

Gender and Politics in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of the world, God deemed it fit to integrate women in the plans of creation. From the dust of the earth, man, like the beast and the birds was created, according to the Bible. Women, on the other hand, was created from man (i.e. not from crude raw materials but from an already refined product), and for the specific purpose of being a helper in the fulfillment of God's policy directive to have dominion over all creatures of the earth. Thus, the gender agenda cannot continue to gain momentum, especially in developing societies, unless conscious efforts are made towards mainstreaming gender issues. As a result, this paper evaluated gender sensitive politics that should be enthroned in developing societies, especially Nigeria. Recently, gender equality in politics has started gaining grounds in Nigeria, and will expectedly spread to other developing societies. More so, socio-economic factors inhibiting women's political potency need to be properly addressed. Specifically, conscious efforts should be made by Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies (local and international), and women organizations to liberate women from the grips of culture, religion, male-dominated party system, poverty and illiteracy, among others. Thus, this paper concludes that failure to address these inhibiting factors implies that women political underrepresentation will continue in the Nigerian polity.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Inequality, Politics, Tradition, Governance

INTRODUCTION

Political discrimination of Nigerian women has a colonial history. Before the advent of colonialism, women in the different communities which were eventually amalgamated as "Nigeria" played significant political roles [1,2,3,4,5]. The pre-colonial Hausa society paraded such influential and prominent women political leaders as Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Daura and several other titled women as the Magajiya, Iya and Mardanni occupied very prominent political positions and wielded great influence in the daily administration of their cities [6,7,8,9,10]. However, it must be stated that, this level of participation was recorded mainly before the introduction of Islamic reforms through the Jihad of 1804 [11,12]. The reforms introduced the purdah system which imposed certain restrictions on the socio-political activities of women. The pre-colonial Yoruba society had palace ladies (wives of the kings or priestesses) who were addressed as the Iyamode, Iyemole,

Iyemonari and Iyale-ori. The Queen mother (Iya Oba) had a lot of influence and respect. It is interesting to note here that about five women had at one time or another been Oba out of more than thirty eight predecessors to the present Oba. Uchendu [1] observes that the umuada (a group of married women) were politically strong and influential in the pre-colonial Igbo society. However, women's political influence started dwindling in the colonial period [13,14,15]. According to [2], African women lost political as well as economic status under colonial rule. Europeans failed to see that African women have political roles and institution in their societies [16,17,18,19]. This led the women to revolt against stringent colonial rule in 1929 (the Aba Women Riot). In 1948, nineteen years later, the ruler of Egba land, Ademola (II), attempted to re-enact the same drama that led to the Aba Women riot of 1929 by liaising with the colonial administration to exploit the local population. The

women rejected this and protested against him to the point that he was dethroned and exiled out of Egba land. This took about twenty thousand women led by Madam Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in much the same manner as the 1929 Aba women's riot. The colonial government, not prepared to encounter the women again, nodded to their demands which resulted in Ademola's dethronement and banishment. The determination and struggle of Nigeria women to stamp their feet on the politics of the country in the colonial era were exemplified by the activities of few women like late Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, late Miss. Beatrice Adunni Oluwole who attempted to form a political party, Nigeria Commoners Party (NCP) and Mrs. Hilda Adefarsin, one time president of National Council of Women Societies. There was obvious lack of moral and institutional support from the colonialists to encourage and enhance Nigerian women participation in politics. However, Nigeria's post-colonial political development has ensured women political participation, though minimally.

Politics and Gender Inequality

Over the years, several studies have delved into the issue of politics and gender inequality. The magnitude of the studies available on this issue alludes to the fact that it is an issue of concern at global, regional, national even local level [3]. Olatunde citing the work of [4] opines that "studies and debates have analyzed such issues as; women involvement in politics; the impact of politics on women; the politics of social position and the politics of Feminism (2010). In this study, Randall noted that much of these debates and studies generally lie within the boundaries of political science, centering on women's political participation. Findings in this regard, however, have shown a great deal of underrepresentation for women and a lack of effective inclusion. The general argument is that despite the fact that women constitute half of the world population, they are mostly ignored when it comes to decisions that concern them; and that their presence in the political

