

Gender Discrimination and Political Participation in Nigeria: Implication

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ABSTRACT

The discrimination suffered by female politicians is a major concern globally. In Nigeria, women's participation in politics is at variance with nearly half of the nation's population which they constitute, and neither has it translated into equal representation in political leadership positions. Notwithstanding calls from different advocates, civil society organizations and International agencies to close the gap caused by long-term discriminations against women and increase their political participation by including them in both appointive and elective positions, there still persists poor participation of women in politics. Thus, this paper examined the implication of the persistent discrimination of women in political arena. Nigerian women are confronted by a number of challenges including discriminatory socio-cultural practices; lack of fund; under-representation, unsafe political environment; political party discrimination; wrong perception of women in politics; lack of family, fellow women and media support; to mention a few. It is recommended therefore, that there is need for civil society organisations, governments as well as political parties to increase the level of awareness of women, and sensitize them on the true meaning of politics and the essence of partaking in the leadership affairs of the country at all levels. More importantly, men should endeavour to support the political aspirations of women in Nigeria.

Keywords: Gender, Political Participation, Discrimination, Implication, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The pronounced commitment of international organizations to gender equality and to bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, supported by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1993 and the Beijing Platform of Actions, 1995 had changed the political landscape with presence of a minimum of 30% of women in the political structure of most African countries, Nigeria inclusive; however, one of the major reasons why women have not received adequate benefits from years of planning and development is their inadequate representation and non-participation in the preparation and execution of plans for their socio-economic development and wellbeing through decentralized institutions. Also, it has been observed that the traditional role of the woman and the girl-child in carrying out household chores often leave them with little or no time for formal education and self-development. Women are seen to belong

to the home, be incapable of making sound decisions, while it is unbecoming of them to involve themselves in political activities. [1] states that the issue of political participation basically constitute voting in elections, contesting elective (public) offices held in relation to other representation. Also, [2] added that, the increase of votes cast by women in elections from 10 to 40% of total vote cast in eight years signifies a form of increase in population. But when the number of women holding public offices, when compared to men, is relatively low, there is under-representation. She noted that there may be an increase in participation of women and yet under-representation of women in politics; or there could be high representation of women in politics and yet low participation, depending on the standards used to measure participation. In Nigeria today, there is an increase in the level of women participation, yet women are under-represented especially

in elective positions at all levels of governance.

In nascent democracies, there are several reasons why women do not participate fully in political leadership and governance in all forms. The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that the girl-child is usually prepared for a second place position right from the home where the focus of her training is on how to be a good wife, a good mother and a good home-maker. As a result, women are hardly equipped with public leadership tools, especially in the areas of

Women's Participation in Politics in Nigeria

The political system in Nigeria remains male-centric as witnessed under military dictatorship and in the emerging democratic civilian governance structures and practices. According to [3], the military era provided women with the least opportunity to challenge the structure of gender inequalities, as military promoted female subordinate position in the society through the 'First Lady' syndrome (a process which hindered the 'woman's question' from being addressed within the mainstream development praxis). Under such arrangements, the 'women's question' was treated within the private interests of wives of political leaders (a mentality which is almost difficult to erase even within the party politics and democratic governance). [4], note that one of the significant goals set by the Fourth World Conference on Women was to achieve a 'logical balance' of men and women in voicing the concerns of the society. Unfortunately, the country is yet to implement its commitment to women's political participation through the 30% affirmative action mandate provided for in the National Women Policy (2000); which was later increased to 35% in the National Gender Policy (2006). Available records show that in 1992 for instance, under the Babangida's administration, out of 300 gubernatorial aspirants, only 8 were women representing 2.6% and none of these women was elected as governor [5]. Accordingly, between 1980 and 1992, reports indicate that of 56 contestable seats in the Senate, only one woman was

education and social exposure. This in turn reduces women's chances of contesting elections. In Nigeria, a lot of women do not have the necessary skills to present ideas effectively. Lack of awareness on the need to be politically active and to contribute to public affairs has had negative impacts on the women folk. Consequently, if women are given the opportunity of participate in governance, they will recognize these problems and address them to accommodate full participation of women in governance at all levels of government.

