THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This research is to ascertain the problems and prospects of Nigerian women in politics in Nigerian context, and to eliminate the discriminative practices against women in politics, and to ensure that discriminative measures are not taken against those that are aspiring for active politics. It is discovered that women, until recently, faced a lot of traditional female constraint, cultural and religious inhibitions in a male dominated society, which means that women were confined to domestic roles at home which prevented them from proving their abilities; and that political posts should not be on the basis of gender, the walls of discrimination against women in politics should be turned down. Also, gender equality should be practiced in this democratic dispensation.

Key words: problems, prospects, women, politics, discrimination

Introduction

Within the past three decades, the focus on women by scholars, government and international agencies has been erroneously manifested, most especially in Nigerian and in third world countries. The upsurge in interest arose from a number of reasons, which vary originally depending on the prevailing geographic, social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. Again, the nature and form of expressing the interest also vary. For instance, women studies in the developed countries are on a large scale and dimension than in the newly independent nations of Latin America, Asia and Africa in particular. Attention on women’s affair came into focus during the colonial era when women discovered that in the present era of democratization, it is both theoretically and politically important to access the change in gender politics accompanying the transition
away from military and civilian and multi-party forms of government. One may ask for example whether civilian regime grants greater political space to women than military regime. What space does transition programme provide for the realization of women’s political ambition? A great number of studies have emphatically examined the ways in which legislative process discriminate against women; national and local developments have advanced male interest over women’s interest enhanced male domination in the formal economy as well as in the home and excluded women from governance.

In accordance with all the evidences demonstrating the role of the state in the oppression of women’s effort aimed at improving the situation of women having also targeted the state for example by calling legal reforms; given the widely made observation that women play a key role in many of the region’s national liberation movements, this appraisal raises further question: were all the women and women organisations active in the independent struggle simply out of public life once independent was achieved or were they disenfranchised against women? Do women simply allow this to happen or are there more to the picture than it suggests?

Another concept that always comes to mind is the issue of women empowerment. Empowerment is seen to be the clarion call for the new era that is emerging; it involves giving women the ability to act without men breathing down their necks. All the se will put women issues at fore front of the nation’s agenda. It is time to end gender discrimination and other shameful practices against hopeless women in the society. The politics of exclusion has no place in the modern society. It is also dangerous for a given government not to give certain segment of the population a voice in the governance or in determining their own political affairs. It is more dangerous to keep population mute ignoring their input and making only cosmetic changes. The primary aim of this research work is then to find out how we can evolve a role or place for women in Nigerian politics and governance.

**Methodology**

This research explores primary and secondary sources of materials in sample selection for the problems and prospects of women in Nigerian politics and governance and data from journals, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, libraries and internet were made use of.

**Conceptual Clarification**
**Emancipation:** Liberation, setting free. It means or implies that one who was not free to do certain things can now do them.

**Liberation:** Release, discharge, unchain. Means that one had been in bondage under restriction and now is released.

**Marginalization:** Has to do with making something look low, minor or ignored in important issues, decisions, arrangements.

**Orientation:** The act or process of finding out actual facts and conditions and putting oneself in the right relation to them. Having to go through a process of familiarizing self with a system or a practices.

Olamitoke (2008) points out that until quite recently, men were regarded as the sole bread winners of the homes. Today, however, things are changing; more women are becoming more economically empowered as more go to school and take on more challenging roles in the society.

Prior to the emergence of President Olusegun Obasanjo as the first civilian ruler after 35 years of military rule, women were neglected to the background of Nigerian politics. Muazu (2005) established the fact that women have been neglected to the background even though they form major segment of the society and cannot be done away with. Women are the life wire of the family; when the family is good, the society is good, and women build (or destroy) with whatever input they make.

Moreover, Muazu (2005) further cites culture and religion as the two prominent factors hindering the progress of women in politics.

**Historical Overview of Women in Nigerian Government and Politics**

Ivor (2008) pointed that long before the advent of the colonial masters to Africa and Nigeria, many women had proven that a woman’s position was not in the back seat of governance. He revealed that there are well documented facts about the existence of strong pre-colonial and post-colonial women institutions. There are also accounts of women who had ruled their kingdoms successfully. For instance, in Ijesha, five out of thirty eight OBA (kings) were women. There had also been women sovereigns in northern Nigeria. Prominent among who was the famous Queen Amina of Katsina.