setting is not a fair representation of the percentage of women in the world [3]. Along this line are arguments indicating that as of October 2006, the average percentage of women in lower or single houses of some 189 parliaments was 17%. In other words, women representation according to studies so far is still below the 30% minimum representation proposition in the policies on women. As can be expected, this have been classified as highly unfair and a lack of acknowledgment of a fundamental right of women [5; 3]. In his studies on "Democracy, Representation and Income: A comparative Analysis", in 2006, Monon Tremblay observes that democracy, representation and women are three Nations that everything opposes. He noted that in Ancient Greece, Cradle of the democratic experiment, democracy was rigorously exclusive. Theorists examining social contract and the sovereignty of the people, at best ignored women, and at worst foresaw their confinement to the private and family spheres. But today, representative democracy presented as ideal includes women-or at least those who do not think so keep quiet. Unfortunately, practice does not honour to this ideal; as of May 2006, the average percent of women in lower or single houses of some 180 parliaments is 16.8% [5]. Methodologically, Tremblay used both dependent and independent variables. The dependent variables split free countries in 2005 into two categories; those which have been free at least half of the time from 1972 to 2003, and those which are under that level. The result of the study confirms a frequently given answer to a question often asked in the classroom: there is no one factor that can explain the dynamic that modulates women's access to parliament. Even in countries listed as free in the Freedom House Gastil Index, and therefore showing a certain level of uniformity in terms of empirical democracies, there is never just one factor - even among the factors; working in concert in a statistical model to explain the obstacle that raged election [5]. In his words, Tremblay concludes that

“we must refrain from uniformly applying indicators to all countries, whose realities are, in fact, quite divergent. The results presented here show that the explicative ability of indicators and regressions models varies according to each country’s democratic experiment. Adding that, in countries where democracy has reigned for only a short time, voting system constitutes the most important factor in explaining the proportion of women parliamentarians, while in well established democracies this explication is found in an egalitarian conception of gender roles. The relegation of the voting system to the background in established democracies makes it necessary, to nuance an idea that too many political scientists and feminist activists endorse and transmit without any critical evaluation: proportional representation favours the election of women and majority voting discourages it [5].

Gender Balance and God-fatherism

God-fatherism is another problem area whenever the issue of gender balance is raised in Nigerian Politics. This is because men are always the favourite of the godfathers. The godfathers prefer to deal with the male folk, who they find more easily to influence and bind to an agreement. This situation makes it more difficult for women to come to an equal playing field with the male folk. Writing about godfatherism, [6] quoting [7] opines that “in contemporary Nigerian politics, the godfather performs certain services for his client with the aim of enriching himself and consolidating his political base at the expense of his client and the larger society” It is important to note that godfatherism is not a modern phenomenon. It has an ancient origin and its modern usage has acquired political and commercial meaning... The practice of godfatherism has given it a latent structural status within the “black market system” of power that is not constitutionally recognised. Contemporary history, particular in the context of nascent democracy has shown that this system of power can engaged and overwhelms the state in the power game [6]. The aforementioned statements

are true considering the fact that most politicians without the necessary political ingredients fall back at sponsors in order to succeed politically. This is the reason why [6] notes that “the nascent character of democracy with a weak lumped politicians who lack the resources; material and financial to organise elections, create space for retired soldiers, retired bureaucrats and businessmen who cannot feature in the nascent regime, to stay behind the scene and feature as “black market” political leaders... . It is within this context that we can capture and rationalise the role of the godfathers in nascent democracy” [6]. Idowu [8] as cited by [6] has identified four typologies of godfatherism in Nigerian politics: ideological brand, ethnic/religious brand, the materialist brand and the brand of military godfatherism. According to him, these forms of godfatherism have in one time or another affected the political development of the country. This is because during elective periods, the godfathers would want their candidates to take over political powers thereby making the political atmosphere unbearable for the feeble minded. In most cases, those affected by the tensed political scene are the female folks, who by nature are created with a unique heart that cannot hold long the political tensions. In the whole situation, the media are not really helping matters. The widespread ignorance and clientele status of the media in a corrupt renter system has given further leverage to the emergence of godfatherism. In contemporary Nigerian state, corruption is not just a social problem or evil, but has acquired the status of a mode of accumulation [6]. Ebohon [6] went further to observe that: “Media players see in corruption, an opportunity to reap windfall accumulation through image laundry projects such a meteoric rise from relative obscurity to opulence by the widespread ignorance and truth distortion contract awarded by the godfathers to media homes”.

Factors Affecting Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

The Nature of Party System: Political parties in Nigeria are usually male-dominated and do not have level playing ground for women. According to [9], political parties in Nigeria are more or less rhetoric than real, and obviously pay lip service to the gender equality agenda. She further accused political parties in Nigeria of being characterized with a gamut of problems including undemocratic administration of the parties, lack of gender responsive party politics culture, gender unfriendly party practices (such as violence, money politics, blackmails and name calling, among others), and lack of technical skills to mainstream gender issues in party politics. Also, political parties are usually dominated by men. Ideally, it is the position of women leader that is reserved for women. In a situation where men are almost the executive members and non-executive members, political decisions are usually taken in favour of men. Women are left to their fate. Of course, it is obvious that "no cockroach will win a case in any court where fowl is the chief judge". This implies that it is very difficult for women to win elections where men decide the political outcomes. It is also pertinent to point out that most political meetings are usually held in the night, and this makes it difficult for women to cope for fear of being nicknamed "harlots" by their respective husbands and even fellow women. Consequently, most women see politics as a "dirty game" played by men alone and simply withdraw from it and even dissuade fellow women who are interested from contesting against men.

