

## WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA (1960-2011): A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to assess the level of women participation in politics in Nigeria from 1960 to 2011. Certainly, the continued agitation by Nigerian women for more elective positions in the country since her political independence in 1960 calls for great concern. Nigerian women have over the years suffered perceived marginalization by their male counterpart in politics. Efforts made to address this imbalance at the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995 still proved abortive. The 35 percent affirmative action for women is yet to be realized in Nigeria despite the continued agitation. The paper therefore tried to find out the present level of women participation in elective positions of this country in terms of gender equality during the period under review. If the level of women participation in politics is lower than the 35 percent affirmative action, then factors militating against their full participation in politics will be discussed with possible solution to the problem. Data for this study were drawn from secondary source and analyzed accordingly. The paper argues that gender inequality really exist in the political equation in Nigeria due to certain perennial factors. It is the view of this paper that women to some extent have been participating in the political process of this country, with a steady increase since 1999 and government should continue to encourage more women in politics through some enlightenment programmes.

**Keywords:** Women, Political Participation, Elections and Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

The term political participation according to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences Vol.11 and 12 p.252 refers to “those voluntary activities by which members of society share in the selection of rulers either directly or indirectly, in the formation, discussing and proselytizing, attending meeting, contributing financially, and communicating with representatives”.

In Nigeria, the more active form of political participation include formal enrolment in a political party, canvassing and registration of voters, special writing and speech making, working in campaigns and competing for public and party offices. The essence of participating in politics is the of acquisition of power, and using the power to organize the society, harvest and distribute resources and to influence decision making in line with the group interest. All groups including women seek to influence the dispensation of power in line with their articulated interest as a fundamental motive of political participation.

Since Nigeria’s political independence in 1960, different studies have been carried out and proved that men have been dominating the political process than their women counterpart. This inequality that exist in the political space often contribute to inability of many women in emerging democracies to acquire the knowledge and skills which will make them realize their rights and inspire them for leadership positions. However, studies have shown that efforts have been made by both government and non-government organizations to in increase the level of participation of women in politics, in line with the declaration made at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing which advocated 30% affirmative action. The National Gender Policy in Nigeria recommended 35% affirmative action for a more inclusive representation of women in politics. The low political participation by women in Nigerian politics gained root in due to patriarchal practice inherent in Nigeria from the pre-colonial era till date. However, it could be observed that since 1999 democratic governance, the scenario has changed and there has been an increase in women participation in politics both at elective and appointive positions in Nigeria.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective: The objective of this study is to critically assess the level of women participation in politics in Nigeria from 1960 to 2011.

Subsidiary Objectives: To examine factors militating against full participation of women in politics in Nigeria.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The theoretical framework for explaining women participation in politics in Nigeria is Feminism. Feminism at its core seeks to achieve equal social, political, and economic rights for women and men. It refers to any action, especially organized, that promote changes in society to end patterns that have disadvantaged women. The term “feminism” originated from the French word “feminisme,” coined by the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, and was first used in English in the 1890s, in association with the movement for equal political and legal rights for women (Honderich: 1995). Feminist ideals and beliefs focus on what culture is like for women as compared to what the world is like for men. The feminist assumption is that women are not treated equally to men and as a result, women are disadvantaged in comparison to men.

It encompasses work in a variety of disciplines, including approaches to women's roles and life experiences; feminist politics in anthropology and sociology, economics, women's studies; gender studies; feminist literary criticism; and philosophy. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. While providing a critique of social relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on analyzing gender inequalities and on the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy (Chodolow: 1991 and Honderich : 1995).

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. In its narrowest interpretation, it refers to the effort to ensure legal and political equality for women; in its broadest sense it comprises any theory which is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified (Gilligan: 1977). In Nigeria, feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to: vote, hold public office, work, earn equal pay, own property, receive education, enter contracts, have equal rights within marriage, and maternity leave. From 1999, there was hope for a new dawn in the struggle for more participation of women in politics in Nigeria. Through equal involvement in the affairs of the state, stability and order are promoted: and by giving everyone the opportunity to express his or her own interest, greatest good for the greatest number is achieved.

## THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF NIGERIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE IN 1960 AND THE CORRESPONDING NUMBER OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS:

### (1) THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ELECTIONS

The post-independence political system in Nigeria witnessed more of ethnic sentiments than being nationalistic. The nascent democratic experiment in Nigeria after political independence in 1960 was parliamentary system of government. The dominant political parties during the first Republic (1960 – 1966) were “The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) which was expression of the political aspiration of the North, while the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU), although represent a different group still confined its loyalty to the North.

The Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigeria citizen (NCNC) were identified with the political aspiration of the Western and Eastern and Region s of Nigeria respectively. The way Nigerians participated in politics during this period experienced some dramatic changes. These changes were caused by economic and social structure bequeathed in the country by the colonial masters. The post–independence political participation in Nigeria centered on appointment of officers both at the national and the regional offices.

As stated earlier the first political experiment carried out in Nigeria after independence was the parliamentary system of government and the Westminster model of Public Administration which was the legacy bequeathed on

the country by the British Colonial Government. Participation during this period was strongly influenced by the pattern of group life in Nigeria. Politics and elections centered not only on winning seats at the parliaments but also on the protection of cultural and regional interests of the people.

“The political parties represented the interest of the Hausa – Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibo, as well as a multitude of smaller parties, sought to dominate national politics and at the same time assure their control of their respective regions”. (V. F. Bishop and J. William Meszaros: 1980 p.179). To realize their ambition, political parties formed coalition as a matter of convenience for electoral success. Different strategies of politicking were employed by the politicians and expectations concerning their participation were paramount. All individuals including women did not participate equally because Nigerian politics and elections were limited to the urban cities. Many of the people who lived in rural areas had little education and were outside the modern economic sector. The social obligations were with their kinship or cultural groups rather than the more modern political institutions and activities.

The political parties in Nigeria were the major channels for political participation during that period, and allegiance was given to group or regional interest over national interests. The interaction between group life and parliamentary politics fractionalized Nigerian political life. The Northern Region feared Southern domination because they North lagged behind the Western and Eastern Regions in modern education, and consequently, Northerners banded together to protect their interests.

On the other hand, many southerners feared northern domination because of the large northern population and what was viewed by many southerners as the conservative traditionalism of Northern political leaders. The conflicts were not simply between North and South. Minority groups in all areas feared domination of the three major ethnic groups. Conflicts between the Eastern Region and Western Region were often more interest than between the North and South.

Coupled with this fear and mistrust was the fact that the election was rigged and the conduct of election led to the questioning of the result. Corruption and thuggery were often the rule rather than the exception. The 1964 Federal election and the 1965 Western Regional election cast doubts about the honesty of the electoral process and the results.

During the first Republic, men dominated the political system, only one female senator from Eastern Region in the person of Late Chief (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo contested elections in 1961 and won into Aba North constituency under the National council of Nigeria citizens (NCNC) platform and became a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly.

In the Northern Nigeria, women’s active role in politics during the colonial era, significantly contributing to making the Nigerian nation. Bishop and J. Meszaros (1980) state further that colonial role drastically changed the role and status of Nigeria women as rulers and political activist. They plummeted to the subsequent political, cultural, and economic powerlessness, inflicted on them under the colonial policy provide and rate introduced by the British. This policy, accordingly, favoured men, whose political and economic advancement was pursued at the expense of women who were subsequently marginalized. Though marginalized, some prominent Nigerian women like Margaret Ekpo (East) Funmilayo Ransome – Kuti (West) both NCNC and Hajiya Gambo Sawaba (North) of the NEPU, were active in the colonial struggle and post – colonial politics in Nigeria. These in conjunction with other women, help to form the women’s wing of their political parties and contributed to the mobilization of the women folk throughout Nigeria.

Because of their marginal position, the women never wielded power to nor occupied political offices. However, their achievements and contribution rested on their leading roles in the advancement of women, whose rights they articulated and defended. They also laid a solid foundation for women’s participation in post independence politics in Nigeria.