Moreover, the role of umuada (daughters of the land) in igbo land has continued to be extremely significant. Lastly, Queen Emotan of Bini Kingdom is another good example. Babangida era marked a watershed in the history of women struggle in Nigeria, when
Maryam Babangida institutionalized the office of the first lady in 1987. She equally took the issue of women to an unprecedented height.

However, some other women who had great impact in the pre-independent and post independent Nigerian government and politics include: Dr. (Mrs.) Okonjo-Iweala, Professor Dora Akunyili, Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili, Justice Aloma Mariam Mukhtar, Deziani Alison-Madueke, Oloye Olajumoke Akinjide, Professor (Mrs) Viola Onwuliri, Mrs Akon Eyakenyi and host of others.

Factors Militating Against Women in Their Quest for Political Position

According to Muazu (2008), rather than assign critical roles to women so as to give them opportunity to prove their mantle, the male biased society assigns them only to supportive roles. They are confined to cooking and other domestic chores. Scholars such as Olufemi Pittman Ver-Eccke, as well as activist groups such as Women’s International Network (WIN) and the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) contend that ideological reinforcement for structural inequality is provided by custom practices and norms.

Olamitoke (2008) points out that for long, Nigerian women (both in the urban and rural settings) were often marginalized and denied access to opportunities for educational, social and political fulfillment. They have been at the bottom run of the activities. In spite of their efforts there are still fewer women running for offices than men; a situation that is also observed in the United States and in other advanced democracies. An additional problem is that which relates to women’s abilities to exercise their citizenship rights. Before 1999 constitution, only men could pass on citizenship rights to their spouses.

Akande (2010) posits also that Nigerian women do not have full legal capacity in so far as they are unable to “independently enter into contracts to acquire and own properties or enter into legal transactions; sue or be sued”. The extent of women’s practical freedom also varies with class, level of education and type of marriage. Women may have more freedom than within monogamous marriage which gives one man the advantage.

Ivor (2008) concluded that marital and family responsibilities of women and the relative non supportive stance of their spouses constitute major obstacles to women’s effective participation in politics. Other factors are huge financial involvement, religion, godfatherism, violence, cultural facts and sexism.
Issues Affecting Women in Politics

According to Lewanika (2010), getting into and staying in position of power is difficult because of the roles traditionally expected of women. All over the world, women in leadership position are hampered by numerous obstacles, including pervasive and often subtle attitude and belief that women are unequal to men at home, at work and in government. Feminists argue that regardless of race, class or ethnicity, women are consistently defined as political outsiders whose participation in public life is conditional upon their material roles.

Many cultures view the raising of children as primarily the job of women with men not expected to have domestic roles in countries where such beliefs are deep-rooted, women who go against the grains are often required to perform double duty. Professional women for instance are obliged to manage the household and family while performing their professional tasks. This often leaves women at a disadvantage position. They are often related to as men if they are great achievers.

Chinonye (2006), a one time commissioner for women affairs identifies issues affecting women’s participation in politics. The Nigerian cultural background, religious beliefs, weaker low cultural background, gender biases, insensitivity have cumulatively pulled down the integrity of women, socially, politically, economically, mentally, spiritually, physically and otherwise.

Some of the factors militating against women in attaining great positions are more social cultural than legal, with the implications of psychological nature. Some of these implications include poverty, illiteracy, ignorance of their rights, violence and incondusive political environment (money politics, intimidation and violence). Cultural stereotypes, religious barriers and harmful traditional practices, to mention but a few.

Muazu (2008) is of the opinion that Nigerian women have been marginalized for a long time. This marginalization which persists till date creates a situation where women are hardly given any critical role to play. Women are few and far between all levels of the political process and decision making in general. Most often than not, women are regarded as objects that must imbibe the culture of silence. They are sometimes forced to remain silent when discussions are going on because their ideas are considered of little value. This is the situation that is obtained in virtually every aspect of our national life as regards women. Unfortunate as it is, men have come to believe with the Aristotelian ascertain that women are quite unworthy of participation in public affairs. Muazu (2008) further states that our kind of gender relation which is very traditional
allows for separate spheres for men and women. Consequently, men make decisions at all levels and women merely carry out instructions. Hardly do men invite women to village gatherings where important decisions are taken.

The effect of this at the higher level is that there are very few women in formal political structures such as state and local councils and in the political parties.

