



Chapter 1

Deciding To Run

I was new to party politics.

Why would I want to be one of three hundred and sixty members of Nigeria's House of Representatives, a club of the highest paid legislators in the world, notoriously ineffective and the subject of much public derision, who only have to sit for a minimum of one hundred and twenty one days a year? Why would I aspire to join this body's tiny contingent of women – seven percent at the last election – and subject myself to the bombast of so many Nigerian male VIPs who never get tired of hearing themselves talk?

Why would I even bother?

My friends joke that I have an aversion to ease and a built-in radar for suffering. One swears I have “punish me” tattooed on my forehead in invisible ink. When people were lining up before God to get their human dose of self-preservation, I was missing. This may have been a factor in my decision, but I had affirmative reasons for running as well.

It was late 2014, and Nigeria's two main parties were heading into primaries to select candidates for the general election which was due in February 2015 – it would later be postponed to March. I lived in Abuja, part of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), which has two members in the House. One constituency includes the central area, known as the Abuja Municipality Council Area (AMAC) where I lived, and a nearby area called Bwari. The other includes the FCT's ever-growing outskirts: Abaji/Gwagwalada/Kuje/Kwali.

The single most important question a candidate must be able to answer is: "Why are you running?" I asked myself this question over and over as I made my decision, and wrote down my list of reasons for running, in no particular order.

I was tired of the dirty streets of Abuja. We had garbage piled up at every corner. On a windy day, the plastic bags strewn around surfed the air like kites. Sewage ran down the streets of some of the most expensive real estate in the country. The filth was driving me crazy, and posting pictures on Twitter was no longer enough. I knew that keeping the city clean was the duty of an executive agency, the Federal Capital Development Agency (FCDA), under the FCT minister. Unlike Nigeria's thirty-six states, a federal minister runs FCT, not an elected governor. But

the National Assembly shared responsibility for approving the FCT Ministry's budget and passing laws for the FCT. Surely, as one of its representatives, I would have summoning powers and could crack the financial *koboko*?

I believed it was time to see more people who looked and sounded like me in politics. Since 2012, I had been the chief executive officer of the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund, a non-profit organisation focused on the increased representation of women in politics and decision-making. From that vantage point, I could see that the 2015 general elections were not looking good for women. We were going to remain far below the global target of thirty-five per cent female members in the legislature, and one reason was the small number of women running in the first place. In 2011, less than ten percent of candidates for the general election were women. By contesting, I would add to the numbers, gain first-hand experience of running for elective office, and become a more persuasive advocate for women's representation in politics and government.

The third reason was that I wanted women in government who knew and did better. I was ashamed of the response of women in elected office to the plight of the Chibok girls. They had been abducted by Boko Haram a few months earlier in April 2014 and symbolised all who had lost their lives or freedom to the insurgency while seeking

education and a better life. After the abduction, our thirty-two women in the national assembly – twenty-five in the House of Representatives and seven in the Senate – split along party lines. The pro-government ones minimised the crisis; the pro-opposition ones made it a partisan issue. Many seemed not to care at all, including those in the executive.

Was it fair to focus on the few female legislators and let their male colleagues off the hook? Perhaps not. And yet, getting more girls into school has been a huge development issue for Nigeria, particularly in the northeast, which has abysmally low female literacy levels. You would think our female legislators would take special interest. If the twenty women in the United States Senate could write a bipartisan letter to President Obama urging action for the Chibok girls, then ours should have done more.

Over the last fifteen years, a few legislators have worked closely with civil society groups to pass bills to promote gender equality and improve the lives of women and girls, but many female legislators seem to have little interest in being associated with this cause. Activists routinely have to plead with them to get chairpersons for the legislative committees on women within the House and Senate. Instead of begging, we could be working to get unashamedly pro-women legislators into the national assembly.

Also, we do not know enough about how our government and political parties work. We have some ideas, we hear fantastic stories of influence and intrigue, but what is it really like? Is running for office really as wild a process as it seems? I was tired of not knowing, of hearing tales of the game of politics being dismissed as “beer parlour talk”. We needed to demystify our politics. If nothing else, I would have my personal experience to validate or debunk the stories.

I thought the people of the FCT deserved more care; it was more than just home to the federal government. A naturally beautiful place with leafy green hills and massive rock formations, it is the fourth largest urban area in Nigeria after Lagos, Kano and Ibadan, with three million residents and growing fast. Many of the communities surrounding the power and affluence of the federal government have no motorable roads or running water. Some have no electricity, no industry, no commerce, little education and little motivation for being productive and engaged citizens. There was room to serve as an advocate, a voice for these communities and include them in the plans for the capital territory’s economic and social progress.

