

**SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL
IMPEDIMENTS TO WOMEN PARTICIPATION
IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Nigeria is blessed with human and material resources. Nigerian women constitute about half of the population of the country and are known to play vital roles as child-bearers, child-rearers, house workers and house-managers, community organizer and social and political activist among others. Despite the role of women, Nigerian women have encountered a number of problems while venturing into politics. This is due to some cultural stereotype, economic limitation, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures. There is large scale discrimination from the men folk, both in voting for candidates and in allocating political offices despite the roles women perform in the society. In the light of the foregoing, this article examines the current status of women in politics, identifies problems women face in their quest to participate in politics and lastly suggest possible measures for their political empowerment such as comprehensive political education on women's political participation and their impact on democracy and good

governance.

Introduction

Nigeria is a blessed country. One of her many natural endowments is human capital. About half of the population is made up of the female gender having distinguished themselves in their chosen careers. In politics, women form bulk of the electorate and campaign mobilizers (Ojo, 2011). In Nigeria despite the significant roles of women before and after independence, the development of corresponding economic, social and political power is wanting (Anifowose, 2004). The marginalization of Nigerian women in politics and decision making is also as well as old as the Nigerian society and actually predates the advent of colonialism in Southern and Northern Nigeria (Irabor, 2011). After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria was under military rule for 29 years. The fact that the military ruled for 29 years helped to institutionalized violation of human rights that resulted in very severe political, social and economic crises (Ihonvbere, 2000). Ihonvbere further reported that these anomalies have impacted negatively on the development of women's rights, despite the many international norms and institutions designed to advance the cause of women.

The challenge of women's participation in the political process in Nigeria has gained additional significance since the return of democracy. The 2011 general election was taken over by men with their male-dominated model of politics (Daily Sun, 2011). This has happened despite the enlargement of the political space in Nigeria that should have created more opportunities for the participation of women in politics. It has become imperative to look at measures to increase women participation in politics for national development. This paper therefore provides answers to the following questions:

1. What is the situation of women in Politics now as compared to previous elections?
2. What are the contributory factors to the involvement of women in Nigerian politics?
3. What are the measures to be taken to increase women's political participation in Nigeria?

Conceptual framework

Theoretical model proposed by Chapman (1993) on objectives of men and the nature of their political relations provide useful guides on discussion of women underrepresentation in Nigeria politics. Chapman said that, men are the major determinants of political actions and inactions and they are generally concerned with the perpetuation of the status quo. He goes further to observe that when women compete with men for access to political elites, they do so on the terms already established by men for competition among themselves. The success of women in politics like that of any male out-group, cannot be achieved within such systems without displacing, or replacing existing elite and without some changes in values, and it cannot occur independently of fundamental changes in socio-economic as well as political relations. In essence, without clear understanding of the way men regulate their own access to political elites, the conditions which govern that of women will remain obscure. The implication is that men dictate the tempo of political activities in the modern society, Nigeria in particular.

An overview of the level of women's participation in politics from 1999 - 2011

Women participation and representation in elections at all levels is regrettably low despite all the policies, improvement recorded is still in no way near the various gender equality propositions. The CEDAW report presents comprehensive statistics of women participation and representation in the last four general elections in this republic. The table below showcases the level of women representation in the key decision-making positions at national level since the beginning of this republic:

TRENDS IN WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA FROM 1999 - 2011

winners at the polls. The number and percentage of women who were successful at the polls in 2011 was less than the figure in 2007. Whereas, the 2007 figure (6%) was higher than the figure in the 2003 general election (4%) and the figure in 2003 was higher than the figure in 1999 general election (2 %). From the table it can be deduced that the gains of women in 2007 elections were reversed in 2011.

Challenges to the involvement of women in Nigerian politics

There are many reasons why women are not involved in and are often situated from entering into politics among them are:

Cultural diversity, transition, Socialization and representation: in Nigeria, cultural diversity narrows in social values and status of women and specifically in their involvement in traditional government. Also, colonialism was a regime that was established and sustained "through the use of military dictatorship" (Igoli, 1997). The emergence of political culture was characterized by exploitation, suppression, subjugation, discrimination and other undemocratic ethos. The exhibition of these attitudes in environment where women had insignificant political impact still made greater number of women irrelevant in Nigeria political setting. Moreover, culture changes status "fix women in a service and domestic mode of behaviour" (Awake, 2002: 4) to the extent that their entrapment leads to socialization of false consciousness which makes "women to define the status quo as the most desirable and secure state" (Awake, 2002: 4). Therefore, finding children socialization as a "complicated and marvelous adventures" most mothers prefer to "sacrifice free time and much of their social life to make sure their children are well cared for" and as such they would not trade for the world" these cherished precious moments they enjoyed (Awake, 2002: 4).

