



Research Paper

## Female Legislators in Benue State: A Profile of Cecilia Nyieyima Theresa Dewua

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**Abstract:** Politicking in Nigeria at national, state and local levels by females is an uphill battle. It takes time and calculations for tenacious women to join and actively participate in party politics to the level of securing a political appointment or contesting for an elective position, consequently defeating ambitious and zealous men in an election. This is because women face impediments in the quest to venture into active politics which calls for research of this nature. Findings from the research revealed that women like Mrs CNT Dewua who opted to go into partisan politics face a lot of challenges ranging from family mistrust, under-estimation of the intellectual capability to excel in politics and attract dividends of democracy for their people, male harassment/intimidation, discriminations, stigmatization, and false allegations of wrongdoing, among others. The challenges notwithstanding, Hon. Mrs Dewua was able to win the election to represent Gwer West Constituency in the Benue State House of Assembly from 2003 to 2007. The paper calls on aspiring female politicians to emulate the exemplary conduct of Hon. Mrs Dewua and other female predecessors by being courageous and dogged in the pursuit of their objective or career in partisan politics.

**Keywords:** Female Legislators, Party Politics, Exemplary conduct, Challenges, Representation

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### Historical background

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieayima Dewua (JP) emerged into this world on the 9th of September 1962, in the serene village of Mbapier, which is now recognized as Tavaku, situated in the Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State. Her early years were marked by the simple joys of rural life, providing her with a foundation deeply rooted in the rich cultural tapestry of the region. At the tender age of 16, Theresa embarked on a new chapter of her life by entering into matrimony with Hon. Mr. S.L.U. Dewua is a distinguished figure from Tse-Awuna, Agbe-Bija, Mbachôhôn in the Gwer West Local Government of Benue State. Their union, which commenced in the year 1978, blossomed into a beautiful family, graced with the presence of five children, symbolizing the enduring bond of love and commitment they shared.

Mrs. Theresa Dewua's journey as a wife and mother is a testament to her resilience and devotion to her family. Through the trials and triumphs, she navigated the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood with grace, leaving an indelible mark on the hearts of her loved ones. Her commitment to family values and the well-being of her children reflects not only her personal character but also serves as an inspiration to those around her. The foundation laid during those early years in Mbapier/Tavaku, coupled with her experiences as a wife and mother, has undoubtedly shaped Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieayima Dewua into the remarkable individual she is today, earning her the esteemed title of Justice of the Peace (JP) in recognition of her significant contributions to her community and beyond.

### Educational Attainment

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieayima Dewua (JP) embarked on her educational journey at St. Patrick Primary School, Taraku, where she laid the foundation for her academic excellence from 1970 to 1976. Her early years at this esteemed institution not only nurtured her intellect but also instilled in her a passion for learning that would guide her throughout her educational pursuits. Subsequently, she continued her educational odyssey at the Government Teachers College, Makurdi, from 1976 to 1981, honing her skills in teaching and deepening her commitment to the field of education.

Undeterred by the challenges that often accompany academic pursuits, Mrs. Theresa Dewua furthered her education at the College of Education, Ankpa, from 1986 to 1989. This phase of her academic journey equipped her with the necessary pedagogical tools and insights to make a lasting impact in the realm of education. Her unwavering dedication to learning led her to the prestigious University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she pursued her studies from 1992 to 1995, contributing to her broader understanding of her chosen field. Building upon this foundation, she subsequently enrolled at Benue State University, Makurdi, from 2000 to 2005, attaining her qualifications diligently within the scheduled academic calendar and achieving the remarkable feat of graduating with an excellent result in all courses. This unblemished academic record is a testament to Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua's commitment to excellence and her tenacity in overcoming academic challenges throughout her educational journey.

### **Work Experience**

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua (JP) embarked on her professional journey as a class teacher, dedicating herself to the educational development of young minds at St. Francis Primary School, Agagbe, Gwer West Local Government Area, from 1981 to 1983. Her commitment to nurturing the intellectual growth of her students became evident when she was transferred to LGEA Primary School, Nagi, where she continued her teaching endeavours from 1983 to 1988. In 1989, Mrs. Dewua further expanded her impact, moving to LGEA Primary School, Naka, where her passion for education continued to flourish.

In recognition of her exemplary service, 1989 marked a significant milestone as Mrs. Dewua earned a well-deserved promotion to the position of supervisor for the Agagbe Zone in Gwer West Local Government Area. This role not only reflected her dedication to educational leadership but also demonstrated her ability to inspire and guide others in the pursuit of academic excellence. Transitioning seamlessly into administrative roles, she furthered her career by transferring her service to the Gwer West Local Government Council in 1990, assuming the pivotal role of Women/UNICEF Coordinator. Her competence and dedication were rewarded with a subsequent promotion to the rank of Principal Women Development Officer, where she served with distinction from 1996 to 1997. Demonstrating her versatility and leadership acumen, Mrs. Dewua continued to ascend through the ranks, achieving the esteemed position of Principal Education Officer and Sectional Head of Women Education between 1997 and 2000.