elected, while 3 out of 442 were women in the House of Representatives. The story was the same in 1992 in the Senate where only one woman emerged as Senator out of 90 and 14 out of 575 in the House of Representatives. Statistics presented by [6], also reveal that from 1999-2011 general elections in Nigeria, no woman was elected into the office of the governor in any of the 36 states and that of the president of the federation. Also, out of 109 Senators, there were only 3 women (2.8%) in 1999; which increased to 4 (3.7%) in 2003; a further increase to 9 (8.3%) in 2007; and a slight decline to 7 (6.4%) in 2011. Of the 360 House of Representative members, there were only 12 women (3.3%) in 1999; which increased to 21 (5.8%) in 2003; a further increase to 25 (6.9%) in 2007; and a slight increase to 26 (7.2%) in 2011. In addition, out of 990 State House of Assembly members, there were only 24 women (2.4%) in 1999; 40 (3.9%) in 2003; and a further increase to 57 (5.8%), 68 (6.9%) in 2007 and 2011 respectively. In the same vein, out of 829, 881,887 State House of Assembly Committee members, there were only 18 women (2.2%), 32 (3.6%), 52 (5.9), in 1999, 2003, and 2007 respectively with slight increases. But in 2011, there was no woman out of the 887 State House of Assembly Committee members. Considering the office of the Local Government Area Chairperson, there were only 13 (1.8%), 15 (1.9%) and 27 (3.6%) women in 1999, 2003 and 2007 respectively with slight increases. While in 2011, no woman was elected in to the

office of Local Government Area chairperson. Lastly, out of 6,368 Councilors, they were only 69 (1.1%) women which increased to 267 (4.2%) in

Factors Responsible for Poor Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria

i. Absence of Financial Capability

Generally, the relatively pathetic poor financial disposition of Nigerian women is a critical challenge which mostly accounts for their poor participation in politics and political defeat in elections. Although this equally affects men but the rate at which it affects women is more pronounced in Nigeria. The high cost of financing political parties and campaigns is a big obstacle to women. For instance, the minimum cost of gubernatorial election could go as high as 200 million naira. Therefore, how many women can garner such huge amount of money and how many men can source for such amount of money for women? Which political party would nominate a woman for that post considering her very small contribution to party finance and formation? [7]. About 90% of women in Nigeria, according to [8], currently live below poverty line, so in spite of concession granted by some major political parties which lowers the cost of obtaining party nomination forms for women into elective office, the cost of realizing electoral ambition is still far beyond the reach of even the most highly placed women in the absence of “a godfather who foots the bill in exchange for unlimited favour when the seat is eventually secured” [9].

ii. Inadequate Number of Women in Leadership Positions

It is unfortunate that although women constitute the greater number of the registered voters in any elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to experience full representative positions [10]. The 1999 Nigeria Constitution generally refers to non-discrimination on the basis of sex, etc but is not explicit in ensuring equal representation on gender basis, takes no cognizance of the disadvantaged position of women, and has no provision for gender equality.

2003 and reduced to 235 (3.7%) in 2007; in 2011, no woman was elected into the office of Councilors.

iii. Unsafe Political Atmosphere

The political terrain in Nigeria is fraught with violence, maiming, assassinations, threats, blackmail, intimidation, humiliation, etc which are used mostly by men to scare women away from active participation in politics in Nigeria. Involvement of thugs before, during and after elections [11], and the attendant insecurity such as destruction of lives and properties that characterize a typical electoral process in Nigeria makes politics something out-of-the-way for most women [12]. Nigerian women have over the years become targets of violence of diverse forms based on their positions in promoting transformative politics [13].

iv. Political Party Discrimination

The manifestos and constitutions of political parties in Nigeria rarely mention ‘Affirmative Actions’ for women, and when they do, their commitments are lower than the bench mark set by regional and International conventions. The political party discrimination against women in politics in Nigeria is often a deliberate effort to exclude them from active participation in politics even though some of them pay lip service to their commitment to women’s aspirations. For instance, the timing of political meetings (mostly late in the night) and serious politicking which involves a lot of traveling automatically excludes mostly married women from active participation in politics. The governance structures in the political parties may play a critical role on who actually gets nominated to vie for elective positions. Nigerian women are not likely to be voted into key positions in the political party hierarchy. The highest position held by women in a number of key political parties include ex-officio members and women leaders whose relevance is only for mobilizing the womenfolk to vote for men. Thus, they are usually unable to assert themselves or push for the interest of women during

nominations leading to marginalization of women during election. In addition, most Nigerian political parties marginalize and discriminate against female political aspirants by excluding them from participation through sharp practices like “zone out” and “step-down techniques mainly for women. The “zone out” technique is where a political party simply zones out the seat of a female aspirant to a constituency she is not regarded as an indigene of; while “step-down” technique is where a female candidate who has clearly scaled through party nomination and is eligible to contest an election is simply asked to step down for a more suitable candidate (mostly men).

v. Erroneous Perception of Women in Politics

In Nigeria, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women (prostitutes/wayward) of easy virtues, stubborn people, whores, too domineering, cultural rebellions, etc. Unfortunately, this perception is held by both men and women. It is observed that during campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men and women. The use of negative labeling; derogatory names; abusive language and expressions to describe Nigerian women in politics discourage many of them from active participation in the nation’s politics.

