



Chapter 5

Being An Aspirant

One evening, as a friend visiting from Lagos and I settled down to dinner, I got almost simultaneous calls from Gajo, my ward chairman, and Zuby. They both asked if I could meet up at Hajiya Ireti's house for matters related to the campaign. Zuby said it was a good time to get the details of Hajiya's membership and voter registration card for my nomination forms. Gajo called to finalise my ward recommendation letter.

There was only one answer, and so I invited Toni along for an after-dinner adventure. He had been the very first person to donate to my campaign, and called regularly to find out how I was doing. I knew he would get a kick out of the trip.

There were lots of people at Hajiya Ireti's place when we got there. The front room and two side rooms were full. Hajiya and a group of young people were in one of them. After I exchanged pleasantries with them, Hajiya and I walked out together so I could get her details to complete

the forms and introduce her to Toni, the author of several books.

Zuby, Gajo, and Umar Farouk were in another room. As soon as I walked in, Umar Farouk said loudly, “I hope you have the three hundred thousand naira for your letter.”

“What three hundred thousand naira?” I asked turning to Gajo.

“*Gaskiya* the letter must be accompanied with your contribution to the party,” he replied. “Otherwise you will face stiff opposition at the ward meeting. You are unknown, so members can raise objections to a letter commending you.”

A letter from my ward attesting to my good standing with the party was one of the aspirant-screening requirements. Zuby and Salisu, one of his friends, told me to let them handle negotiations on my behalf. I went out and chatted with Toni and Hajiya Ireti. Every couple of minutes, Zuby would come out to caucus with me and then have a side bar with Salisu. Then they would go back into the room with Farouk and Gajo. I offered the full amount requested if they would throw in a delegate seat for me. After an hour of back and forth, I begged Hajiya Ireti to intercede and we got the amount reduced to half of what they asked for, with nothing promised or counter-offered for the delegate seat.

I did not have that kind of cash on me. I had to drive back home with Zuby to pick up what I had and head to an ATM to get the balance. It was past 10p.m., and Toni, who had an early flight back to Lagos, begged off the rest of the adventure.

I handed over the money to Zuby and drove him back to Hajiya's with the agreement that he would get the letter from Gajo the next day and bring it to me. I returned home feeling satisfied.



A few days before the deadline for the submission of forms, I got a phone call shortly before midnight, as I was preparing to shut down my laptop and go to bed. It was Mallam Hassan. He asked me to meet him at the home of a former speaker in Apo. There were some important people he wanted to introduce me to.

“This is a test,” my brain flashed in the nanosecond before I said, “Okay,” in the most neutral voice I could muster.

He asked if I knew the house.

No.

Did I know the area?

No.

He gave me directions. I paid almost no attention, so consumed was I with the thought of getting dressed and driving across town from Maitama to Apo in the middle of the night.

“Got it?” Mallam Hassan asked.

“Yes, thanks. See you shortly.”

I hung up and contacted a trusted confidant and asked if he thought it was okay to go. “Go,” he answered. “You have no idea who will be there and how useful they might be.” I sent a text message asking Mallam Hassan to send me directions by text, changed and jumped in my car with my laptop.

Whatever this meeting was, I was prepared to wait for hours without squirming. I had learned the hard way that the only way to wait gracefully is to have something to do while you wait. In Apo, the streetlights were off and the shopping mall that was to serve as my landmark was completely enveloped in darkness. Somewhat apprehensively, I wound my window down and asked the men at a police checkpoint for the mall.

When I got to my destination I was immediately led into a dining room where Mallam Hassan and two men sat. One was an ex-minister, and the other, was a certain Sir Shuaib, who I had never heard of but was clearly supposed to. It is futile to be honest in these scenarios so I pretended I had, and sat down at the table with them.

Hassan gave me a generous introduction: my work with the Women's Trust Fund, my membership of intellectual platforms, and my writing for *Leadership* and *Thisday* newspapers. "Now, she has decided to join you in the trenches and is running for the House," he said. "She needs your support and guidance."

When he finished, he turned to me and said, "I am handing you over to Sir Shuaib. He is one person I know who can push through anything. He is a bulldozer."

I thanked Mallam Hassan and said I looked forward to Sir Shuaib's support and guidance. Sir Shuaib asked me two questions.

"How close are you to Ahmed Muazu?"

"I don't know him sir."

"How well do you know Bala Mohammed?"

Before I could give the same answer, Mallam Hassan cut in. "Zero."

"This makes things harder," Sir Shuaib said. He instructed me to call him the next day.

I was at the ex-speaker's house for less than thirty minutes.

