

Gender Issues in Nigerian Politics

Jibrin Ubale Yahaya

Department of Political Science, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

jibrinubaleyahaya@gmail.com 08035876786

Abstract

Women participation in Nigerian politics is crucial to the development of Nigeria and since women constitute a sizeable proportion of the population, neglecting them may mean losing their valuable contribution. Traditional socioeconomic and political and cultural structures aid discrimination against women leading to loss of contributions of women to societal development. Raising the status of women through gender empowerment has is considered in certain quarters as vital in the quest towards improvement in living standards and wellbeing of the masses in economies transiting to stability. Despite global efforts to improve the poor conditions of women through numerous conventions and conferences such as CEDAW' MDGs among others, gender discrimination has not ceased. The, paper aims at throwing light on gender discrimination, obstacles to gender equality and suggests strategies for promoting effective gender equality and empowerment of women. Using secondary data, from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, the paper found that gender discrimination exists in all variable indicators considered. Current status of Nigerian women in relation to men in the areas of education, income, labour force and share of seats in parliament or level of political participation were considered. Some of the main factors militating against women 'S effective participation in politics are illiteracy, poverty, money politics) instrument of intimidation, harmful traditional practices and discriminatory cultural stereotypes, violence against

women, barriers by electoral process, and religious barriers. It is suggested that more efforts are required by civil society groups and government agencies for greater awareness on gender issues and rekindling efforts of all stakeholders in the quest to formulating policies and programs towards reduction of gender inequality.

Keywords: Women Development, Popular Participation, Gender inequality.

Introduction

Nigeria like other countries in the world is responding to the clarion calls made variously by the United Nations to rid societies of all forms of discriminations especially gender based discriminations. Nigeria took bold step in the year 2000 when it adopted and passed into Law National Policy on women guided by the Global Instrument on the Convention of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).



Nigeria is currently reawakening its effort in achieving gender equality. To achieve this, a development process which takes women and men as partners in development, and more importantly that which challenges the structure which continues to produce gender-based inequalities in the society, and balances power relations between women and men both at micro and macro levels is inevitable.

Nigeria indeed has tried to respond to this development from the international arena. by articulating policies and programmes that seeks to reduce gender inequalities in socio economic and political spheres, however, the success of bridging the gap between men and women is far-fetched. Omonubi-Mc Donnell (2003:2 Opines: Politically, Nigeria women are negligible and undermined force, with little political involvement. Economically, they constitute the majority of the peasant labour force in the agricultural sector, while

most of the others occupy bottom of occupational ladder and continue to be channeled into service and domestic occupations. The consequence of the unequal status between men and women is high level of economic and political powerlessness among women, powerlessness in turn retard development of any level, politically, economically and socially. The question is, what are those constrains and discriminating factors against women that still continue to perpetuate gender inequalities in Nigeria.

Discrimination against the womenfolk in modern society manifests in many ways. They are relegated to disadvantaged position not only in Nigeria but also in many other countries. Discriminatory practices have grave implications for the well-being of women and the economy. Gender equity could act as a veritable instrument for societal development. Traditional socioeconomic and



cultural as well as political structures aid discrimination against women. Elimination of all types of discrimination against women and the girl-child is essential to enable women's potentials to be realized in the areas considered exclusive only to the menfolk, such as politics. Human beings deserve freedom and equal rights. According to Aung San Suu Kyi (cited in UNDP Human Development Report, 2014)), human beings the world over, need freedom and security to enable them realize their full potential. Raising the status of women through gender equality and empowerment has become vital in the quest towards improvement in living standards and wellbeing of the masses and by extension, transforming the economies to a more stable one. Gender equality is crucial to a meaningful national development.

Gender comprises a range of differences between men and women, extending from the

biological to the social, It refers to socially constructed and socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with females and males (Parpart, et al, 2000). All cultures interpret and elaborate the biological difference between women and men into a set of social expectations about what behaviors and activities are appropriate and what rights, resources, and power women and men possess. But like race, ethnicity, and class; gender is a social category that largely establishes one's life chances. It shapes one's participation in society and in the economy. Therefore, while the term gender refers to men and women, for the purpose of this presentation, gender refers to the condition of women in the context of African societies. Invariably development has element of welfare though meant for everyone. Discrimination is the act or practice of treating somebody or a particular group in society less fairly than others, perhaps on the grounds of sex/gender,



race, age, group, etc. Discrimination is an unjustifiable negative behavior towards a people based on their group membership. Discriminatory behaviors may include denial of access to common goods or show of hostility towards some people or a group of persons. It is a negative behaviors directed against persons because of their membership in a particular group (Parpart, et al, 2000: 87).

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender:

This refers to social roles allocated respectively to men and women in particular societies and at particular times. Such roles and the difference between them are conditioned by a variety of political, economic, ideological and cultural factors, and are characterized in most societies by unequal power relations.