In a bold and transformative move in 2002, Honourable Mrs. Dewua chose to withdraw from her role as Assistant Education Officer in the Gwer West Local Government, making a courageous entry into partisan politics. However, her commitment to community and social services remained unwavering. Before her political involvement, she actively engaged in various community initiatives, holding leadership positions in organizations such as the Catholic Women Organisation, Naka Parish, and the Student Counselling Association of Nigeria at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Gwer West MtemImyôngu Women Development Association, among others. According to Hon. Mrs. Dewua, her decision to embrace partisan politics was fueled by a sincere desire to encourage societal progress and contribute significantly to the overall enhancement of the economic and social well-being of the general public.

### **The Development of Political Participation**

In the year 2003, Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua (JP) secured a resounding victory in the elections, earning the esteemed opportunity to represent the Gwer West State Constituency in the Benue State House of Assembly, Makurdi (Amadi, 2005). Her tenure, spanning from 2003 to 2007, was characterized by unwavering dedication and impactful service to her constituency. Although she served only a single term, it was not a reflection of underperformance; rather, it was a testament to the unique policy embraced by the people of Gwer West at the time. Under the guiding principle of 'yanaagbian' or 'eat and give your brother,' the community opted for a single-term policy across all elective positions, ensuring a fair and equitable distribution of political responsibilities.

Within the Benue State Assembly, Honourable Mrs. Dewua assumed crucial roles that showcased her commitment to legislative duties. She served as a valuable member of the House Judiciary Committee, contributing her legal acumen to matters of legislative importance. Additionally, her leadership extended to being the Chairperson of the House Committee on Women Affairs and Social Development, emphasizing her dedication to issues crucial to the welfare and empowerment of women within the state. Throughout her tenure, Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua left an indelible mark, not only as a representative of her constituency but also as a steadfast advocate for justice, social development, and gender equality.

As part of orientation to fully equip her for effective performance in the State Assembly, she attended some seminars, workshops, courses and conferences. The most important ones include; the Orientation and Training Workshop for Members-Elect organized by the Benue State House of Assembly and the Benue State University, Makurdi, in 2003. The Anti-graft/anti-corruption Laws affect Political Office Holders at all Government levels held at Kuru-Jos (2003). Advanced Course on "Setting New Standards of Excellence: How to become a high-Performance Legislative body, held at Mississippi Consortium for International Development,

Nigeria Country Office-Abuja (2003). North Central Zone Legislative Capacity Enhancing Retreat, BSUK Williams & Daniels Consulting in Collaboration with African Legislative Resources Centre, Makurdi.

Another forum was the Stakeholders Conference on Political Reform, Office of the Political Adviser to the President, Abuja (2004). Health Issues of Women and their Effects on the Family, NCWS/Medicine Support Services, Abuja, (2004). 'legislative Strengthening Program for Benue State, Nigeria'' for non-Degree Training Course, Consortium for International Development, Cape Town South Africa (2004). High Impact Policy Initiative/Legislative& Executive Collaboration, the Mississippi Consortium for International Development, Nigeria Country Office, Abuja (2005). Government Policies, planning and Implementation, Thames Valley University (NIIM), London (2005). Gender Training, CNCWD/JICA Support, Abuja (2005). Gender budgeting and Training, CNCWD, Abuja (2005). And 52<sup>nd</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, Abuja, Nigeria (2006). From the above conferences, it is clear that she travelled to three countries, namely; South Africa, Britain and Israel.

### **Personal Awards**

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia NyieayimaDewua (JP) distinguished herself through exceptional performance during her tenure in the Benue State House of Assembly, earning accolades that underscored her impactful contributions. In 2006, the Institute of Human and Natural Resources in Garki, Abuja, recognized her outstanding commitment to nation-building, presenting her with the prestigious 'Pillar of Nation Building' award. This accolade served as a testament to Mrs. Dewua's unwavering dedication to fostering the development and progress of the nation, reflecting the depth of her impact on both local and national levels.

Furthermore, her dedication to democratic principles and advocacy for youth involvement in politics did not go unnoticed. The Benue State Student and Youths Democratic Forum, Makurdi, bestowed upon her the esteemed title of 'Ambassador of Democracy.' This recognition highlighted her role in promoting and upholding the democratic values vital for the active participation and representation of young individuals in the political landscape. Honourable Mrs. Dewua's receipt of these awards not only affirmed her legislative prowess but also underscored her broader commitment to nation-building, democracy, and the empowerment of youth—an acknowledgement well-deserved for her significant contributions to the betterment of both her constituency and the democratic ideals of the nation.