Education, marriage, motherhood and representation: the rigidity of socially ascribed gender roles and women's limited access to power, education, training and productive resources as well as other emerging factors that may lead to securities for families have created a hurdle for women advancement in general. Due to these gender roles, women are not given equal opportunity as the men to be educated

and liberated economically. This is because in some parts of society, educating a woman is seen as a waste of resources, since a man will marry her; the onus is on the man to take up responsibilities. Even in parts of society where education and economic empowerment are accepted and promoted, women are expected to perform majority of household chores and take sole responsibility of childcare even when both the male and female partners have full time jobs (Obot, 2004). They are child-bearers, child-rearers, house workers and house-managers among others. In the situation of single parenting for instance, families headed by women are poorer compared with those headed by men. In this web of care, increasing majority of women is disempowered.

Finances and representation: the majority of women entering politics are further disadvantaged due to financial constraints. Obtaining a nomination as a political candidate requires investment of substantial amount of money which many women do not have and often cannot raise due to the fact that political sponsors or supporters do not perceive women as "good" candidates to support. Also, few women hold important economic positions and few are professionals (Ojo, 2011). Vote buying which was alleged by some voters may have influenced the voting pattern of some people. Vote buying has implications for female candidates as many of them are not similarly situated economically with their male competitors and therefore, would not be able to woo voters with money as recorded in 2011 general election that was characterized with low women performance (Ojo, 2011).

Indigene-ship factor and representation: the political environment poses another challenge known as indigene-ship factor also known as the 'son of the soil factor'. An individual is first and foremost expected to be recognized as a citizen before ethnic group. In the case of Nigeria's political environment, the ethnic group comes first in most cases and this has a huge effect on women's level of participation. In the Nigeria tradition, the society bestows respects on women based on marriage and it is something regarded as important for every woman who automatically changes her state of origin and become

a member of her husband's ethnic group. Ironically, in political environment the woman is not fully regarded as a full member of that community rather she is seen as a foreigner and a member by marriage alone and therefore should not be given the right that should be for the 'son of the soil'. The case is even worse for a foreign woman married to a Nigerian because she may never be appointed into any noteworthy political office because she can never be considered as a true 'indigene' of any state (CEDAW, 2008). The parties often use it to disqualify women or discourage them from being flag bearers for the party during elections since they believe the political environment is hostile to such candidate that fit the profile.

Roles of political parties: Since the commencement of indigenous politics in Nigeria in the mid-1950s, one remarkable feature has been the near absence of women in the parties especially in party leadership. Although there has been improvement over the years, the situation today still leaves much to be desired. Despite several efforts made by women locally and internationally to improve the situation of women in politics, very little progress has been made as women are still excluded from the mainstream while the support they enjoy is at best cosmetic (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2010).

An analysis of Nigeria electoral system shows that 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections witnessed unprecedented increase in the number of female aspirants and heightened local mobilization of the generality of women, yet only a handful made it to the end (Ojo, 2011). Also a review of the manifestoes and constitutions of over 30 political parties in the last elections showed that almost all the political parties in Nigeria, at best, paid lip services to women's political development since they are still considered 'outsiders' in the game of politics (Agbalajobi, 2009). The experiences of women during the last elections show that the political parties have refused to integrate women's needs and concern in the business of democracy. There are only few women in the National Executive of political parties in Nigeria, Where they manage to get to this level, they are given the post of welfare, social organizers or ex officio which may be politically redundant (The Punch, 2011). These forms of marginalization and poor representation of women run through all the other political parties. Incidentally, an analysis of the

manifestoes of the parties shows the inclusion of gender provisions despite that in practice this is not evidenced.

