

Gender Equality and Women Political Participation and Representation in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The focus of this paper is on the examination of women political participation and representation in Nigeria vis-à-vis ascertaining the extent of their involvement as well as unearthing factors that influence the degree of their engagement in politics. The study is against the backdrop of global agitation for gender equality and women participation in politics. Adopting liberal feminism as its framework of analysis, the study employed content analysis in analyzing data sourced mainly from secondary sources of data generation. The paper shows that the extent of women participation and representation in Nigeria is very low and calls for urgent action. Furthermore, the study espoused inter-alia that factors such as culture, media portrayal, religion, finance and nature of politics in Nigeria play a critical role in the extent to which women participate in politics in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, the paper concludes that since culture is not static, the government through various agencies such as National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the mass media should adopt strategies towards reorientation of the public. Also, appropriate laws should be enacted and rigorously enforced to drastically reduce the negative nature of elections in the country to enable level playing ground for all devoid of all forms of harassment and intimidations.*

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women, Political participation, Agitations, Nigeria

Introduction

In recent times, there have been agitations by women globally for adequate representation and participation in governmental positions (both in the legislature & executive). The idea being that women political participation is a matter of human right and gender equality, inclusive growth and general development. The active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making and political involvement is essential to the achievement of equality, democracy, peace, growth and sustainable development and the incorporation of their experiences and perspectives into the decision making process (Mlambo & Kapingura 2019). Also, evidence highlights that greater political empowerment of women often leads to higher standards of living and positive developments in education, infrastructure and health (OECD, 2018). Mavisakalyn (2012) notes that women's inclusion at the decision-making table is associated with increased spending in these sectors. Women's inclusion in politics ensures "that decision-making bodies reflect the diversity of the societies they represent and can provide a balanced perspective in designing and implementing rules, thus enabling an inclusive approach to policy making and service delivery." (OECD, 2014).

Notwithstanding these benefits, women in the 21st century are facing challenges in the sphere of public life or service both locally and globally (Kumar, 2018). Women find themselves under-represented in the legislature and executive positions at every nook and cranny of the globe. According to United Nations (2019, p.1) "while the world has achieved progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment under the Millennium Development Goals (including equal access to primary education between girls & boys), women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world".

In line with the foregoing, (Nwankwo, 2012) notes *inter-alia* that women are yet to be proportionately represented in the position of authority in public life anywhere in the world and awareness of gender as a central feature of all aspects of everyday life and society has become more and more widespread. Accordingly, it is pertinent to note that the role of women in every society is quite enormous and as such they are at the heart of development as they control most of the non-monetary economy (subsistence, agriculture, child-bearing, domestic labour, e.t.c.) and play an important role in the monetary economy which – trading, wage, labour, employment, e.t.c. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2019), women's equal participation with men in power and decision-making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Strategies to increase women's participation in politics have been advanced through conventions, protocols and international agreements for gender mainstreaming (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019); but they are yet to prove effective in achieving gender parity in the highest government rankings (Morobane, 2014). A major turning point in the women's struggle worldwide can be traced back to July 16, 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in New York organized by the local female Quakers, Elizabeth Cady and Lucretia

Mott (Faulkner, 2011). The convention demanded entirely equal treatment for both men and women such as right to education, right to practice any occupational skill, e.t.c. The opening paragraph of the convention read:

... we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.... Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation – in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.

Gender Issues and Political Participation in Nigeria

Despite many countries ratifying international conventions and protocols on gender equality and women political participation, the low level of women's representation in government and politics is a worrisome circumstance and thus raises the question of reasons behind it. As reported by Chalaby (2017) and Radu (2018), half of the world's population are women, but today women only hold 23% of all seats in parliaments and senates globally. According to George (2019), United Nations (UN) data reveals that only 22.8% of all national parliamentarians were women in 2016 (up from 11.3% in 1995), and only eleven women serve as head of state. The United Nations itself have their agencies headed predominantly by men. In Nigeria, statistics has shown unequal representation of women to men in political participation. In the 2019 general election, only Obiageli Ezekwesili (who later withdrew from the contest) represented the women fold as a contestant in the presidential election. In line with the above, the major political parties recorded no single woman as an aspirant for the party's candidature in the primary election and it shows the extent of the level of inequality in gender political participation.

