



## Research Article

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## An Overview of Gender Politics in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This paper is an over view of the perception of women participation in politics its a modest attempt at examining the important crucial roles of women in politics, women have a crucial role to play in socio-political and economic transformation of Nigeria as a Nation is no longer in contention there is a need to increase the understanding of the important role of women in our nation building, so many scholars had engaged in research of this area which is geared towards assisting in the struggle for the emancipation of Nigerian women. The paper looks at women participation in politics and not to be discriminated against in politics and holds the motion that there should be equality of all genders, it also writes about Nigerian women in the precolonial era where different ethnic regions all have their way of women participation in governance and the post colonial era. In concluding the paper recommends that institutions should be empowered to create equal opportunity for all genders and government at all levels should create the needed environment for women to participate in politics and remove any form of discrimination against women.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Gender and Politics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before independence, females played prominent roles in governance in the different societies in Nigeria and held important positions among the majority of ethnic groups, particularly among the Hausa's, the Yoruba's and the Igbo's. Their participations before independence was through the institution of female chiefs, the authority of the first daughter and age grade associations. In the Hausa land for example, females had a very high status before the advent of colonial rule. This is because, the Hausa people belonged to a civilization characterized by male lineal succession in the ruling class and the females held high political offices.

For example, the 15<sup>th</sup> century History of Zaria witnessed the rule of queen Amina who succeeded her father and conquered all the towns around Zamfara and Nupe and dominated these regions for 34 years. She also introduced fortifications into the Hausa Cities during her time (Palmer, 1998: 9).

After the Fulani conquest of the Hausa land, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam started to expand, this changed the position of the females in the Hausa community. The institution of purdah spread from the nobles to the peasants in the rural areas. This reduced the participation of females in Hausa cities, during the colonial period. However, because southern Nigerian females (Yoruba and Edo) including Muslims did not

practice seclusions, they moved freely and controlled the market politics among the Yoruba and Edo. This politics was centered around the King (Oba) and his palace (Palmer, 192 :19).

In contrast, during the first Republic 1963-1966 very few females contested for election and none won a seat in the House of Representatives. Therefore there was no female in the federal cabinet. One female was appointed in 1964. In the 1961 regional elections 3 females were elected to the Eastern House of Assembly. There were no female ministers in the regional houses (Otoghagua, 2006:363). Subsequently, during the military regime of major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, females did not occupy any positions. During the time of it, General Yakubu Gowon, there were no females in the cabinets. By 1975, the third military coup led by general Murtala Mohammed occurred followed by the aborted coup which brought in colonel Olusegun Obasanjo into power. During this time, although the policy of appointing civilian ministers and commissioners at the federal and state levels respectively continued, the positions of females in decision making were greatly under-represented. During the second republic, 1979-1983 there was only one female senator out of 57 senate members and five female members out of 445 members of the federal House of Representative. 6 females were however, appointed into ministerial posts. Although females featured progressively in decision making structures during this period, they were nonetheless greatly under-presented in appointed positions relative to

male for instance, of the 50 members of the constitution Drafting Committee which produced the 1976 constitution none was a female (Afonja, 1996: 78).

However, it is important to stress at this juncture that representative is one of the principles of indirect democracy and as such cannot function in an under democratic society. The big question now is what is democracy? Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> American President (1908-1965), in his Gettysburg address delivered in 1864, at the peak of the American civil war, gave a definition of democracy closest to the Greek meaning of the concept, thus; "Democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people". By this very definition democracy implies that, the ultimate authority of government is vested in the common people, so that public policy is meant to conform to the will of the people.

The origin of democracy can be traced back to the ancient Greece. Greeks originally used the idea to mean the "poor" or "many". By the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, in the Greek city states, democracy was designed to allow all citizens to have a voice in decisions that would affect all. This right was exercised at mass meetings and approximated to what we call today direct democracy. The linkage between democratic governance and women political participation is a historical one and since one of the principles of democracy is equality it is only fair that it is extended to all groups and facets of political participation in decision making is legitimized by the basic democratic principles of equality and fundamental human right. Also, the extension of franchise to adults who do not otherwise suffer from specific legal disability is a philosophical justification of democracy.

Research problem is all about an academic perplexing questions posed or resolution. It is an intellectual task and not physical one. This phenomenon of women political marginalization is an imperative one therefore, it will not focus on indebt analysis of political, socio-economic and cultural roots of prejudices on the whole.

