

My masculine voice, a blessing — Hon. Ativie, only woman in Edo parliament

BY JOSEPHINE IGBINOVIA

Except for her feminine physique, everything about Hon. Elizabeth Ativie is mannish. From her husky tone of voice to self-carriage, her military upbringing speaks volume. These characteristics however belly her disposition towards public service and motherly love for the people of Uhumwode whom she has represented at the Edo State House of Assembly for two terms running. Elizabeth has also remarkably been the only woman in the state House of Assembly since then. In this interview, she shares the secrets of her success in politics, survival strategies in the House of Assembly and contribution to the development of her constituency. Chief (HON) Mrs. Elizabeth Uyinmwun Ativie was born in Lokojo, Kogi State to the Family of Mr. & Mrs. Josiah Aigbokhae of Orhua Village in Uhumwode Local Government Area of Edo State.

How long have you been in politics?

I've been in politics since 1999. I was once National President of the National Youth Council of Nigeria and that actually prepared me for politics. I was in the house in 2006 as the Chief Whip of Edo State House of Assembly but got thrown out one and a half year later by the court, immediately after Governor Adams Oshiomole won his mandate. I quietly went back home because I knew my place in the hearts of my people! So, I contested and won again the next term, still becoming the only woman in the house. We hear stories about female parliamentarians being beaten and messed up; how much of that have you suffered? I've experienced a lot. I went through the challenges of night meetings and all, but my husband was always there for me. He would go with me and stay in the car while I joined the meeting. Although, nobody has ever beaten me in any political meeting or rally because before you say Jack, I would have said Jack Robinson. I became very masculine and my masculine voice has also been helpful. All these put me at an advantage and make me seem a threat to some of the men. They find it difficult to lift up their hands against me even in crisis situations. But this is not so for most female politicians... You see, most of our women do not know when to retreat or move further. For instance, in the last local government election, I was surrounded by over fifty young men with cutlasses and other arms. My security man was with me. When one of them wanted to harm me, my security personnel jumped out of the car and corked the gun. I came out of the car immediately and stopped him from attempting to attack them. "Don't touch any of them; they are my brothers", I shouted at him. Do you know those boys immediately dropped their weapons because of those words! So, you see, we should be able to guard our words as women. And of course, you know, for a few of us that had won elections, if we want to be truthful, we were assisted by our male politicians; there's simply no way you can win elections without them. So, you must know how to work with them. Actually, what men need from women is respect. That way, they will always recommend and stand by you. These are some of the subtle means through which I have entered the house for a second term.



Elizabeth Ativie

Do you agree that politics is a dirty terrain for women?

That used to be the old tale. Any woman in politics was considered promiscuous and frankly, I was scared by such tales because I value my marriage so much. At a point, I summoned courage and decided to go into it so as to make a difference and teach the world that there are woman who cannot sleep with men to succeed. You cannot see me in an unholy place. Though I drink with male politicians because that's one way they can see you as one of them, I don't take too much of alcohol. Even when they are drinking hot drinks, I take a sip for solidarity! Right now in Edo State, if you ask for a politician who is a role model, my name will be mentioned! So, I believe I have achieved that ambition of making a difference. Female parliamentarians are perceived to lack influence over decision-making in the parliament; do you have facts to debunk this claim? I sponsored the Child Rights Bill in my state and in three months I was able to see it through. By my oversight functions, I've invited developmental agencies to my constituency, Uhumwode, because it appears to be the most marginalized local government area in Edo State due to the fact that it is situated in the rural area and agencies tend to work more in cities, abandoning rural areas. My position in the house has however dragged them back to begin to look towards the rural areas. I've also influenced many other projects. For instance, a lot of new schools are being built and renovated, and children are now attracted back to public schools. I'm also sinking boreholes through the Community Development Projects where the World Bank and State government have some certain percentage of contributions. My people also have problems with accessing healthcare because the General Hospital in Benin City is very far away. So, I was able to acquire a mobile clinic that goes everywhere to give medical care. I also sponsored the Violent against Persons Bill. It was initially Violence against Women but the house rejected it and I had to redesign it. I'm also working on the bill on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women-CEDAW; I'm working on getting the men on my side on this. You know, these things are usually done behind the scene so that before you come to the floor of the house, you must have got about half of the house on your side.

You therefore must be doing a lot of cajoling....

One thing I have done to get the men to support me was that I refused to allow the Committee for Women Affairs to be headed by a female. So, a man now heads it! The advantage is that, if you head such committee and you attend programs on its issues, your opinion will be shaped. Our

current Speaker was once a Chairman on Women Affairs and he is grounded on women issues. So, I believe therefore that CEDAW will see the light of day any moment from now in Edo State.

Let us into your background...

I worked as a professional nurse for 33 years in the Edo State civil service until I retired in 2006 as a Director. I also hold a degree in Health Education and a Masters in Sociology and Anthropology, specializing in social work. My flair for helping people informed my decision to go into politics because politics naturally gives you the ability to do more. Actually, I was a member of the Girls Guide and that groomed me to be humanitarian despite my background; my father was a police officer and I grew up in different barracks round the country.

News Update.....

Hon. (Mrs.) Ativie, Elizabeth Uyinmwun is now the newly elected Speaker of the Edo State House of Assembly. Congratulations Madam Speaker from GOGI!