I never saw the bulldozer again and only spoke to him one other time after at least a dozen calls and text messages. He picked up that one time to tell me to call him back later.

Late night meetings are one of the most often-cited

challenges to women's political participation in Nigeria. In my twelve weeks as an aspirant, I was only invited to this one, and was under no obligation to attend. I chose to go and the meeting was not helpful. Yet it could have been; I might have found Bala Mohammed and Ahmed Muazu there, and in a singular moment of lucidity they could have decided to break the party's pro-incumbents policy and say, why not? Let's have a young (by Nigerian standards) female member of the House for the FCT, and see what damage she can do to the status quo. Either way, if I had not honoured the invitation, I would never know.

If there were a husband to say no to my leaving home after midnight for that meeting with Mallam Hassan and his friends, words might have ensued, or at the very least a three-day dose of the silent treatment. Maybe that's where the challenge lies – navigating and balancing marital expectations.

When I scan the couples I know working across private, public and development sectors, I wager that the majority of men in this scenario would forbid their wives from attending a midnight meeting, out of concern for safety and respectability. One would offer to drive his wife there and sit in the car until the meeting was over. One or two would demand to be part of the meeting.

Yemi, an aspirant for the PDP ticket to represent her

constituency in the House of Representatives was dynamic, confident, and articulate about the issues and solutions. She had a supportive spouse who was also from the same constituency and often accompanied her for meetings with party and community leaders. They both had political pedigree, which in Nigeria means little more than having a recognisable name from an established or emerging political dynasty. Yemi's husband would often speak, sharing his thoughts on why his wife was the best candidate. Yemi said she could not count the number of times people at these meetings would ask her husband, "Why are you not the one running?"

When I worked in a law firm in New York City between the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were times lawyers needed to pull all-nighters or near all-nighters, but these were not the norm. It is probably easier for spouses to handle a call from the office informing them that it is going to be one of those nights, than it is to accept a call after midnight and a spouse jumping out of bed and into a car. There are certain professions, among them investment banking, medicine, security where late nights are part of the job. Does this constitute an obstacle to women being successful in these professions? Why is politics different?

For women in politics, the late-night meetings are a challenge on multiple levels. There are security concerns.

Despite police checkpoints, it is never safe to be out late at night. It increases the risk of exposure to armed robbers and carjackers, and for women in Abuja, there is the Abuja Environmental Protection Board to contend with. The AEPB considers it one of their duties to pick up women at all hours of the day, whether walking along the street, standing in front of their houses or public places or even sitting inside cars, on suspicion of being prostitutes and forcefully rehabilitating them at a cost to government of five million naira for every fifty women “rehabilitated”.

There are also concerns about sexual abuse and promiscuity. Presumably women worry more about the former while men fret about the latter. There is a narrative in Nigeria that only women of easy virtue are interested in contesting elections or participating in party politics. This narrative is as pervasive as empty water sachets at a motor park. It makes it less likely that female politicians will report being raped or molested, and more likely that husbands will forbid wives from participating in politics. The narrative favours those who enjoy the status quo. Female politicians have reported demands for sex from party leaders in exchange for electoral success, but no one has ever been prosecuted.

Women who have worked hard and built a career do not want to be associated with promiscuity, for their sense

of self and for their families. And although rape, sexual harassment and consensual sex can, and often do take place during the day, there is a sense that for many, the risks or possibilities of these happening are higher at night.

Part of the problem is the culture of late-night meetings amongst politicians and how prevalent and popular these meetings are in the first place. They cannot be practically banned; sometimes there are exigencies that make meeting at night necessary or hard to avoid. Whether the meetings are efficient and effective is another issue. I have been to a few meetings with politicians that started during the day, but I could tell would go on way into the night. The meetings did not start on time, and once they did, there was so much effusive camaraderie in the room that it was hard to keep the participants focused on the agenda. Add the deep love politicians have for their own voices, and efficient meetings are out of the question. If you are not present, you might miss something important. However, there is no guarantee that being at the meeting will result in an attendee having any actual input in decisions. There are stories of politicians meeting from 10p.m. to 2a.m. with no decisions taken. When the meeting officially ends, many, including women scurry home. Then the remaining men make the decisions in the car park as their drivers listen in.

Spouse's support and concerns for security aside, where

female politicians have young children, there is the simple question of who to leave them with. There will be busy or travelling spouses, single mothers without live-in nannies, and unsympathetic partners. In *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg advises women who want to succeed to choose the right partner. My thought on reading this recommendation was that this was not a key success factor in patriarchal Nigeria. Here, there is a fixed formula for marriage and care giving. For women who want to have it all, it is down to supportive mothers, sisters and friends.