In line with the foregoing and also accounting for gross misrepresentation of women in politics, all the thirty-six state governors of the federation are males and their deputies also men dominated (thirty-three males and three females) with Enugu state (South-East), Rivers state (South-South) and Ogun state (South-West). Another eye-opener is that the 8th National assembly recorded only seven female senators and twenty female house of representative members and the current senate has only six female senators to one hundred and three of their male counterpart. The case of gender inequality in Nigerian political landscape is also supported by Agbalajobi (2010). He corroborated this deficiency in women participation and representation thus:

Following two decades of military rule, statistics revealed that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while in 2007 they made only 6%. This survey shows a poor representation of women in 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections. In 2003 in states like Adamawa, Cross River, Ebonyi, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Nasarawa, Oyo, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara, no woman was elected as member of the State House of Assembly... (Agbalajobi, 2010, p. 78).

Women have indeed over the years continued to suffer neglect and marginalization *vis-à-vis* gender equality and political participation and representation and thus makes imperative for a study aimed at ascertaining the extent or level of their political involvement cum engagement as well as unravelling the *raison d'être* cum causes for this phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted liberal feminism as its framework of analysis. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional or philosophical discourse (Chodorow 1991). It examines women's and men's social roles, experiences, interests, chores and feminist politics in a variety of fields. Feminist theories and doctrines according to Okoli (2010) are diverse, but their unifying feature is a common desire to enhance, through whatever means, the social roles of women. The goals of feminism are (i) to demonstrate the importance of women (ii) to reveal that historically women have been subordinate to men, and (iii) to bring about gender equality. In other words, simply put: feminists fight for the equality of women and argue that women should share equally in society's opportunities and scarce resources.

Liberal feminism is the variety of feminism that works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure. Its roots stretch back to the social contract theory of government. It focuses on: (i) all people are created equal and should not be denied equality of opportunity because of gender, (ii) efforts on social change through the construction of legislation and regulation of employment practices, and (iii) inequality stems from the denial of equal rights.

Situated within the present study, the liberal feminist theory has relevant applicability in studying, understanding and explaining gender inequality in Nigeria. Women indeed are not equally accorded similar opportunity with the male counterpart owing to the fact that they are considered out of historical, biological and cultural values the weaker sex. This has dented the socio-political and economic essence of social existence. It bedevils the foundation on which their qualities are relegated only to domestic

consequences. Liberal feminism also connects with one of the objectives of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), now Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which focuses on gender inequality and women discrimination in politics.

Factors Affecting the Extent of Women Political Participation and Representation in Nigeria

Gender equality in politics has been achieved to some extent in some parts of the world, however, there are some factors limiting its success in other parts of the world especially in developing countries such as Nigeria. Some of those factors include:

Culture: Culture has persistently come up as one of the factors that impede the participation of women in politics. People's norms, beliefs and traditions constitute the greatest factor responsible for gender inequality and women discrimination in governance. This is a key factor because it is an ethos issue. Deep-rooted traditions and socio-cultural beliefs about what women can or cannot do have hampered women's participation in politics.

Oladunmi (2009) argued that culture is the basic barrier to women in authority positions in the Nigeria state. He stressed that culture is the major cause of discrimination against women in Nigeria. In agreement, George (2019) maintained that women's ability to engage politically both within and beyond the voting booth – particularly as community organisers and elected officials – is often shaped by norms that drive the social structures.

Traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes – especially as regards strong, particularly in rural areas (Sadie, 2005). In a traditional Nigerian society, politics is believed to be the duty of the man, since he is the head, participating in politics automatically bequeaths one with power; it is generally accepted that only men be allowed to wield such political power.

In line with the above, Abiolo (2010) opines that Nigerian women are socialized into culture of female subordination where they are made to believe that they are inferior to the men by every given standard. Women are not only subordinate to men in their husband's family cultural setting but are also socialized to believe that in the society, authority position is men's business. An accumulation of the above manifestations and subordinations affects women in position of authority by depriving them self-esteem.

Collier (1974) argues that women are seldom seen as political actors, but rather as pawns to be used in the political manoeuvres by men and hoarded for their productive, reproductive and prestige-enhancing value or traded to create and cement alliances. In her study, she noted that male informants often speak of women as pawns, that women are usually excluded from political gatherings, are ineligible for political office, and are occupied with child-rearing and domestic tasks.