## **(2) THE SECOND REPUBLIC ELECTIONS**

During the second Republic (1979 – 1983) there was a little increase in the number of women that participated in politics although only one female Senator in the person of Late Franca Afegbuwa. Six (6) women won election

into the House of Representatives at the National level. Some of these women were Mrs. J.C. Eze of the Nigerian People’s Party (NPP) who represented the then Anambra State. Mrs. V.C. Nnaji, also of the Nigerian People’s Party (NPP) who represented the Isu constituency in Imo state and Mrs. Abiola Batope of the Unity Party of Nigeria who represented Muslim Central II in Lagos State. On the whole, few women won elections into the State House of Assembly during the Second Republic.

Source: Report 2008, New York, United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women.

**(3) THE THIRD REPUBLIC ELECTIONS**

The 1990 elections into Local Government Areas heralding the Third Republic, and few women emerged as councilors and only one woman in the country emerged as Chairman of Aboekuta Local Government Area in Ogun State. During the gubernatorial elections, no female governor emerged in any of the States in Nigeria. Only two female Deputy Governors emerged namely Alhaya Sinatis Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong of Cross Rivers State. In the Senatorial election held in 1992, Mrs. Kofo Bucknor – Akerele was the only women who won in the Senate. Very few women won seats in the House of Representatives including Mrs. Florence Ita – Giwa who won the senatorial seat in the Calabar constituency of Cross River State under the National Republican Convention (NRC).

Source: (htt://www./1.htm1).

**(4) THE FOURTH REPUBLIC ELECTIONS:**

The Fourth Republic under President Obasanjo had many women participating in politics in Nigeria. There were more number of women in government both at the Federal, State and Local Government Councils.

Below are the data to support the argument above in the State House of Assembly, House of Representatives and Senate between 1999 – 2007.

2(a) 1999 – 2007

House of Assembly	Year	Total no. of seats	No. of Men	No. of Men %	No. of Women	No. of Women %
	1999	978	966	98.8%	12	1.2%
	2003	951	912	96%	39	4%
	2007	990	936	94.5%	54	5.5%

Source: European Journal of Social Sciences-Vol.14 Number 4 (2010)

House of Representatives	Year	Total no. of seats	Men	% of men	Women	% of women
	1999	360	347	96.4%	13	3.6%
	2003	339	318	94%	21	6%
	2007	358	33	93%	25	7%

Senate	Year	Total no. of seats	Men	% of men	Women	% of women
	1999	109	106	97.2%	3	2.8%
	2003	109	105	96.3%	4	3.7%
	2007	109	100	91.7%	9	8.3%

Source: The Nigeria CEDAW NGO coalition shadow

Furthermore, there has been an increase in the appointive position occupied by women from 1999 and the fact remains that the degree of improvement remains marginal (Aiyede 2006:172). Prior to 1999, women representation in the Federal Executive Council never exceeded 5% (Nda, 2003:334, Illor and Ikenna 2009:117.) In 1999-2003, the Obasanjo government made a clear departure and appointed 4 women out of the 29 Senior Ministers representing 13.7% and 3 out of the 18 Junior Ministers representing 16.6% there were 2 women Advisers and 2 Senior Special Assistants and 6 Special Assistants and 1 Special Assistants to the Vice President and 8 Permanent Secretaries being women. At the Local Government levels, the 1999 Local Government elections into the 774 councils, only 8 women were elected as Chairpersons.

In the 2011 general election an increased number of Nigerian women participated in politics and contested for party's primaries. Many lost, yet a significant number compared to previous elections won the party's primaries and constituted for elective position in the various political parties. Female candidates constituted 9.1% of the total number of candidates who contested election into National Assembly in the 2011 general elections across all the political parties. There were 3,306 candidates with men accounting for 3004 (90.9%) and women 302 (9.1%).

Source: (<http://www.basbabwomen.blogspot.com/2011/02/womenpoliticalparticipation>).

Despite many female aspirants, few emerged as candidates and fewer of them emerged as winners at the polls. Unfortunately, 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 was higher than the 2003 general elections; and the figure in 2003 was higher than figure in 1999 general election.