vi. Lack of Support

Owing to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, it is culturally assumed that women must seek permission from the men/husbands before venturing into politics. However, if such permission is not granted, the only option for such women is to drop their political ambitions. Thus, most family members especially husbands even among the educated ones do not allow wives to participate actively in politics in Nigeria. Many poor women political aspirants do

not enjoy family support financially, socially, and otherwise. Similarly, the Nigerian women political aspirants often lack the support of their fellow women politically which is a major challenge to their active participation in politics. It is unfortunate that women in Nigeria do not believe in the leadership abilities of their fellow women and do not support them to win elections. Although, factors like envy, jealousy, and other problems associated with interpersonal relations are common with women, generally, most women would rather vote or support men than their fellow women in spite of their numerical strength [14].

vii. Socio-cultural and Religious Practices

Women according to [15], are discouraged from participating in public life from childhood through adulthood by authority figures such as husbands, fathers, mothers and other relations due to cultural image of a virtuous woman defined as quiet, submissive who should be seen and not heard. Because of the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society, most Nigerians including women still believe and accept the traditional perspectives that view women as inferior to men, second class citizens, weaker sex, to be seen and not heard, child bearers/primary care-givers, etc. In most cases, they feel the game of politics is an exclusive reserve of men and dare not venture into it and those who manage to venture are usually contented with the back seats [16]. Likewise, religious practices are used as powerful instruments of stereotype against women political aspirants/politicians from active participation in politics. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, the purdah system (i.e. house seclusion of women) of the Islamic doctrine strictly bars women from participating in politics either as voters, political aspirants or even participating in campaigns/other electoral activities. However, when it comes to the issue of political leadership and formulation of government policies, women’s role in Islam is limited to supportive and advisory [17].

Implications

Women largely contribute to socio-economic life and play a critical role in all spheres of society. Nevertheless, a number of socio-cultural constraints have not allowed them to take advantage of their numbers and position in order to significantly influence the governance processes. Consequently, the potential of half of the Nigerian population continues to be unexplored while the scope of labour, energy, and human resources available for national development remains untapped ([18]. Nigerian women have been marginalized in the formal political systems owing to traditional beliefs and practices which inhibit their advancement and participation in public life. In spite of constitutional provisions for equal participation, women's political empowerment continues to be impeded

by socio-cultural factors in the country. Also, the choice of educational training made early in life by young girls under the strong influence of families, peer groups and the society at large often deny many women several opportunities of building their political career. Thus, with the population of women constituting nearly half of the nation's population, one would expect that they would dominate the political scene, especially in a democratic system of government. Unfortunately, most women are kept in perpetual abject poverty because they render either unremunerated or poorly remunerated services [19]. As such, there is no gainsaying the fact that the women folk are more or less absent from the political scene.

The Way Forward

- i. Socio-cultural and religious practices against women active participation in politics in Nigeria should be positively reviewed by stakeholders (particularly traditional/religious rulers and government). These stakeholders should be encouraged to protect women's political career and ensure support for their political aspirations. They should further ensure that cultural/religious practices that discriminate against women are discouraged and their perpetrators are adequately reprimanded.
- ii. Government should adopt enforce deliberate policy frameworks that encourage women participation in the political affairs of the nation.
- iii. Nigerian men should learn to support the womenfolk in their political aspirations; hence, mobilization and re-education

- iv. of Nigerian men towards women's empowerment is vital. There should be constitutional amendment to ensure equitable appointive and elective positions in governance for meaningful national development: This could be done by ensuring that women and men have equal legal and human rights by eliminating all gender discriminatory clauses in existing laws and legislations including, by persons, organizations and enterprises. Also, advocacy for, and sensitization of the people on the need for customary laws with gender equality principles is paramount.
- v. There should be mandatory and supported education for the girl-child and woman at all levels of education. Also, women should be provided equal access to credit facilities and other empowerment services to enhance their output and income generation.

CONCLUSION

In today's world, women are performing wonderfully well in different leadership

positions in all spheres of life. It is no doubt that Nigerian women are still highly

marginalized, discriminated against, and under-represented in the political life of the nation. However, a number of factors such as discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices, lack of fund, toxic political atmosphere, wrong perception of women in politics, lack of family, fellow women and media support, among others, have been identified as being responsible for women's poor participation in politics. Thus, civil society organisations, governments as well as political parties should increase the level of awareness of

women through the organization of seminars/workshops not only in the cities but also in the villages. Women should be sensitized on the true meaning of politics and why they should partake in the leadership affairs of the country at all levels. More importantly, men should be orientated on the need to hold a proper perception of women in politics and to support their political aspirations/careers, instead of regarding them as a threat or a loose set.

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