The family of course is the main institution of patriarchy which is an important concept of explaining gender inequality. Literally, it means 'the rule of the father'; more broadly, it refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women. This is inherent in most African families. Giving men a higher social status over females has crept into public life, which reflects in state activities. The socialization of children to expect and accept different roles in life has created a social mechanism for the development of values that engender the several forms of discrimination against women.

In line with the above, the patriarchal system and its consequences especially as regards the traditionally held attitudes to women in decision-making positions is another fundamental problem facing women in politics. The patriarchal system determines when a woman should enter politics, how she should go about it, the extent she is permitted to go and where she dares not venture into; else she will meet defeat. A woman's roles in the family are seen as her primary reason for existence. The patriarchal system has helped so much to subjugate and dominate women's abilities and capabilities in all spheres of life; politics inclusive. For instance, patriarchy demands that women take permissions from their husbands and such be granted before they can join any political party or vie for position. Also, a country's culture determines how women in politics are perceived. In Nigeria, women politicians are negatively perceived, they are seen by others and media (even by other women) as women of easy virtue who are prone to promiscuity in a bid to get nominated and win elections (EMC, 2014). Politics is also seen as a domain for women who have no husbands, whose husbands are former politicians and women who are single. All these perceptions pose challenges to men politicians and those intending to be (Lawai, 2015).

Media Portrayal: Socially constructed gender roles and stereotyping are seen as the bedrock of gender inequality but they have been nurtured by the mass media. Since the mass media has the ability to facilitate attitude change and opinion formation, then their way of gender representation has done more harm than good in the struggle for gender sensitivity in politics. The mass media continue to reproduce discriminatory stereotypes about women and portray them in sexist ways. Datyan-Gevorgyam (2016)

argued that if the mass media were to be divided into two categories, such as fictional and news reporting, then in the former, women are often associated with the household or sex-objects, and in the latter categories, they lack roles.

Omenugha (2005) explains that the media in Nigeria seem to uphold the *status quo* through excluding women, giving them little voice, demeaning them through various forms of stereotype and increasing their vulnerability, thereby also contribute to the trapping of women in the vicious cycle of poverty. Omenugha (2005) further argues that women are not positively represented in the media. They are often portrayed as victims or criminals thereby degrading images of women. Supporting the above view, Okunna (1992) states that news makers are dominated by men and the mass media are guilty of the stereotyping of women. Also Nyondo (2005) observes that journalists prefer male sources to female sources. She posits that “the masculine newsroom has spilled into the stories journalists write. The criteria of ‘importance’ in news worthiness becomes an issue when a reporter quotes female sources. The questions are: What does she know about the topic? What is her level of education? Who is she in society?” The numbers and proportion of women involved in the making of news are significantly lower than those of their male counterparts and thus influences the proper representation of women in the media (Council of Europe, 2013).

In every society, public attitude regarding the role of women are the major factors in deciding the status of women. In shaping these attitudes, the media exerts a strong influence. The images of women in mass media content, news, entertainment, advertising and so on is thus seen by feminists as a crucially important topic because this image will undoubtedly be reflected in the attitudes of society towards women in the long run (Sandman et. al, 1976). Their attitudes whether negative or positive would be structured and delivered to them by the media. This would make them have little or no interest in participating actively in politics.

Religion: Religion is another critical factor that impedes or psychologically affects women’s political participation in Nigeria. Nigerians are deeply religious, with Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion accounting for the major religion in the country. Being religious in nature, the Nigerian populace has over the years been strong adherents of the teachings of their religion. Starting from the oldest religion in the country (Traditional religion), the women usually do not participate in any decision making outside the immediate family setting. This of course has crystallized along culture to psychologically hinder political participation of women.

To the Christian faithful, many leadership roles in the organized church are prohibited to women. For example, in the Roman Catholic church as well as the Anglican communion in Nigeria, only men may serve as priests, deacons, etc. as well as senior leadership positions such as pope, patriarch and bishops. Though very few mainstream protestant denominations are beginning to relax their longstanding constraints on ordaining women in their leadership posts, while some are also tightening their constraints in reaction (SBC, 2018). The Christian denominations that deny women leadership positions in their order has backed their tradition on many texts in the bible, for example Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1, Ephesians 5:22-23, Titus 2: 4-5 among others, and these texts basically placed men above women in authority and positions of power. It is also easy to notice how the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ were women or female deficient.