It should be noted that Sarah Jubril was a Presidential aspirant under the platform of the people's Democratic Party (PDP) and lost at the party's primaries. Despite the few women in elective positions in 2011 general elections, there has been increased in the number of women in appointive position in Federal, States and local Government Councils across the country. Some of the women in Nigeria have continued to participate actively in politics and decision making process of the Goodluck Jonathan's Government notably among them are Mrs. Ngozi Okonji-Iwuela Economic Co-coordinating Minister and Minister for Finance, Diezani k. Alison Madueke the Minister of Petroleum Resources etc.

## FINDINGS

From the above analysis, it could be observed that Nigerian women played no significant role in statecraft and have not able to influence decision making in any consistent manner, especially during the First, Second and Third Republican Government. Chazan (1989:186) states that this is the reason why they are faced with discriminating and coercive policies and they experienced marginalization, exploitation and oppression. He also discovered that despite a high level of women activism in politics, they have not been able to tackle important problems that confront them.

In Nigeria, during the First and Second Republics, there was very little level of participation as very few women found themselves in the Federal Legislature with few Commissioners in various state governments. During the Third Republic, more women were motivated through economic and social empowerment considered by the government in building their capacity for political activism. Apart from economic empowerment, Egunjobi (1997) mentioned the following specific factors such as: (a) Micro – credit facilities for women to enhance their political participation.

(b) Longtime orientation: Setting as personal rivalries which are women greatest problem. Men are aware of these short-coming in women and hence sometimes used it against them.

Adeniyi (1997) maintains that women struggle for freedom, equality and liberty without competence is meaningless. Few Nigerian women as listed above who have been tested in various fields have been found to be very competent. Generally women have been seen as prominent instrument in nation-building in many sectors of economic and political life in Nigeria.

According to Dr. (Mrs.) Umoh (2012:175) “women feature in the private sector as well as the public sector.” However, the number of women in government offices is significant, yet effective women representation is still very negligible.

Ezeigbo (1999) feels that because women constitute more than half of the electorates, this numerical strength should give them a great leverage to share power and developed alongside with the men. He suggested that women should support one another especially those who show interest in elective position and vote only those men who have sympathy for women interest. The data collected from Nigeria’s first republic to the Fourth Republic indicate low level of political participation of women in Nigeria when compared to their men counterpart. It is on this basis that factors responsible for the low participation in politics by the women are discussed below.

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST ACTIVE WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS:

### **(1) RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES**

Religion is one of the most important factors which militate against women participation in politics in Nigeria. In the North, it is a taboo for real Muslim women to organize public rallies. They are to participate in politics except for the elderly, divorces or those whose husband are able politicians and then move out together for political programmers. On the other hand, even though there is no such low barring Christian women from participating in politics like the Muslim counterpart; they are not regarded as a responsible wife. Christian women participating in politics are regarded as way ward.

A number of barriers are imposed on women active participation in politics by cultural practices. According to Iloh and Ikenna, (2009:124) and Nda, (2003:336) “Nigerian society is permeated by patriarchy whereby women are expected to conform to and confine themselves to male dominance and female subservience. Women are seen to belong to the home, be incapable of making sound decision and it is unbecoming of women to expose themselves in public for political activities such as campaign rallies. Man often find incredible and implacable to see their participation in politics.

### **(2) VIOLENCE AND THUGGERY**

The concise oxford dictionary defines a ‘thug’ simply as violent ‘murderous ruffians to facilitate the achievement of their political goals. The use of thugs in Nigeria political has not only led to waste of human resources, but has also contributes to low participation of women in politics. Without doubt, Nigerian politics since independence has been characterizes by thuggery, and violence. This culture of thuggery has not only been imbibed and sustained as part of the country’s political behavior since independence to the present moment; it has been one of the potent causes of the low participation of women in politics.