Bridge (1998) opines that gender constitutes one of the determinants of how poverty is experienced and of wealth creation. Rights and entitlements of men and women to opportunities, resources and decision making are based on socio-cultural norms rather than on human rights or the respective development capability of men and women. CIRDDOC (2001:1) defines gender as a system of roles relationship between women and men that are determine not biologically but by the social, political and economic context. Scott (1988:2) captures the nature of gender, thus: Gender is the social organization of sexual differences but this does not means that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men, rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences. These meaning vary across cultures, social groups and time since nothing about the body



including women's reproductive organs, determines univocally how social division will be shaped.

Gender analysis

This means a critical understanding of all "gender biases" which perpetuate gender inequalities in all sectors of society.

Gender issues

Gender issues arise when the relationship between women and men, their roles, privileges, status and positions are identified and analysed. Gender issues arise where inequalities are shown to exist between people purely on the bases of their being a female or male. The fact that gender and gender differences are socially constructed is itself a primary issue to deal with.

Gender equality

This refers to a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realising their

full human rights and potentials; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the results. Furthermore, it entails that the underlying causes of discrimination are systematically identified and removed in order to give men and women equal opportunities. Equality therefore understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality, and not merely simple equality to men.

Gender Issues and the Place of Womenfolk in Nigerian Politics

In Nigeria, there are prevailing concerns such as religious and cultural bias against women participation in politics; Low membership in political parties and party structure; the hostile political environment are not responsive to women needed interest and creates imbalance in the political sphere. Women who constitute about half of the

population have been continuously sidelined in public life to the extent that they never held more than 15% of elective offices (see table 1 statistics of elective positions) compared to what obtained in other nations of the world, particularly in developed nations.

Olurode (2011) noted that Nigeria lags far behind in women political participation index on the African countries saying, “Nigerian women save about the worst representation of 5.9% in the national legislature when compared to most other African countries example Uganda (34.6%), South Africa (43.2%), Ethiopia (27.7%), Cameroon (20%), Niger (12.3%) and DR Congo (8.0%)”. The issue being that women in Nigeria face a lot of odds when they contest against men. For instance,

The issue of the Chauvinistic traditional system:

Onyejekwe (2011) stated that:

- a) It is an abomination for women to claim equality with men especially in decision making programme such as politics or wanting to head a man under any circumstance, it’s a taboo.
- b) A woman does not take a separate decision apart from her spouse.
- c) The idea of women in politics is a rude agenda in Nigeria and an abomination to most men. Naturally, there is stiff opposition from even educated men politician to women.

Women conception of politics:

In Nigeria, there is a belief that Nigerian politics is based on high political virility, those who have all it takes to compete in the turbulent environment, and those who can match violence. It is assumed that men possess superiority, strength, competitiveness and self-reliant and are preferred to tussle in political endeavor,

whereas, women are considered too passive to engage in politics and governance. This consensus is also constructed by societal norms and values which through socialization has defined different gender roles according to biological differences. Their perception of politics as a dirty game and continued fright at the thought of violence has alienated them from mainstreaming politics.

Funding and high cost of election

Although, equality affects men but the rate at which it affects women is more pronounced in Nigeria. The cost of financing political parties and campaigns is a big obstacle to women. The minimum cost of gubernatorial election could go as high as 200 million naira and how many men can mobilize such huge 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? (Nda, 2003:338). Awe (1995) opines that women are said to be amongst (1995) opines that women are said to be amongst the poorest people in the world and a poor person cannot play significant role in politics. Over 90% of women live below the poverty line in Nigeria. Those that are educated are not rich and the rich ones are uneducated or are not politically inclined. Therefore this disadvantage position cannot allow women to match naira for naira in Nigeria monetized politics. This partly explained why they are reluctant about active participation in politics.

The place of the women participating in politics:

Although women actively participate in the membership of political parties, the only serve as supporters for male to acquire political positions. Politics is said to be game

of members yet women's numerical strength has not impacted positively on the political life and decision making structure of the nation. Men constitute a large percentage of the party membership and this tends to affect women when it comes to selecting or electing candidates for elections. Men tend to dominate the Party hierarchy and are therefore at advantage in influencing the party's internal politics. Women usually constitute a smaller percentage of political party membership because of the social, cultural, religious attitude of different Nigerian societies.

The general perception of politics in Nigeria:

It is on dirty vocation that is reserved for unrefined people who have little scruples with bending the rules and subverting due process (Luka, 2011). Female politicians are therefore seen as accomplices of vile male

politicians who are bent on manipulating the popular will of the people. They are treated as deviant male politicians. Politics is time consuming and it demand great attention. Juggling their traditional ascribed roles with an interest in politics without a supportive spouse could result in needless conflict. Female politicians are often perceived to be divorcees and marital failures. Also violence and treat, the do-or-die nature of politics in Nigeria has had its own fair share of women who have to pay the ultimate price for venturing into politics. Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Suliat Adedeji and many others are easily recalled as helpless victims of the sanguinary predilection of Nigeria's politics. These issues highlighted have gone a long way to affect women's participation in politics and has therefore lead to a very low level of political interest.