In Islam, men and women are moral equals in God’s sight and are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship, prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. Social responsibility in Islam is derived from the Qur’anic verse which states: “And (as far) the believers, both men and women – they are friends and protectors of one another: they (all) enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong.” (Qur’an Surah Tauba:71). The injunction laid down in the verse compels women and men to perform for the progress of society, hence a person in an individual capacity is encouraged to take active role in society rather than just a passive one. However, when they endeavor to assert themselves as Muslim women, they are labeled of being influenced by the West and putting Muslims and Islam to disgrace (Rahman and Memon 2015). In line with the above, it is a rarity to see or witness a woman leading prayers or serving as an Imam in the presence of men.

Some scholars argue that the status of women in pre-modern Islam in general conform not to Quaranic ideals but to prevailing patriarchal cultural norms and questions the social restrictions on women especially regarding education, seclusion, strict veiling, polygamy etc. In the Northern part of Nigeria, where Islam is the predominant religion, the women are rarely seen participating in politics.

Finance/Economic Factor: Kassa (2015) notes that the economic status of women plays a significant role in enhancing their representation and participation in politics. Furthermore, Onazi (2014) states that in the world of politics, the participation of women is an onerous task that requires huge finance. In Nigeria, most people subsist on less than \$2 a day, hence the tag; a

potentially rich country with a poor population (Adepoju 2011, Okeke, Nnamani & Nduba 2018). Statistics on poverty in Nigeria indicate that 70% of poor Nigerians are women (National Bureau of Statistics 2010).

Economic status or the finance available to candidates in election contest to a great extent is a major determinant in political participation cum representation in Nigeria. Huge finance is *sine qua non* for successful campaign as political campaigns are expensive and requires a robust financial backing. Few women in Nigeria no doubt have the resources to finance an election campaign and this account as a factor that hinders their active participation in politics *vis-à-vis* election contest. Finance or economic status as a factor affecting women participation in politics is also remotely related to culture. Societal values shape the financial status of women. Men are generally seen not only as the breadwinners in the typical Nigerian homes, but, also as those who sponsor (usually small scale) economic venture of the women fold.

Against this backdrop, one can easily deduce that the lack of solid financial base is indeed a major constraint to an effective participation of women in Nigerian Politics. Women lack the economic base which would enhance their political participation.

Nature of Elections: Elections indeed among other things, create a channel for competitiveness that allows public offices to be keenly contested for by qualified candidates with a view to rendering selfless services to the people (Nnamani, Nduba & Nwanolue, 2019). Since the inception of Nigeria's fourth republic in 1999, there has been six general elections into executive and legislative positions in the country. Elections in Nigeria has gross irregularities including violence as a recurring decimal. These irregularities are occasioned by the very nature of politics and/or electoral contest in Nigeria which is patterned on the zero sum game coupled with the nascent stage of democracy in the country. Arguing along this trajectory, Okeke, Nnamani and Nduba (2019, p.59) posits that "most political positions in Nigeria are contested as 'do or die affair' because it is a means of having access to national cake and acquiring wealth, not service to the people. Evidence has shown that those who occupied political positions in Nigeria since 1999 stupendously enrich overnight"

This pattern of politics of winner takes all and loser losses all has further exacerbated intense hegemonic contest for power (Nduba, Nnamdi & Ofodu, 2020). Politics is therefore seen by many as a means or avenue for quick and massive accumulation of wealth and power (Egharevba & Oveneri-Ogbomo, 2018). This intense contest for power in Nigeria has taken many dimensions including but not limited to, ballot box snatching, intimidations, thuggery, threats and assassinations and outright results manipulations.

Election violence is a coercive and deliberate strategy used by political actors (either the incumbent party and/or opposition parties) to advance their interests or achieve specific political goals in relation to electoral contest (Adolfo, Kovacs, Nystrom, & Utas, 2012). As a consequence, many politicians resort to illicit electoral strategies and make use of militant youth wings, militias or the security forces to either win the election or strengthen their post-election bargaining positions (Mlambo, Kapingura & Meissner, 2019; Okeke, Nduba & Akam, 2019).