On the other hand, violence is defined the illegitimate and unauthorized use of force to effect decision of others (wolf 1969:606). In Nigeria, political activities always characterized with violence do or die affairs politics is not about services as it ought to have been, but it is business, and opportunity to amass wealth, campaigns always laced with salt and pepper of violence and physical elimination of opponents. Women in this case will find it difficult, if not impossible to breed and keep thugs for political purpose. No women want to be come as thug or perceive on sponsor of thug. Women like to preserve their dignity anywhere they found themselves. And since Nigeria political terrain embraces thuggery and violence, it becomes difficult for women to complete favorable with men such as situation.

### **(3) HIGH COST OF ELECTION**

It is a known fact that politics in Nigeria is gone money, and without money it is impossible to win election to any political office. In some cases poor financial disposition of women is a serious factor militating against women participation in politics in Nigeria. Some women maintain that they are marginalized in everything, especially thing that will uplift their financial position like contract award etc for fear that women may be more powerful and hence result in power struggle with their male counterpart. Women therefore remain helpless economically and ineffective political players. The high cost of financial political parties and campaign is a big obstacle to women.

#### (4) THE ISSUE OF INDIGNITY

This is another major barrier that militates against active women participation in politics in Nigeria. Women who are married outside their constituencies of birth (but who want to contest election in their married constituencies are usually regarded as non-indigenes by the people from that constituency. This is a worse case if the woman is married outside her ethnic group and this may prevent her from effective participation. To their winning, election is not possible unless they form the majority in their wards. Some men and women politicians complain against the appointment of non-indigenes into the state elective position for fear of leaking their secret to the state.

- (i) **POLITICAL MEETING SCHEDULE:** The time scheduled for political caucus meetings to map out strategies for winning elections are always held in the night or odd time and is not conducive for responsible family women to attend. Time for such meetings is the time women are expected to be at home and take care of their children and family. This practice is viewed as an attempt to side-line women from engaging in political process.
- (ii) **PATRIARCHY SOCIETY:** This refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women, which encourages gender inequality in political process. This arrangement places women as manager of households and non-partisan in decision making process thereby limits their level in involvement in politics.

Apart from the factors listed and discussed above, women always faced massive restriction from participation in politics from their husband. Fear of broken families, breeding of irresponsible children and the need to perform their domestic activities are also some of the reasons that prevent women from going into politics.

#### CONCLUSION

From the above, it could be observed that the level of political participation by Nigerian women is low. This is drawn from the fact that Nigeria democratic culture is characterized by factor such as: assassination, lawlessness, illegalities, rigging, oppression, manipulation, marginalization and violence. Other factors include male dominated party executives, lobbying, money politics and innumerable social, economic, cultural and religious issues. These ills are perfected by men and these constitute barriers to women aspiring and contesting for elective positions in Nigeria. The World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 is another accelerating factor for women participation in politics globally. In Nigeria, there has been a marked improvement at the level of women participation in Nigeria since 1999 democratic government. It is important for women to participate in politics because as noted by Skler (1994) without the active participation of women at all levels of governance, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this paper, the following recommendations are made:

- (a). The political parties should create a support programme for prospective women politicians who will be playing key role as mentors and provide capacity building for participating in politics.
- (b). Furthermore, the establishment of the Ministry Women Affairs and Social Development in Nigeria should be seen as accelerating agency for mobilization of women to participate in the decision process in the country. Women groups and organizations such as National Council for Women Security (NEWS), Women in Nigeria (WIN), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIAWA) should be supported by government to assist women politicians to engage effectively in the political process.
- (c). Since thuggery and violence negate women's chances at the polls and in political participation, effort should be made by government to mount a campaign of "No violence during elections". Also States should ensure full security for women and girls during elections period. Political parties must be committed to non-violent campaign and desist from making provoking utterance during electioneering in order not to scare their female counterpart.

- (d). Greater attention should be paid to negative cultural and gender barriers to women development in politics.
- (e). There should be free education for girls aimed at eradication of mass literacy and development of leadership qualities in women.
- (f). Implementation of the 35% affirmative action and National Gender Policy at all levels of government and engaging all stakeholders such as Independent National Electoral Commission and Political Parties in the process for compliance.

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