Family Responsibilities: Family responsibilities and childbearing also hinder women from participating effectively in partisan political activities. For better part of their lives, most women are involved not only in child bearing but also in child rearing. Thus, much of the time they could have devoted to politics is taken up by their maternal challenges and obligations. On a serious note, most men do not allow their women to deeply

or actively involved in politics, for fear of losing their wives to political activities and gladiators, becoming more powerful or influential than them (husbands), reneging their domestic/family responsibilities, among other things.

Cultural/Religious Demands: Culture, as we know, is the totality of the patterned way of life of any people. In almost all the cultures in Nigeria, women are only meant to be seen and not heard. Among the Igbo, Hausa and Tiv peoples, women are seen as domestic beings, with their place in the kitchen. Most cultures in Nigeria forbid women from competing with men in issues involving public interests. Also, among the Islam practicing Hausa people, the religious practice known as "purdah" forbids women from being seen in public. Thus, these women continue to be marginalized in terms of education, and thus cannot be actively involved in politics. However, increased education of women has continued to liberate some Nigerian women from the shackles of culture and religion.

Financial Constraints: Politics in Nigeria has been monetized. In fact, it is usually referred to as "money-bag" politics. Political period therefore becomes a time to display wealth by contestants. Electorates are deceived into voting for the highest bidder(s), as they are not sure if they can benefit from the governments when enthroned. Poverty, which has been feminized in most developing countries, including Nigeria, is a major obstacle to women's active political participation. This forces women to accept the "second fiddle" role. According to [10], financial resources constrains women's political efficacy as women find it difficult to fund election, including payment of registration and nomination fees, and funds to finance the kind of elaborate and expensive electioneering campaigns required to mobilize supporters and voters to guarantee success at the polls. The monetization of electoral politics in Nigeria amplifies the generally poor socioeconomic conditions of Nigerian women and reduces their chances of success significantly. Although they are occasionally granted waivers with regards

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to registration and nomination fees, women lack money to finance their campaigns and ensure their victory. Therefore, with enormous financial resources already in the hands of men as controllers of party structures, women's chances are further reduced. According to [11], the dominant philosophy in Nigerian politics is money. The money factor plays very vital role in the conception, mobilization and winning of political offices either at the presidential, governorship, senatorial, and local council elections. Money is very critical in the shaping, making and unmaking of public office which is supposed to be on trust. Thus, the higher and larger one's financial muscle is in Nigeria, the greater one's chances of winning public office. Women are generally poor in Nigeria, and thus do not have enough financial strength to prosecute their political ambitions. But having dominated the socio-economic and political scenes since the creation of the Nigerian state, men have enough money to sponsor their political ambitions.

Mass Illiteracy: Lack of adequate education is a major hurdle for women political participation. Women constitute a larger percentage of the illiterate population in Nigeria. They are largely uneducated and lack the courage to challenge male chauvinism and domination over women. In fact, illiteracy has resulted in some women opposing and blackmailing fellow women who have taken the challenge to demand for equality between men and women.

Women as Instrument for Political Change

Right from creation, God has made it important to integrate women in the plans of creation. As Goke (2005) notes: from the dust of the earth, man, like the beast and the birds was created, according to the Bible. Women, on the other hand, was created from man (i.e. not from crude raw materials but from an already refined product), and for the specific purpose of being a helper in the fulfillment of God's policy directive to have dominion over all creatures of the earth. Thus, the gender agenda cannot continue to gain momentum, especially in developing societies, unless conscious efforts are made towards mainstreaming gender issues. As a result, gender sensitive politics should be enthroned in developing societies, especially Nigeria. Recently, gender equality in politics has started gaining gradual momentum in Nigeria, and will expectedly spread like whirlwind to other developing societies. More so, socio-economic factors inhibiting women's political potency should be properly addressed. Specifically, conscious efforts should be made by Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies (local and international), and women organizations to liberate women from the grips of culture, religion, male-dominated party system, poverty and illiteracy, among others. Failure to address these inhibiting factors implies that women political underrepresentation will continue in the Nigerian polity. Hence, all hands must be on desk for the gender agenda to be realised.

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