Electoral violence is one problem that has been identified as a stumbling block to robust participation of women in the political process and in governance. Violence against women is used as a targeted and destructive tool in various ways throughout the electoral cycle to dissuade women from participating as election administrators, candidates and even voters (Para-Malam, 2015, Mlambo, Kapingura & Meissner, 2019). According to the United Nations (2015), an Afrobarometer survey showed that women feel a sense of vulnerability to political intimidation and violence. Zakari (2015) further states that violence against women in elections could be overt or subtle; beyond violence that does physical harm, there is violence manifesting in terms of gender-based hate speech, with sinister aim of deterring women from presenting themselves as candidates or voting elections. Behrendt-Kigozi (2012) notes that political violence and the social stigma that politics is a dirty game is a further stumbling block for women to enter active politics. The failure to address these barriers creates an atmosphere that makes women to have negative attitude towards political activities.

This negative nature of politics in Nigeria has been noted as a serious impediment to political participation of women. Women that are well qualified and with the right policy initiative that will engender much needed development in the state feels threatened by this very nature of politics and therefore shy away from politics.

Structural and Institutional Barriers: There are structural and institutional constraints or barriers to gender equality vis-à-vis women political participation and representation in Nigeria. Structural barriers facing women in Nigeria include the level of socio-economic development of the state, the career and professional status of women. The socio-economic hindrances include unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, access to education, lack of sufficient financial resources, dual role women play in the family,

full time job and their choice of profession (EMC, 2014). This is also evidenced in the perceived and/or real lack of work balance in politics, limited infrastructure (such as child care or parental leaves) and working arrangements.

According to Mlambo, Kapingura and Meissner (2019), most women deliberately shy away from politics due to perceived and/or real inability to balance work and life as patterned by the expectations of women as being primary caregivers within their families and households. This is also influenced by the meetings or assignments cum engagements of the political parties in the evenings, difficulties to predict the working hours of politicians especially parliamentarians, travel requirements and uneven access to quality childcare (OECD, 2018).

Institutional barriers also account for factors that dissuade women from participating actively in politics. Institutional barriers include constraints such as political systems that operate through rigid schedules that do not take into consideration women's domestic responsibilities and (if any) the type of electoral quotas (Kangas, Haider, Fraser & Browne, 2015). The manner in which politics and political parties are structured especially in Nigeria and most developing countries is that women have limited chances to be well or adequately represented. The establishment and organization of the political arena are shaped around and favours men than women (Lovenduski and Karam, 2010). According to these scholars, the present political arrangement is a product of long established political processes which were mainly male dominated. Men have always been at the helm of affairs; making and implementing policies. It is therefore easy to overlook and/or take lesser cognizance of women's issues and their possible involvement in years to come may not likely be looked into.

Thus, it may not necessarily be a deliberate act according to Lovenduski & Karam (2010) but that of an omission especially since Nigeria is a patriarchal society; women's interests and involvement in politics are subsumed in men's. This Institutional fault is foundational to women under representation in elective posts because they were never part of the making of the rules and regulations guiding political activities in the country. Women are, so to say, late comers in the political scene. This perhaps is one of the greatest psychological weapon hampering women active participation in politics as the length of time they (men) have enjoyed dominance over women is often not well emphasized or taking adequate cognizance of.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is predicated on the global agitation and attention to the role or absence thereof, of women in politics as a way of human right, gender equality, inclusive growth and general development. The study made a modest attempt at ascertaining the extent or level of political participation and representation of women in Nigeria and also unraveling the factors that impedes their participation in politics.

The study showed that there is a massive disparity cum gender inequality in Nigerian politics as women are still not playing active role in politics in comparison to their male counterpart. Furthermore, the study espoused that factors such as culture, media portrayal, religion, finance, nature of elections, structural and institutional barriers play a significant role in impacting women's political participation and representation in Nigeria.

Against this backdrop, the study recommends that since culture is not static, the government through various agencies such as National Orientation Agency and the mass media should adopt strategies towards reorientation of the public vis-à-vis the importance and necessity of women participation in politics. In the same vein, appropriate laws should be enacted (if the available ones are not enough or limited in scope) and rigorously enforced to drastically reduce the negative nature of elections in the country to enable level playing ground for all devoid of all forms of threats, harassment and intimidations.

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