In various Nigerian tribal cultures, it is seen as a taboo and hence out of place for a man to relinquish the leadership of the house to his wife and if this is done the man is considered feeble. Such practice within the family unit seems to be expressed within the societal level where women's political ambitions are probably viewed with disguise and disrespect. Therefore women unlike their male counterparts are unlikely to receive positive reinforcement for participating in politics.

Also, female politicians seem out of place especially in a society that has strong religious restraint. In some other places like in the eastern part of Nigeria which is predominantly a Christian area. The commercial nature and outlook this part support western values and traditional in terms of beliefs, fashion style, ideology etc.

the women of eastern states are less restricted compared to the northern women who dues to religious and cultural restrictions barely dress as they like talk more of effective participation in politics.

## **WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA POLITICS**

The focus on the political empowerment of women by scholars in the last three decades, by governments and international and many other world countries. The upsurge in interest arose from a number of reasons which vary regionally. The reasons depend on the prevailing environment, geographical structure, demography, social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. Also, the nature and for expressing their interest vary. In West Africa for instance, attention on women affairs came into focus during the colonial and postcolonial eras when women discovered that not only were their traditional rights disappearing, but that they were being saddled with new economic burdens and responsibilities imposed by the new colonial government (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2004: 3). The British colonial administration also exposed them to untold hardship, increased poverty and thus turned them to tools in the hands of men who dominated the social, economic and political environments (Awe, 1992: 32).

## **NIGERIAN WOMEN IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA**

During this period the geographical entity known as Nigeria did not exist, only different ethnic groups with their different social and political structures, some were highly centralized communities like the Benin kingdom, Nupe kingdom, others were of the belief that women were powerless in pre-colonial Nigeria they had access to political participation through a complex and sophisticated network of relationships, rights and control of resources. A cursory look at the part about the level of women participation in government shows that the period was dynamic in that the roles of women changed or were adjusted to suit the prevailing political and economic situations. Thus, women's contribution to development remained dynamic throughout the pre-colonial period (Awe, 1992: 64).

In addition, the early period, when history was in the realms of myths and legends, women were present and the account showed that they played crucial and decisive roles in the politics of their societies. For instance, princess Inikpi of Igala-land and Moremi of Ife played the role of saviours of their societies at critical periods when these societies were besieged by invaders and were subjected to constant warfare. Warfare is politics in another form and they steeped most decisively into the breach and saved those societies by sacrificing their own lives (Uchenna, 1993: 78).

In Hausa history in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Amina of Zaria was reputed to be a formidable woman who led her army to the battle field and succeeded in

expanding her area of jurisdiction as far as the river Niger, the Kwarfa Empire and Kano in the north, the building of the walls of Zaria was also attributed to her. Long after Amina, was Zainab who ruled over Denika, Lokoja and Okene about the years 1800 to 1890. She fought many wars like Amina and traded with the Europeans. These rules were however rare and set no precedent for such type of female leadership, they appeared like an aberration particularly as they were succeeded by male rulers who had maintained control of throne thereafter (Awe, 1992: 141).

### **NIGERIAN WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

For about 60 years, the various societies that now make up Nigeria lost their independence and gained a new master, the gains such as the removal of some of our most obnoxious customs and traditions, it was essentially a regime that set out to exploit Nigeria for the benefit of Britain. In the process, both men and women were affected by women suffered more in terms of economic opportunities, allocation of resources and political offices. Deprivation in all these areas combined to make Nigerian women second class citizens. Colonialism was an agent of change, it was not only a system of government but also a way of life. Thus, colonial policies and colonial situation affected the lives of women tremendously. Women had to re-adjust themselves to new roles while playing their traditional roles. The colonial system generally opened new avenues to women and helped to release them from customs which had hitherto deterred them from participation in societal development. Nevertheless, the colonial system had its own prejudices against women (Nkwankwo, 2003: 46).

Moreover, apart from establish their own parties' women played vital role in the establishment and growth of the political parties which dominated Nigerian politics from 1951 till independence. Through the women's wings of the parties' women could mobilize grassroots women for their parties. However, only very few women were privileged to be admitted into upper echelon of the parties. Many of such women included the wives of the leaders of the parties. However, a few women were able to distinguish themselves. One of such women was Margaret Ekpo of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), she was a Vertican politician who won election on her own merit into the Eastern House of Assembly in 1953 and attended constitutional conference (Yusuf, 1985: 214).

