

‘My experience as the first woman with a disability to run for House of Reps in Nigeria’

Running for an elective post is not an easy task. It becomes even more daunting if you are a woman in a male-dominated society like Nigeria. Because most of the determinants are skewed in favour of men, civil society groups are taking steps to bring about a more equitable electoral process. One of such efforts gradually leading to a more level-playing field is Ready To Run, a Yiaga Africa project sponsored by the EU Support for Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) initiative.

Ready To Run is mobilising a new breed of visionary public leaders to sanitise electoral politics, obtain political power through the ballot, and provide accountable, responsive and innovative leadership. While inspiring and supporting young people to stand for election, Ready To Run is also focused on equipping candidates with skills and tactics for running effective electoral campaigns and eventually winning at the polls.

Lois Auta is one of the young women who have been part of the project since 2019.

‘I ran for a seat of House of Representatives in the 2019 elections. They supported me with my campaign activities, especially on the media part. They took me to radio and TV stations to talk about my manifesto. They gave me visibility; they gave my contacts to journalists to interview me. They even did a documentary for me,’ she said.

Though Lois lost the fight, her campaign remains a huge accomplishment.

‘We have women who are inspired to run for office. We have changed the narrative that says women cannot run for elective offices due to inadequate funding, ethnicity, or gender,’ she explained. ‘I remember when I could not follow my campaign team to a certain place because there was a river. I couldn't cross the river and I had to stay back. But this platform changed the narrative that a certain gender cannot run for office because of the challenges and problems associated with it. By running for office, I was able to challenge the status quo. God used me to become the first woman with a disability among the 4,080 candidates that ran for a seat at the house. And this has inspired the world, especially young people and women with disability.’

Lois is grateful for the exposure and experience gained through the various activities facilitated by Ready To Run and plans to take part in the 2023 elections. 'Nobody would have known about Lois Auta as a candidate for elective office. YIAGA gave me the publicity I needed. They gave me many platforms to speak on what I intend to do once I am selected. So, I am very proud of YIAGA for giving me this opportunity. And I would also say we should do it again,' she urged.

'Ready To Run helped to amplify our voices as female CANDIDATES'

ReadyToRun was founded to ensure young people with competence and character leverage on available opportunities to not just run for political offices but emerge winners who can promote national development. Tari Oba Oliver, who first ventured into politics at the age of 18 as a student at the University of Benin, is one of the young people who have benefited from the programme.

Though her debut in elective politics was short-lived, Tari kept at it. When she realised that a lot of young eligible voters were not registered with the electoral commission and did not have Permanent Voter's Cards, she decided to focus her efforts on getting them eligible to cast their votes. By mobilising others to register, she gained a lot of experience and, by 2018, those she had worked with convinced her to throw her hat into the ring again.

It was during this process that Tari came across ReadyToRun. 'They provided technical support, in terms of capacity building, policy drafting, community organising, social network, social capital, and media exposure,' she said.

Feeling well-equipped, she bought the ticket to run for a seat at the Lagos State House of Assembly. Her election was, however, declared inconclusive. 'Then I had to go back for a re-run, but at that time I was already exhausted because there was a lot of vote-buying. I was contesting against somebody that was running for the third time and I am a non-indigene and a woman, so there were lots of factors that worked against me,' she added.

In all these, working with the ReadyToRun team was one of the highlights of the whole process for her.

‘We got a lot of support that helped to amplify our voices and helped to grow my network. When I lost the election in the re-run due to factors like indigenouness and political manipulation, I went back to my state and, within the next two months, the sale of forms for the Bayelsa state governorship election began. So, I swung into action and ran for governorship in Bayelsa. I was the only female facing off against 20 men, one of whom is the current governor.’

Tari has come a long way from her undergraduate days. ‘Right now, I am doing a lot. I am the Technical Adviser to the Governor on Women in Agriculture. I am the Secretary of the Bayelsa Women Empowerment Network, also founded by Her Excellency, the Governor’s wife. I am the Secretary, Gender Response Initiative in Bayelsa State.’ She contested in the 2023 Elections as the only female presidential candidate of her party but sadly, did not secure her party’s ticket.

‘Being part of Ready To Run gave me an edge at Edo Decides 2019’

Comrade Grace Ese Obakina is an experienced advocate against Gender-Based Violence. As someone who has worked in community development, she is conversant with the challenges faced by the rural communities because of policies and other governance issues. This led to her decision in 2017 to join elective politics in her native Edo State. But there were challenges, part of which included her youthfulness and gender.

‘I understood what the people at the grassroots went through. If I had the opportunity to serve the people, I would be able to serve better because of this understanding. So that launched me into contesting for the local government chairmanship in 2017. I didn’t win. In fact, they didn’t allow me to win because I was not grounded in the grassroots politics with them,’ she said.

She did not give up. Again, in 2019, she ran for a seat at the Edo State House of Assembly under the Labour Party. During the run-up to the general elections, Grace came in contact with Ready To Run. After she reached out to and participated in their training and other activities, she felt truly ready.

'I left there transformed. I left there equipped. When I say equipped, I mean I was ready to take the fight to my opponents. What I learnt from them has made me popular among the electorates, even till today. At Edo Decides 2019, when I came out to speak, all of those lectures kept reflecting in my speech and everybody was like wow!' she continued, adding that it was a great opportunity for her. 'It opened my eyes. It built my capacity to the fullest. I think it was the finance that really stood against us. Some of us, being young persons and women, were not financially like the men.'

Aside from the financial challenges faced in the electioneering, Grace had other challenges that were mostly due to her age and gender. But because she had been prepared to confront these issues, she was undeterred.

'My interaction with Ready To Run built my self-confidence,' she said proudly. 'Originally, I was a social worker. Before then, I was at the primary health care centre, where I was volunteering. As a counsellor, a social supporter, I had big dreams, but I didn't know how to channel my resources. That's why I said it was a great thing meeting Ready To Run because even though I have had this concept in my mind, I didn't really know where to connect, I didn't know where to channel it.'