Issues in Politics and Women Representation in Nigeria

Politics in Nigeria, since the inception, has been dominated by men. It's all men affairs, but a no-go-area for Nigerian women. Right from the colonial era, politics suffered violence and only the violent will take it by force (paraphrased Holy Bible: Matthew chapter 11 verse 12). Women, by nature, do not possess the kind of violent nature or characteristics exhibited by men in Nigeria politics. Agbalajobi (2010) has opined that winning public elections in Nigeria is a matter of force "do-or-die" affairs. Therefore, those who possess physical stamina and strength of use brutal force are men. As a result, women would have to give way for the man to take whatever is available by force. According to Aluko (2011:41), the absence or under – representation of women in decision-making and implementation

processes undermines the fundamental concept of democratic form of governance which assumes that participation and presentation in all areas and levels of public life will be equally available to women and men. However, politics and political arrangement in Nigeria has undermined female legitimacy resulting in women's political powerlessness. Akiyode-Afolabi (2010) submit that women's overall political representation and participation in government is still at 8%.

An analysis of the Nigerian electoral system has shown that the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections witnessed unprecedented increase in the number of female aspirants and increased local mobilization of the generality of women. However, only few women aspirants succeeded in winning political seats in these elections. Women candidates in the 2011 election constituted 9.1% (against



90.9% male candidate) of the total number of candidates who contested in the April 2011 polls. As usual, only few women made it through party primaries (Aluko, 2011). This failure is reinforced by the fact that political parties and structures have been hijacked by men. Available statistics shows women's political underrepresentation in the April 2011 rolls in all the geo - political zones and some states in Nigeria. The South -West had the highest number of female candidates with 15.5% of the 2116 contestants from the zone; South-East had 11.9% women candidature of the 1611 candidate; South-South had 10.5% female candidature of 1624 candidates; North Central has 8.5 of 1371; North East had 4.2% of 1187 candidates; and North West had 2.3% of 2088 candidates. At the state level, the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) has the highest number of female candidates (24%), Ekiti had 20.9%, Osun had 20.5%, Lagos had 17.8%, Kogi had 17.0% and Ebonyi had

16.0%. States like Bauchi (1.1%) and Yobe (0.8%) had very low representation with the least being Jigawa which had no single female representation (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2010). Tables 1-3 further show women political representation in Nigeria in this Fourth Republic. The above is just the percentage representation of women candidature. It is appalling to find out that only insignificant few women candidates won the 2011 election. Men had their ways at the end of the polls. However President Goodluck Jonathan has graciously compensated the women with about 33% appointment into ministerial and other public positions. Interestingly, the foregoing statistics justifies the fact that political representation and participation of women is abysmally low in the northern parts of the country as a result of the religious practice (purdah) that makes women unnecessarily invisible and withdrawn from the public.



Finding of Results

The Nature of Party System: Political parties in Nigeria are usually male-dominated and do not have level playing ground for women. According to Aina (2012:71), 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 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 their (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 benefits 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 Nelson (2012), 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 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 Agbalajobi (2010), 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. This, 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.

Conclusion

Women participation in Nigerian politics is very crucial to the development of Nigeria and since women constitute a sizable proportion of the population, neglecting them may mean losing their valuable contribution. Despite this, the divide of gender roles vis-a-vis between both sexes as proscribed by culture will only exacerbate inequality. Gender discrimination or disparities were found to exist in all variable indicators considered. In Fact, in traditional Africa, a

married woman is considered as the legal property other husband. Ideally, a real democratic system should allow voluntary individual participation in politics, without any sentiments about gender, to optimally benefit from the potentials of women in Nigerian social and political life.

In order to have women, gender equality initiatives, the government needs to work towards changing the structures which produces gender inequalities in our society. Building on the premise of the existence of a clear inexorable interconnection between women's deprivation and some socio-economic and political factors, it therefore follow that, to address women gender equality on any front, effort must be made to address the aforementioned gender issues. Nigeria cannot afford to continue to treat half of its population and a significant part of the productive force as inferior being. We need

to give our womenfolk the full chance to participate in all sectors of society. The roles of women as house makers cannot be down played. Women touch anywhere, cannot be matched. To ensure and achieve gender equality in Nigeria, economic and political povcrlessncss of women must be addressed.

Recommendations

The papers recommended the following things for proper women engagement in Nigerian politics:

- i. Educating the women and large society the importance of women appearance in Governance affairs through allocation of responsibilities to contribute on National Development
- ii. Citing some specific official roles constitutionally for women in Nigerian Politics

- iii. Reducing financial commitment of women to involve in Politics
- iv. Provision of laws that balance the gender inequality.

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