### **Creative Pastime Pursuits**

Beyond her political and professional commitments, Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia NyieayimaDewua (JP) exuded a multifaceted personality with diverse interests. Her leisure pursuits included a keen interest in playing Badminton, showcasing her active and sporty side. She found solace in the enchanting world of music, appreciating its various genres for relaxation and enjoyment. Embracing the tranquillity of nature, farming became not only an interest but also a source of connection with nature. Additionally, Mrs. Dewua was an avid reader, delving into the world of literature as a means of intellectual enrichment and personal growth. These diverse passions added layers to her dynamic persona beyond the realm of politics and public service.

### **Personal Achievements**

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia NyieayimaDewua (JP), being an educationist herself, staunchly championed the cause of intellectuals. This commitment to supporting intellectual endeavors was vividly demonstrated during a public book presentation in 2003 where Mrs. Dewua stood out among the politicians in attendance, being the sole contributor and supporter of academic prowess. Notably, her contribution was in stark contrast to others who made promises that eventually proved to be mere hollow pledges.

In her capacity as the Chairperson of the House Committee on Women Affairs and Social Development, Mrs. Dewua played a pivotal role in ensuring the effective implementation of government policies about women (Amadi, 2005). Her dedication went beyond rhetoric, as she actively worked towards creating an environment where women's concerns were not just acknowledged but addressed comprehensively. Furthermore, she served as a vital bridge between the legislature and the executive, a crucial role that safeguarded the interests of the people. Her legislative tenure from 2003 to 2007 was marked by meaningful contributions to the creation of laws that catalyzed development in Benue State. Mrs. Dewua's commitment to progress and her ability to translate intentions into impactful actions exemplified her dedication to public service and the welfare of her constituents.

Serving the State Assembly was an opportunity for her to contribute to governance from a distant point. In other words, she was not a member of the executive council that takes final decisions affecting the State but was a legislator who could propose bills emanating from consultative forums with the people at the grassroots in her Constituency and beyond. She had the audacity to lobby for projects and other assistance for her people. She had the privilege to engage the people, especially the youth on issues of governance as a politician, not as a high-ranking civil servant. Unlike the male politicians who have little or no time at all for their constituency and

the immediate family on account of politicking, Honourable Mrs. CNT Dewua said she had more time for her family compared to the stressful nature of the civil service in Benue State (which was without commensurate remunerations), especially after her four years as a member of the Benue State House Assembly, though she was still in active politics. She provided employment for a good number of youths in her constituency. And she served as a model for aspiring politicians in the area, particularly female aspirants.

### **Challenges encountered as a female legislator**

Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua (JP) faced formidable challenges in her political journey, primarily stemming from the structural imbalances ingrained in gender-based issues and sectionalism. These hurdles posed significant barriers to her efforts to advance critical motions and bills during her tenure. Despite her strong advocacy for Affirmative Action and amendments to internal rules, the patriarchal nature of politics hindered the conclusive realization of these initiatives (Uko, 2003). Issues such as family mistrust, underestimation of women's intellectual capabilities, and the prevalence of male harassment, intimidation, discrimination, stigmatization, and false allegations further compounded the challenges she encountered.

The struggle for gender equality in politics remains an ongoing battle (Uko, 2003), and Honourable Mrs. Dewua's experiences highlight the pervasive obstacles that women face in their pursuit of active participation and leadership roles. Her resilience in confronting these challenges, even in the face of familial scepticism and societal biases, underscores her unwavering commitment to breaking gender barriers in politics. Despite the roadblocks, her contributions laid a foundation for future endeavours, inspiring a generation of women to persist in their efforts to achieve true equality and representation in the political sphere.

### **Conclusion**

The paper extends a compelling call to aspiring female politicians, urging them to draw inspiration from the exemplary leadership exhibited by Honourable Mrs. Theresa Cecilia Nyieyima Dewua (JP) and other female predecessors. It emphasizes the importance of courage and tenacity in the pursuit of political objectives, citing Mrs. Dewua as an example of resilience and determination in the face of challenging circumstances within partisan politics. Her legacy serves as a beacon for women entering the political arena, encouraging them to be undaunted in their commitment to effecting positive change.

The paper further delivers poignant advice to Nigerians, imploring them to transcend ethnic and gender biases during elections. The call for a departure from discrimination emphasizes the critical role of inclusivity in fostering national development. Mrs. Dewua's advocacy for credible candidates, irrespective of ethnicity or gender, echoes the paper's plea for a more discerning and unbiased electorate.

In a direct message to aspiring female legislators, the paper highlights the need for courage and emotional resilience in navigating the often turbulent political landscape. It acknowledges the inevitability of hate and anger in the face of power shifts, emphasizing the importance of developing a "thick heart or skin" to withstand such challenges. Through these words of wisdom, the paper not only pays reverence to Mrs. Dewua's legacy but also serves as a guide for future female politicians, encouraging them to rise above adversity and contribute meaningfully to the betterment of their communities and the nation at large.

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