According to the Nigerian observer of Tuesday, November 11, 2003, the sociological data on women in Nigerian government and politics show a great handicap upon all levels of politics because the attitude of our men towards the women is not supportive at all.

Factors That Can Promote Greater Participation of Women in Nigerian Government and Politics

To enhance the participation of women in Nigerian politics, Ali Muazu (2008) advocated three steps to the followed:

First is the design of a framework that will ensure that a certain percentage of political and elective positions are reserved for women. To consolidate on this, it should be ensured that only women electorates should vote for the women aspirants who will eventually contest for such position. This should be continued for some time till next stage is reached.

Secondly, both men and women should vote for the female candidates of their choice. The final stage should be keenly contested; before this stage, women must have acquired the required political strength and capabilities to contest or compete favourably with their men counterparts. Measure must be made of the fact that on their own part, women must avoid the pretty jealousy among themselves. This will create a fertile flank for the women to promote their own causes and cruise uninterrupted to great political heights.

Olamitoke (2008) reported on the Sunday Tribune of 13 January 2008, which the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo advanced the goals of equality and development for all women by appointing more of them into strategic positions in his government. These women made great impacts and brought about the consciousness that women should be given more opportunity to prove themselves as more of them came into limelight. Moreso, the women have realized the gains of concerted effort in fighting battles and winning their rightful place in the society. With the support of non-governmental organizations and their agencies, women have begun in earnest to cut
across cultural biases in reaching out to men and women to address the urgent issues that directly affect them.

It was to the credit of Obasanjo’s government that women such as late Prof. Dora Akunyili, the former Director General of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC); Nnedi Usman, former Minister of State for Finance; Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili, former World Bank Vice President; Prof. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Minister of Finance and others sauntered into epicenter of governance and had the opportunity of making names. They acquitted so much so that Akunyili and all aforementioned “Amazons” are still relevant in today’s politics and governance in Nigeria.

The present administration of Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan also champions for women in Nigerian government and politics as he promised during 2011 campaign for presidency of our beloved nation, Nigeria. Some of them are as follows:

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<th>Judiciary</th>
<th>Ministers</th>
<th>President’s Special Advisers</th>
<th>Permanent Secretaries</th>
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<td>Jsc. Aloma Mariam Mukhtar</td>
<td>Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala - Finance</td>
<td>Sarah Jibril – Ethics &amp; Values</td>
<td>Nkechi Ejele – Ministry of Tourism, Culture &amp; National Orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jsc. Mary Ukaego Peter-Odili</td>
<td>Mrs. Diezani Alison-Madueke - Petroleum</td>
<td>Dr. Mariam Ahmadu Ali – Intergovernmental Affairs</td>
<td>Anastasia Mabi Daniel-Nwaobia – Ministry of Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jsc. Kudirat Motonomori</td>
<td>Mrs. Omobola Johnson – Communication Technology</td>
<td>Dr. Asma’u Abdulkadir – Gender Issues</td>
<td>Dr. Folasade Omolara Yemi-Esan – Ministry of Information</td>
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<td>Zainab Adamu Bulkachuwa</td>
<td>Hajia Zainab Maina – Women Affairs</td>
<td>Sarah Akuben Pane – Social Development</td>
<td>Winifred Ekanem Oyo-Ita – Ministry of Science &amp; Technology</td>
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<td>Mrs. Sarah Reng Ochekpe – Water</td>
<td>Dr. Precious Gbeneol – SSA on</td>
<td>Fatima B. Bamidele – Ministry of Niger</td>
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<td>Josephine Washima – SA on Job Creation</td>
<td>Hajiya Binta Bello – Economic Affairs, Office of the SGF</td>
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<td>Professor (Mrs.) Viola Onwuliri – State for Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Hajiya Baraka Salisu Sani – SSA on Schools Agriculture Programme</td>
<td>Dr. Jamila Shu’ara – Ministry of Petroleum Resources</td>
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<td>Laurentia Laraba Mallam – Environment</td>
<td>Rabi Shuaibu Jimeta – Ministry of Youth Development</td>
<td>Habiba Muda Lawal - Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation – Bauchi State</td>
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<td>Hajiya Asabe Asmau Ahmed – State for Agriculture &amp; Rural Development</td>
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<td>Ibukun Odusote – Political Affairs, Office of the SGF</td>
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<td>Dr. Amina Mohammed Bello Shamaki – Economic Affairs, Office of the SGF.</td>
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It is, however, necessary to note here that this is just to mention a few, as it is not a comprehensive list of all the women in Nigerian government and politics.
Example of Successful Women

