigerian Daily Times* (owned by his father). His column "As I See It," became a platform for frequent commentary on nationalism and colonial rule. His co-debater, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, was editor of the *Daily Service* – the newspaper organ of the NYM. He was also a barrister and later served as a Federal Minister and the Premier of Western Region of Nigeria in December 1959.

If in the 1940s, both Akintola and Alakija were opposed to women's political advancement, by the 1950s they had changed their minds. In June 1958, Alakija published an article in the *Daily Times* titled "We must Free our Women" in which he hailed the strides of women and called for more freedoms for them. On his part, Akintola, during his tenure as Premier of Western Region, made political concessions by announcing in March 1960 that government would end rates for women because "socially and economically, the earnings of the vast majority of women in the Region are so intertwined with those of their husbands that accurate assessment of women for rates is impossible." But for now, both men were not favourably disposed towards the philosophy behind the motion.

While there is no actual information about what took place during the debate or even the conclusion, an editorial published four days later, in the *West African Pilot*, provides some clues to the dialogue that ensued that evening. Titled "Women in our Legislative Council," it said:

We see no reason why our women should not be members of the Legislative Council. *Festina Lente* (Make haste slowly). There are well-qualified women fit to run for the Legislative Council. Let us give our women a chance in the Legislative Council of Nigeria.

The Nigerian male political class, as well as colonial officials could see that female agitation for a voice in governance and public affairs in general, had come to stay. It is likely that the editorial was published based on the convincing arguments put forward by the duo of Ademola and Ajose. Indeed, the founding of the NWP appeared to be a catalyst for a series of women-centred initiatives in the Western and Eastern provinces. We know that in the neighbouring Abeokuta Province, with the formation of the Women's Union, plans were afoot to challenge the authorities over taxation,

while, a few years later, women in Enugu would confront the armed policemen over the killings at the coal mines of Iva Valley.

After the establishment of the NWP, the public debate and the editorial in the *West African Pilot*, the colonial government moved quickly to grant some concessions to the women in local governance in the Colony of Lagos. In June 1944, Oyinkan was appointed to sit on the Lagos Town Council where she was the only woman among six men including her husband, Dr Kofo A. Abayomi. She served on the Public Health, Parks and Markets; and Juvenile Employment and After-Care; and Post-War Development Committees. Her appointment which brought the number of Africans on the Council to eight, attracted another editorial in the *West African Pilot* with the heading “A female member of LTC.” Although it hailed her appointment, the newspaper castigated the government saying the nomination was “no cause for national joy because it came too late and then after Sierra Leone and The Gambia”:

It is indeed scandalous to have a woman in a municipal council whose government prevents women from exercising the right of the franchise. One way—by which this wrong could be righted is, to confer on women landlords and tenants of this township, the right of voting without further ado.

In the wider society, there was praise for Oyinkan’s boldness for establishing a political party. For example, she was feted by Lagos high society. The social event was also reported by the *West African Pilot*:

Thousands of women mustered strong in the Victoria Gardens of Glover Hall, Lagos last Saturday for the reception...The formal opening was preceded by African drumming and was followed by dance music played by the Calabar Brass Band.

The occasion which was chaired by Oba Falolu Dosunmu of Lagos from the Docemo Ruling House, also had in attendance several Lagos public figures including Chiefs Oluwa, Ashogbon, Olutola and Sashore, Chief C. Ola Oshodi, Mr F. Farmer and of course, her husband Dr Abayomi. The leader of the Lagos Market Women’s Guild, Madam Alimotu Pelewura was also invited. During her speech, Pelewura, described Oyinkan as “A stimulant to old and young of the town.”

[She is] a social busy bee who has won the admiration of not only the women, not of this town alone, but also of the provinces, and it is desirable to pay her due honour. It was in recognition of her activities that she was honoured with an MBE by the government. And this had prompted the

authorities to elect her to the Town Council. The Women's Political Party was founded by Mrs Abayomi, and if it achieved success as it would eventually, it would be another feather in Mrs Abayomi's hat.

This was a public endorsement of the NWP by the president of the Market Women's Guild, despite the fact that Pelewura was a known delegate representing Lagos Colony on the platform of Herbert Macaulay's other political association, the Nigerian Union of Young Democrats. Pelewura was also a formidable woman activist who four years earlier, led market traders to reject the imposition of taxation on women by the government. Her alliance with the NWP reinforced the joint political advocacy against the unpalatable colonial policies that threatened the interests of women and overlooked their agency.

One of the first main collaborations for political action between the NWP and the market women was against a contentious law which upset the long-held traditional practice of girl hawking. Members of party's executive committee did not just jump into the matter but were aware of its historical trail which dated back to the 1920s, when a Hawker's Licence was proposed to regulate the trade and to ostensibly keep young girls off the streets and out of harm's way. Indeed, at the time, the *Nigerian Pioneer* of 3 December 1920 pondered "whether the imposition of a Hawker's Licence will improve matters, we do not know, but the evil calls for remedy."

By 1930, a series of meetings were held between the Administrator of the Colony, Major W. Birrell-Gray, and public leaders to discuss the matter. At one of the meetings which he described as "very representative of the community," to discuss the rules governing hawkers in the streets of Lagos, were prominent social activists Madams Charlotte Obasa and S. Edwin-Cole, as well as well-standing community leaders such as Sir Kitoyi Ajasa (Oyinkan's father), Dr Richard A. Savage, Bishop I. Oluwole and Dr. O. Sapara, were invited. The participants were from various professional backgrounds of law (Sir Ajasa), medicine (Drs Savage and Sapara) and the clergy. Madam S. Edwin-Cole was the principal of Nigerian Girls' Model School, married to a prominent auctioneer; while Obasa, was the well-known philanthropist and social welfare activist and known to consistently raise concerns about the dangers faced by young girl hawkers on the streets. Understandably as mothers, both women were keen to secure the safety of young girls, but collectively as members of the Lagos elite circles, they could hardly identify with the daily hardships and economic practicalities experienced by poor families who constituted majority of the population in Lagos and its environs.

At another meeting held in May, "with the object of dealing effectively with the long-standing problem of the girl hawkers who have