



The Executive Governor Niger State of Nigeria

ADDRESS BY

CHIEF SERVANT, DR. MU'AZU BABANGIDA ALIYU OON, TALBAN MINNA, EXECUTIVE GOVERNOR OF NIGER STATE AT 2008 NATIONAL WOMEN CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE COMMITTEE OF WIVES OF LAGOS STATE OFFICIALS (COWLSO) ON WEDNESDAY, 29TH OCTOBER, 2008 AT EXPO HALL, OCEAN VIEW, VICTORIA ISLAND, WITH THE THEME: WOMAN – WHO ARE YOU?

PROTOCOL:

2. I am very delighted to be invited to this important occasion as a special Guest of Honour. I must first congratulate the Committee of Wives of Lagos State Officials - organizers of this event, which is coming at a most appropriate time when there is global recognition of the vital role women play in the society today and when the future roles of women are looked upon more optimistically by the most dynamic and progressive societies.

3. The theme of this Conference, "Woman – who are you?" is quite apt and encapsulating because it will afford us the opportunity to take a holistic look at a Woman with a view to appreciating her real essence, her unique qualities, her potentials, her abilities, her challenges and her changing roles for the growth and development of society. However, we cannot properly answer this question without asking the next question – Woman: What are you? The two questions may distinguish 'the self', i.e.

individual woman from numerous the roles she comes to play. The self usually reflects the core values that the woman has, with which she has built her essence different from the one ascribed to her by the society, while the roles are what we find ourselves doing, and many a times we play many roles at the same time depending on the circumstances we find ourselves.

4. Indeed, this Conference should enable us challenge and raise issues about some stereotypical views, beliefs and customs which have been dehumanising, degrading, demeaning and debasing women thereby subjecting them to all forms of abuses, violence and exploitation, thereby subsequently blurring the difference between the individual woman (self) and the roles, often depriving the woman from realizing her core values that can help her in having self-actualisation, with consequence for societal development. As a matter of fact this Conference should be able to redefine and consolidate the nature of the woman's place in society today while making her feel good about herself and satisfied with who she is and the roles she plays.

5. I do hope that at the end of this programme and the presentations to be made we would be able to appreciate a woman as a symbol of purity, holiness, innocence and an embodiment of decency and integrity, as opposed to what some of our oppressive cultural practices, distinct from religion has made her. We should also be able to understand that women have come a long way from their roles as being merely mothers and home keepers/makers; their roles certainly go beyond child rearing and home management. Can we take a moment to reflect on our society's perception of a woman as it relates to the developed societies' perception of a woman? Could we honestly say that we have noticed any differences in either perception or roles of a woman in Nigeria since the Beijing declaration of 1995 and other United Nations and related organisations' declarations? It is indeed sda to note that all the things that were originally pure, holly and miraculous about the woman have been debased and exploited by man. Menstruation, virginity, and innocence have now been turned into negatives, as for instance in the classical story of Adam Lilith and eve.

6. Most importantly, we must realize that women have fundamental rights and freedom to decide to what to do with their lives, especially in decisions relating to marriage, because the key word – marriage – appears to have both negative and positive connotation, depending on either how it is perceived or contracted. Let me here emphasize the one aspect of marriage that I am familiar with – that is marriage in Islam. The *Shariah* (Islamic way of life) allows and emphasizes negotiation and agreement in a marriage contract, whereby the representatives or the actual bride-groom could sign an undertaking to abide by all the terms of the agreement that is binding on the marriage. These negotiations could involve the amount of dowry, the ethical codes of behaviour in the relationship, and indeed a demand for a husband to be monogamous. If anyone believes that polygamy is compulsory or encouraged in Islam may be mistaken. In fact, marriage itself is not compulsory but highly recommended. We must note that there are conditions for polygamy in Islam which our cultures, selfishness, lustful greed seem to ignore. What are the consequences of all these on the psyche of a woman and the concomitant effect on the development of a family, a community and a society? May I encourage us to study the established Islamic traditions of marriage in Egypt and Malaysia where a woman's rights in marriage are clearly enshrined in the penal codes and are enforced to the latter.

7. Let me seize this opportunity to call on my colleagues-Governors and State Assemblies to pass the Child Rights Act so that the Girl-Child can grow into a complete woman that can allow her to aspire to be what she wants to be while playing the role of the conveyor of civilization. I should also recommend that there should be a legislation demanding for medical certificate, (probably of mental or other fitness) before marriages are contracted in Nigeria. Let nobody say that there is any religion against such a move – indeed a study will show that all our religions encourage it. This way we shall avoid spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS.

8. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have gone into this depth because we need to underscore the fact that part of the woman's problems is cultural and psychological, which inhibit her from being what she is and what she can be. There is a

world of difference between subservience and obedience. What then is the way forward for the woman? In our view the critical success factors to the woman lies in Education, equal opportunities and support at all levels. This is the reason in Niger State we are according priority to Education, because we recognize as the bedrock of the development of any society and the catalyst for the transformation of our dear State *into one of the top three most developed States in Nigeria by the year 2020* (Our Vision 3-20-20). It is in this light that we have some beyond 30% affirmative action directed by PDP in reflection of women in our political appointments, with four women members of the Executive Council, four women permanent secretaries, four women Directors-General and numerous women political aides. In deed we have a vibrant and result-oriented a Directorate of Women Mobilisation which is supporting the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development in articulating issues and programmes that would positive impact on the lives of women in Niger State. We look forward to the day when tokenism in relation to women and become a non-issue.

9. We ought to realize that the most advanced and developed societies the world over are those which accord a pride of place to women in their scheme of things including political appointments and distributions, because women have shown remarkable abilities in the professional world.

10. Once again, I congratulate the Committee of Wives of Lagos State officials under the purposeful leadership of the wife of the Governor of Lagos State. I also must congratulate my friend and brother, Babatunde Fashola, SAN for supporting the noble cause of women. I respect this man for his objectivity, sagacity and knowledge and I am very proud to have him as a colleague, a brother and a friend. We must continue to ask the right questions and not be afraid with the answers that we get. Woman: Who are you? Should be followed with the question Woman: What are You? And subsequently with Woman: What can you be? And finally Woman: How do you want to be treated?

11. I wish to conclude with the followings words of Lady Astor, the first woman MP who once said that "...one of the reasons why civilization has failed so lamentably is because it has had a one-sided government. Don't let us make the mistake of ever allowing that to happen again....I feel men have a greater sense of justice and mercy. They must borrow our mercy and we must use their justice. We are new brooms; let us see that we sweep the right rooms".

12. It is therefore, my honour and priviledge to declare this Conference open to the glory of God, the benefit of womanhood and humanity at large.