### **WOMEN IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

Women had welcome independence with enthusiasm and hoped that together with the men they would shape the destiny of this nation. But right from the beginning of the new era here was one obstacle which impaired women's effective participation in politics. The women in northern Nigerian were disenfranchised until

1979 when under the new constitution that ushered in the second republic, all adult Nigerians were given the right to vote. In spite of this, the performance of women in politics was not too different. There was no female state governor, there was only three women representatives out of 1332 in the House of Assembly (Awe, 1992: 115).

In another development, the existence of the military regime for most of the period has also affected the quality and quantity of female participation in politics. By this very nature a military administration is a male dominated one. Since independence, Nigerian women with a heritage of constructive participation and contribution to societal development continued in the various ascribed and achieved roles to contribute to national development. Independent Nigeria subscribed to the concept of the equality of all and non-discrimination on any ground what so ever. However, developments since independence led to even more marginalization of women especially in politics. After independence mass political action by women dwindled. The acrimonious politics of the post-independence era, the bitter rivalries of the ethnic based and personality dominated political parties and the paternalistic nature of their organization was detrimental to women's participations. Above all, those developments split the women into opposing camps so that mass action became impossible (Umeha, 2003: 23).

Finally, the marginalization of women in politics was aggravated by the imposition of military rule and abolition of political activities. Though the military showed concern for involvement of women in politics but the number of women that occupied strategic positions was limited. The Gowon administration included women in the state cabinets and not in the federal cabinet, and that of traditional at least one woman in each state cabinet. There were two female deputy governors, more female director generals and two heads of service. However the contribution of women to the development of the political culture since independence have been minimal due to the fact that military rule discourage politics generally and women's politics in particular (Awe, 1992: 131).

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

Democracy is the form of government, in which the people of a country, state or local government area decided how they want to be governed. They also decide who should govern them. In doing these as well as in their day-to-day life the people have all the basic freedoms of speech, association, assembly, conscience etc. such institutions as an independent judiciary, free press competitive political parties and an active civil society also protect them (Adigwe and Francis, 1979: 24). What is today known as Nigeria is a product of British colonial rule. In 1914 the first colonial Governor-General of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard amalgamated the southern and northern protectorates to

form Nigeria. The British administered the country three regions, namely: Northern, Western and Eastern. Each region had a government, which was responsible for the affairs of that region. This arrangement started in 1946 under the Richards constitution which was the first federal constitution of Nigeria. The federal and regional governments were allocated state functions, thus putting every Nigerian under two governments. Each government had a legislature called the House of Assembly, an Executive made up of ministers and a Judiciary (Omoniyi, 2012: 82).

Initially, the Nigerian legislature was not representative. Between 1922 and 1951, Nigeria operated a limited franchise. Elections were limited to only two coastal cities of Lagos and Calabar. Lagos was a first-class town while Calabar attained the rank of a second-class town about 1922. The high commissioner for the protectorate of southern Nigeria, sir, Ralph Moor, pointed out two practical difficulties against representative government in southern Nigeria. The first, according to him, was that it was difficult to find suitable candidates to represent African and European residents. Secondly, he complained of poor communication (Gusim, 2012: 14).

Elective principle was introduced gradually and in stages. It was first introduced into town councils where council government experienced the least problem. In May 1919, elective representation was granted for the Lagos Town Council. The first election in Nigeria was held in the Lagos Town Council, on March 29, 1920. The Clifford constitution of 1922 extended elective representation to the legislative council. Naturally, democratic elections call for political parties that was exactly the situation in Lagos when Herbert Macaulay in 1922, formed the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) (Harriman, 2006: 91).

However, in Nigeria's 4<sup>th</sup> republic gender imbalance is a global phenomenon which hinders women from participating in democratic politics. In the global politics, there are very few women who were able to rise to the top political positions. Gender inequality has been the major problem facing women within the global political space. Nigeria has been a patriarchal society in which roles of women in the political process are restricted. The patriarchic system of traditional and socio-political system belittles the role of women in politics which called for male domination in Nigerian democratic politics. The political parochialism of Nigerian society discouraged women political participation and the adversarial imbalance has continued to rage their political flourish.

#### **RELIGION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS**

For many faiths is a source of strength, solace and learning. In many non-western society's faith is inseparably intertwined with other aspects of life,

including politics and development. Religion plays an important role in shaping and influencing societal values, thus putting religious and faith leaders in positions of considerable authority and power. Separating religion and development is therefore both unproductive and realistic. In particular, faith directly influences societal attitudes and behavior towards women. Through centuries, women have played a significant role in furthering their faith with many women becoming martyrs and thinkers. However, women's rule in society is still undermined by the abuse and violence exercised against them. Instead of being part of the problem, faith can and should be part of the solution.