Why not me?

I had been told, “You should run for office” enough times to make me think it was not such an unreasonable idea.

There is something about the typical Nigerian politician that makes one ask, “Surely we can do better?” Nigerians talk about politics all the time, around the dinner table or from behind keyboards. At some point, I thought, we should demand more of ourselves. Besides, how hard could it be?

Still, I worried how family and friends would react if I actually ran. Disaffection with politics runs deep; it has been a long time since it was viewed as a noble profession. “What is he looking for?” was the standard response in my parents’ academic and public administration circles when they heard someone planned to contest elections. The indignation and befuddlement only increase when they perceive this individual as accomplished, and as such having better options. Educated? Check. Respectable job? Check. Considered intelligent, with a lot to offer the community? Check. Joins politics? Loser!

I had all those traits, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought these traits would make me a worthy candidate for office – not a loser. After all, I had a degree in law and two Masters degrees. I had practised law in a firm in New York City and returned home to work in the private sector for ten years; six of those in different roles in a multinational company. In 2008, I started writing weekly opinions about the state of governance and society and started thinking more deeply about the public sector. This

led me back to Harvard in 2009 on a scholarship for my second Masters, this time to the Kennedy School to study public policy.

I moved to the Nigerian Women Trust Fund, a non-profit organisation focused on increasing the participation and representation of women in politics and decision-making in 2012 precisely because I wanted to be directly involved in public work. My professional experience meant I knew what it meant to be disciplined, deliver value to the bottom line, and be accountable to my managers and team.

Politics in Nigeria is not for the lily-livered. Not when you have also been socialised to be disdainful about those who get lured into it. I grew up with the narrative that success in the political process is designed for the worst of us, or maybe the worst character traits in all of us. Even leaving aside the history of violence, rigging and shameful behaviour, politics remained the field for those who had nothing better to do. This narrative accounted for a lot of the failures in Nigerian politics and government.

While mulling if I should run or not, I sought counsel from a few friends, including some who had actually dared to run for office. The votes were unanimous in favour of my contesting. Still, I was gripped with fear about the comments that would fly around as soon as my name came up in connection with elective politics. “What is she looking for?”

The narrative around women in politics in Nigeria is nasty and sexist. A common description for women who are involved in politics is “prostitute”, and the stories about female politicians and campaigners being raped and verbally and physically abused were scary. This discouraged many women who by virtue of their expertise and experience could contribute to governance and improving the lives of Nigerians.

To my surprise, when they heard my plans, most were excited. Our lives were not improving at the pace befitting a country with so many talented and industrious citizens. Nigerians were beginning to make the link between the excesses of those in government, the insecurity and the poor state of social services. They were making the connection between the state of the country and the glaring incompetence of some who have had access to power and the steady decline in the quality of those who win elections. They saw that the space for political participation was closing. The disillusionment and complaints of Nigerians outweighed the promise of new ideas or faces. The state of Nigeria was unpleasant and untenable and many in my circles were beginning to question our beliefs about what our roles and responsibilities were with regards to politics and public policy. Perhaps we could not afford to stay out of the ring and go on simply watching with disgust.

As people cheered my decision, they also gave advice. I listened to them, and wrote another list for myself. No one had any illusions this would be an easy journey, or one without compromises. I needed my own compass: a guide to ensure that when I looked into the mirror I would not see a rodent, weasel, or someone I could not recognise.

I decided that I would abide by the rules of the game – except when it was impossible to; keep my opinions to myself (new one for me); visit, consult with, and seek support from people I would ordinarily want nothing to do with; wear my party’s colours; and play it cool even when my intuition screamed I was about to be cheated.

On my “will not do” list was trade sex for access (yes, I was advised this could be an issue if I chose to run on a certain party’s platform); eat my words; write obsequious articles about the then first lady, Dame Patience Jonathan; and wear aso-ebi with any person’s face on it.

The advice and encouragement were the easy part. Later I would need financial contributions and boots on the ground to support my campaign. Still, the enthusiastic response was invaluable. It gave me comfort that I had made the right decision and that there were people who recognised that more of the same would not take us where we wanted to go.

Among my generation, the thinking that we had to get

involved in the public sector had become commonplace, reiterated every time two or more of us got together in the inevitable discussions about the state of Nigeria. But it was a touching affirmation from my parents' generation – those who had once enjoyed the best that Nigeria ever had to offer – to get their support. Later, they would tell me with pride how they ensured my campaign posters were all over their neighbourhoods. Some helped me in the quest to meet party leaders, some contributed to the campaign funds and others made introductions to anyone they knew could help – someone who might know someone.

They had raised us to be wary of politics, but they now recognised that the situation required more active involvement.