According to Omonike (2008), a list of women have distinguished themselves in competitive and non-competitive positions and even in the midst of their male counterparts. Some of the women include the first female governor in Nigeria (acting capacity) Dr. (Mrs.) Virgy Etiaba of Anambra State; Dr. (Mrs.) Ndidi Okereke-Onyiuke, former president of the Nigerian Stock Exchange, the first woman ever to revitalize the exchange and made it internationally accepted; late Prof. (Mrs) Dora Akunyili, former Director General of NAFDAC; Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, supervisory Minister of the economy, and a host of others.

Discriminatory Customs and Laws

The customary practices of many contemporary societies are biased by subjugating women to men and undermining their self esteem. The overall impact of gender bias, cultural norms and practices has entrenched a feeling of inferiority in women and placed them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterparts in the socio-political scene even in urban centres.

These socially constructed norms and stereotype roles make women overplay their “feminity” by accepting that they are “weaker sexes” overemphasizing the dainty nature of their sex and regarding exceptional achievement as masculine. For example, most customs often prefer sending the male child to school over the female who is expected to nurture siblings and to be married off. This marginally increases the illiteracy of women and stiffens their competition with their male counterparts in politics.

Quotas and Proportional Representation

To Damilola, T. A. in African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, Vol. 4(2), these are generally seen as a positive action of laws allocating quotas for women to assist in the promotion for gender balance in public life. Quotas are considered as a legitimate means of securing this end. In many countries, the exclusion of women in politics is as a result of many reasons – financial, cultural, traditional and political.

Asserting this fact and the reasons that have made it so implies that quotas should not be seen as discrimination towards women and cannot be branded unconstitutional as most quotas are formulated under neutral basis. The law (Nigeria) provides for a maximum of 60% and a minimum of 30% representation for either sex, which was
implemented as a result of the Beijing Conference. The conference agreed that 30% of public seat and positions should be reserved for women. Nigeria records an increase of 78% progress in women’s election into public offices spanning from 1999 – 2007.

In the fourth republic which started on May 29, 1999, the Nigerian political terrain had witnessed an increase in the number of women political appointees as few women have emerged as chairpersons of local government councils. Lagos State produced a female Deputy Governor.

Conclusion

Women participation in Nigerian politics is an issue which until recently faced a lot of traditional female constraint: cultural and religious inhibitions in a male dominated society. Women were confined to domestic roles at home which prevented them from proving their abilities. Moreso, petty jealousy among women folks has been discovered to be one of the reasons women have not got a formidable front.

Furthermore, the fourth republic of both present and the past governments enhanced the goal of equality and development of women in consonance with the main concern of women conference held in Beijing, China in 1995. The administrations, therefore, appointed more women than before in the mainstream politics. These appointments paid off as many of them distinguished themselves and found favour in the heart of men. The present administration of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan preached 30% affirmative action on women in the political arena of the country. The findings reveal that Nigerians generally prefer male politicians to female politicians. This undue preference given to the male folks would most times prevent capable women from being elected into political positions to contribute their own quota.

Also, given the same opportunity with the male, the women could do well or even surpass the achievements set down by them. However, despite the general opinion that negates the participation of women in active politics, an appreciable number of the people agree that women should participate in active politics.

Recommendations

Arising from the conclusion, the recommendations are advanced measures to ameliorate the problems and prospects of women in Nigerian.

- Supporting a politician coming out for political posts should not be on the
basis of gender.

- The walls of discrimination against women in politics should be turned down. It is only by doing that they would be able to prove their capacity and strength. The age long opinion that women’s roles are naturally domesticated should be discarded. Nigerians should take cue from other countries of the world that women have excelled in politics.

- Most importantly, women should support their fellow women in politics; it is only when they are united that they fight their justified cause. They cannot expect the men to wade into their aspirations. In fact, a proverb says that it is the person who has a pin in his bag that goes to who will remove it for him. The women must first show sign of seriousness before the men will be convinced and give them the needed support.

- Women should believe in themselves so as to excel in other spheres. They can equally bring these facts into politics; in preparation for these, women should be encouraged to go to school. The more educated women are, the more they are aware of their rights and the better they perform in whatever task they are given.

- Gender equality should be practiced in the democratic governance of the nation as it is obtainable all over the world where democracy is practiced.

References