Given that half of religious followers are women, faith leaders have a responsibility to take a proactive position on issues such as violence against women and girls, encouraging the education of women and girls and ensuring that their rights are protected. Sister Joan Chittister insists that a patriarchal system is a system that is helpful to neither men nor women. In order to change the situation of women, it is important to change people's perceptions.

Certain conservative religious sectors refuse to accept women's contributions to their own societies, outside of the household. In post-conflict societies, this becomes more apparent given the weakness of governance structures responding to the needs of the population and the lack of political participation of women in those structures.

Religion could play a transformative role in changing behaviors and stereotypes. Faith leaders could support efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls by denouncing and condemning harmful practices. And faith leaders can become a catalyst for change by openly acknowledging and appreciating the contribution of women to their societies intermesh of development and leadership. They can also be very influential in pressing for legal and policy reforms that address women's inequality at local, national, regional and international level. The ultimate goal is helping people to overcome barriers in order to enable them to speak with their own voice. Fragile state should support or adapt such methods which aim at overcoming structural barriers that keep women suppressed, given that there is a link between women, exclusion and poverty.

#### **WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING**

The underlying cause of gender inequality on all levels (political, social and cultural) is the exclusion of women from decision-making.

In states with weak governance structures, decision-making is often carried out in social institutions, which function according to certain rules. These can be either inclusive or exclusive to groups. Research has shown that social institutions are hindering equal participation of women: "Social institutions have gained

currency as a framework to explain what is stopping women and girls from achieving equal outcomes in areas such as education, employment, business, health and political participation". Strategic, targeted investment in opening up social institutions to women and girls will be crucial in order to meet development goals.

Progressive envisions targets that support women to have a greater voice and influence in decision-making, which the Gender and Development Network (GADN) has summarized as transformative targets. A gender goal needs to be action oriented and measurable. Political institutions, governments and governance structures have the power to help change the status of women and create an equal society in which everyone can participate in political and economic development. This is exemplified by a progression project I Somaliland, supporting NAGAAD, the Network of Women's Organization in Somaliland, through our development worker Edna Onyabgo.

I was conducting an action-oriented policy work shop with the three political parties of Somaliland that also saw the attendance of the Somaliland women's causes members, civil society organizations and youth. The outcome of this workshop was the expression of political will by the three political party leaders to further promote, protect and defend women's rights through the reservation of seats for women members and the support for gender mainstreaming in political party structures.

The situation in Yemen is an example of the problems that many developing countries, but especially fragile states, face. Progression in Yemen is calling for a gender-focused development framework based on maximum participation of women in planning, implementation and monitoring of development interventions. Key to improvement is giving women a voice and a choice. What is needed?

To build a just and participatory society where citizens have the regular opportunity to play an active role in making decisions that affect their lives and in holding their government accountable, there is a need for participation of marginalized and vulnerable groups in political processes. This may be gained through civil education and awareness, promoting effective governance through better advocacy campaigns and participation, developing vibrant civil societies through capacity building, education and networking, and effective local governance through citizens networks and involvement in policy and planning.

Finally, as a result of these facts, this research paper accepts the first hypothesis that: Religion accounts for poor public perception of women participation in politics in Bida local government area of Niger state. And also went further to assert that efforts to improve female education and religious participation in

improving public perception of women's participation goes beyond rhetoric's and should involve effective policies and programs with measurable results.

### **Gender Questions and Public Perception of Women's Participation in Politics**

In Nigeria, it is obvious that women have been reduced to second fiddle, hence there is the commonality of general belief system that the best place for women is in the kitchen. This trend has brought about tremendous misrepresentation of women right from the level of the family up to the society in general. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society. It is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women. Women are therefore discriminated upon from, in most case, acquiring formal education, mistreated and perpetually kept as house-help and as such poorly represented in politics; the average Nigerian woman is seen as an available object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, instrument of wide-range trafficking and a misfit in the society. Thus, the purported irrelevance associated with the status of women in society has merely reduced and average women to an inferior commodity (Stacey, 1993: 14).

Women constitute about half of the population of the Nigerian state and are known to play vital roles as mothers, producers, managers, community developers/organizers etc, their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal and informal structures and processes where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant. The Nigerian society has been patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society. It is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women. It is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females (Aina, 1998, 213).

The patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance, rights and legal adulthood, by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work. Tradition or culture and religion have dictated men and women relationship for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership. Patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance (Salaam, 2003: 114).

Also, this culture of patriarchy is a very strong determinant of male dominance over female and as well as a result men will sit back in the family to keep the family name and lineage growing while women will be married out. Thus, men are being trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic activities roles ascribed to them by culture which affect them later in life, thereby making them to lose self-confident/worth and have low self-esteem in their career in adult life, politics inclusive. Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to the bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, women are highly marginalized and are poorly represented in political activities (UNDP Report, 2005).

### **Economic Dimension of Gender Inequality and Discrimination in Nigeria**

By the virtue of the population of Nigeria the potential female labour force is 50% but the actual value is 31%. The proportion of women in the formal sector is very minimal. This is noticeable in the industries and the civil service; statistics indicated that in the federal civil service, which is the highest employer in the country, women are mostly found in the junior categories (Ajir, 2002: 11). Women are mainly involved in petty trading, selling wares in the market and street hawking in urban areas. According to statistics 78% of women are mostly engaged in the informal sector, which are farming and petty trading. Despite this, their contribution is not commensurate monetarily. The women's unpaid labour is twice that of men and its economic value is estimated to be up to 30% of the nation's Gross national product. Women self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria with a very high birth rate as well as the cultural roles associated to women-role of child bearing, child rearing and home making (Walby, 1992: 104).

Nigerian women, like their counterparts, around the world, face a lot of discriminations that limit their opportunities to develop their full potentials on the basis of equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices. In some establishments women are not allowed to get married or pregnant because it is through that it will reduce their productivity and of course profit. Some women particularly the young ones are only employed as long as they are ready to use their bodies to 1000 customers for their business organizations. This is what is called 'corporate prostitution' (Salaan, 2003: 17).

## **CONCLUSION**

The above discussions form the premise from the following suggestions and recommendations. Since

the research work focuses on true democracy and attempts to harness supports and demands that would benefit not the leaders alone but the entire populace and the poor masses in the street, it points towards a revitalization of feminist politics and as such there is need to strengthen the institutions and movements that represent women.

Women's movements have great potentials in assisting women in preparing to play a full and active part in politics. Women should form a strong union which will be a powerful and useful organization. These unions can be used to achieve women's aims faster, through united action. This union is also useful because it can be used to build strong solidarity among women through information, education and other simple activities.

Women union is an efficient and effective organization which is needed to assist, strengthen and mobilize women groups. Elite women should assist rural women by mobilizing them through mass women organizations. NGO's should also assist with training and technical assistance for women's groups. Equality in political participation and decision making is necessary because women are not homogeneous groups. But one thing common among women is that they are not fully represented in public offices and other public sphere of life. So, there is need to create conditions in which there will be sufficient women in decision making position. This is because full democratic governance cannot be recognized in our society without the full participation of women in politics and other spheres of activities. There should be commitment to equality reflected in the law and national policies.

Finally due to the findings of this research work the first and second hypothesis were accepted respectively. The first hypothesis states that: Religion accounts for poor public perception of women participation in politics in Bida local government area of Niger state. With our analysis and empirical evidences, we were able to prove that during this research work. The second hypothesis which states that: there is a significant relationship between gender and poor public perception area of Niger state was also accepted and proven to be true by the research paper. Furthermore, the research work also indicates that unless the women folks are included and allowed equal political participation as the men the full dividends of democracy will never be enjoyed by the country.

### **Recommendation**

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are curbing the perception of women participation in politics.

- Government should protect and promote the equal rights of women to engage in all political activities and freedom of association including membership in political parties and trade unions.

- Government should commit themselves to setting up the goals of gender balance in government bodies and committee as well as in public administrative entities and in the judiciary.
- They should support non-government organizations and research institutes that conduct studies on women political participation. They should also ensure that government founded organizations adopt non-discriminatory policies and practices to increase and raise the position of women in their organizations.
- Government should aim for gender balance in the list of national candidates nominated for election or appointed to United Nation bodies, specialized agencies and other autonomous organizations of the United Nations especially post at the senior level. Also, there is need to review the representation of women in elective bodies and consider adjustment and reforms were need be.
- Religious leaders should encourage the participation of women in political activities and through their teachings and preaching discourage the marginalization of women and their discrimination in politics and other spheres of the public sector.

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