Party “god-fatherism” factor and representation: The 2011 general elections could be described as the year of “the mighty fallen”. There was indeed the whittling down of the influence of political godfathers as their candidates performed woefully at the elections. The fate of Senators Gbemisola Saraki and Iyabo Obasanjo Bello who respectively contested for governorship and senatorial elections in Kwara and Ogun States typify the genre.

Step down factor and representation: this is a technique whereby candidates who are eligible to contest are asked to step down for a more ‘suitable’ candidate, in most cases men; despite the outcome of pre-election to allow the person a better chance of winning the main election. Hon. Adefulire (Deputy Governor of Lagos State) of the ACN party confirms that this is a major limitation to women involvement in politics (Olamitoke, 2011).

Political insecurity, harassment and representation: Nigerian politics is full of uncertainties. Though the rules of the game are clear and bold, there is a reasonable level of non-adherence by large number of actors. Little wonder, politics is conceived as dirty game and exclusive right of thugs and hooligans in Nigeria. Consequently, Nigeria politics is characterized by acrimony, assault, assassination, intimidation, harassment, maiming and killing (Akunyili, 2010; Obasanjo, 2002). This war-like political atmosphere is in favour of men. Women naturally are not strong as men and so cannot be engaged in thuggery. No woman wants to be seen as a thug or perceived as sponsor of such. Women like to preserve their dignity anywhere they find themselves. Additionally, the ‘Light Heart’ imbued in women. Women cannot struggle in the atmosphere of rancor and violence. The fear of being attacked is always in their heart, their mind is not as strong as that of men. As mothers, women cannot risk anybody’s life for election victory which the men in Nigerian politics care less about (Olugbemi, 2004). In the face of this challenge, Nigerian women suffer “deprivation” in representation.

Suggested measures leading to the growth of women participation in politics

So far in this paper, trends in participation of women in politics have been discussed. Therefore, the following measures are suggested to pave way for more women into active participatory politics. First, Women must be identified and situated as a specific target group in the national poverty eradication programmes. In this regard, funders, foundations and non-governmental organisations should inculcate into its programme plan provisions for gender training for senior decision-makers to mainstream gender perspective into sectoral development planning.

Also, Women's NGOs and other organisations should ensure that Nigeria undertake legislative and administrative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land, as required in the Beijing Platform for Action (BAOBAB, 2011). Women in political parties must negotiate gender parity through the party system as a temporary measure. Since there is no legal framework backing affirmative action, the National Gender Policy 2007 remains the only persuasive document that can translate into a good negotiating instrument for concession for women. Women activists in Nigeria can mobilize around the policy, create awareness particularly, regarding the provisions relating to 35% affirmative action and through this demand electoral accountability from political parties.

Moreover, Gender stereo-types, negative cultural values, oppressive practices such as forced marriage, patriarchal norms that limits women's political expression to entertaining and voting for a candidate preferred by their husband and men's thought that it is abominable to be under a woman's leadership (Agbalajobi, 2009) should be dismantle in the way of women empowerment. Also, much need to be done to free women from the overload of work and responsibilities so that they can pursue careers in politics and leadership.

More so, political education on women's political participation and their impact on democracy and good governance should be put in place for all. Female aspirants would be equipped with relevant skills that underpin the positions to be desired. The outcome would

inform necessary remedial steps aspirants should take to address gaps to reposition them for exigency of electoral campaigns and elective office.

Lastly, opportunity existing for women groups is to proactively encourage women and established mentoring programme for women especially those with political potential for future elections to bring about the much expected changes for women in their quest for greater political participation and representation in the affairs of the State. In addition, party women members must insist that parties democratize their leadership structures and reform their financing mechanisms to ensure increased participation by women. Success in recruiting and promoting women's leadership within parties may also point the way for engagement of other under-represented sectors in social change processes in 2015 and beyond (Akinyode- Afolabi, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed extensively social, cultural and economic factors as bane of women participation in politics in Nigeria. In order to ensure that more women participate in politics and win elections, there is urgent need for women groups in collaboration with relevant government agencies, political institutions, development partners and other donor agencies to re-strategize for the 2015 general elections. Thus, political empowerment of women requires strong networking abilities between men and women who are determined to bring about the empowerment of women. Effective advocacy and lobbying strategies are also needed to ensure that more women attain top decision-making positions as a natural result of their skills and capacity. A true national development is unachievable without women.

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