

## Reflections on the Challenges Facing Women in Contemporary Nigeria Politics

Funmilayo I. Agbaje, Ph.D

Research Fellow Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Author: Funmilayo I. Agbaje, Ph.D Research Fellow Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

Nigerian women have been playing crucial role in political life of the country and this has contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of the nation. Some of their indispensable roles are dated back to pre-colonial times. However, the emergence of westernisation in Africa did not exempt the Nigerian people. After the colonisation of many Nigerian kingdoms, there was a change in the course of events. Due to the influence of colonialism on the traditional political administration, the relevance attached to the existing political institutions among women started to lose recognition. Scholars have written extensively on this but the gaps remains in the area of persisting challenges which, most often are classified as traditional to Nigerian people, militating against women in politics. This study reinforced some of these pressing challenges for future referencing. The research is qualitative and data collected are content analysed.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Challenges, Women, Politics, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

It was discovered that women have always been at the center of political processes across different stages of national development. Historical evidences are available to prove that the Nigerian women have for long been playing crucial role in political life of the country, and this has contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of the nation (Kalu et al, 2018). However, in the course of event from colonial period till date, women have been relegated to the background in issues of the overall development especially in the developing nations like Nigeria. In recent time, the country representative of United Nation Women in Nigeria, Ms Comfort Lamptey, has said Nigeria is one of the countries with lowest representation of women in politics across Africa (Yesufu, 2018).

Noteworthy is that women political agents could be located in their cultural and socio-political roles as well as their contributions to the overall well-being of the society. Nigeria women though are homogenous in biological make-up, the culture, tradition and values are either slightly or out rightly different. For example, while women in Northern Nigeria are likely to be secluded in the home, women in Southern Nigeria, participate more in public life. There were discovered challenges facing Nigerian women in their bid for

active political participation. Some of the challenges had existed before the advent of colonialism while some occurred after the colonisation. For example, during pre-colonial period, a woman who had just lost her husband, under the tradition, could be confined for several months in a state of widowhood. During this period, her movement would be restricted, she could not change her clothes, and several other taboos would be placed on her irrespective of how important she might have been before the death of her husband.

In the same manner, menstruating woman could not participate in any political religious rites in the society because she might be traditionally considered “unclean” for that period. In addition, evidence from many ethnic groups in Nigeria points to the challenges of pregnancy and childbirth as restrictions on women, depriving them of opportunities of participating fully in their community lives.

Another long-standing challenge faced by pre-colonial women in Nigeria politics emanated from the crux of discrimination between a male and female child. The prominence placed on a male child over a female child even before birth takes away the joy of motherhood. Noteworthy is the fact that many pre-colonial communities in Nigeria on a social dynamics whereby the religious

aspects were intertwined with the political aspects. It is not uncommon, therefore, for a monarch to be the statutory head as well as spiritual head. In the light of this, women might be involved in the running of community affairs but might be restricted from outdoor activities due to some crucial spiritual responsibilities. For that reason, if such a woman was involved in the spiritual aspects of her community, she might be deprived the privilege of over-seeing the affairs of her family. Such spiritual curfew known as *Imolè* (a deity) and purdah system existed among the traditional Hausa and Yoruba women. For example, women were forbidden from watching *Oriòam* among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria... *Oriòsocio-religious* activities were and are still exclusive men affair. In order to prevent women from having its knowledge, they were traditionally not allowed to see or get involved in it so as not to see its nakedness.

A defiant woman risked sanction, hence this served as a limitation to the status of women in the traditional society. The popular myth surrounding a woman who – out of curiosity – peeped at *Oriò* initiates is that she would die soon afterwards. It is thus evident that the cultural and gender problems Nigeria women face in politics dated back to pre-colonial times, some other crucial challenges, however, surfaced with the introduction of western culture.

The emergence of westernisation in Africa did not exempt the Nigerian people. After the colonisation of many Nigerian kingdoms, there was a change in the course of events. Due to the influence of colonialism on the traditional political administration, the relevance attached to the existing political institutions among women started to lose recognition. There were struggles about power and influence brought by the colonial officials among the people and this caused a lot of disparities.

The abolition of the dual-sex roles played by pre-colonial Nigeria women was paramount at this period. Women were side-tracked in the new course of events. The colonial parliament gave recognition to women but they were very few in number. Due to this limitation, the possibility of things getting worse before the final intervention of women became critical.

The positive human factors and values which defined womanhood in pre-colonial times were corrupted over time by the colonial interruption of the peoples' socio-cultural existence leading to the marginalisation of women in political processes. Unfortunately, many of the prejudices have been

maintained after de-colonisation, resulting in the discrimination of women in modern Nigerian political institutions. The role and position of the pre-colonial Nigerian women did not conform to the Victorian concept of women, hence the implementation of policies seated in this myopic perception of women led to the erosion of women's position in the society, hence depriving women their hitherto responsibilities as policy makers.

Presently, Women appeared to have lost the myth and sacredness that surrounded their being and social existence in pre-colonial Nigeria. The reason given for this was because apart from being marginalised socially, economically and politically, they had increasingly become victims of male violence. The women have transformed from being active participants in pre-colonial politics to being passive observers of political processes in the post-colonial politics. Despite the fact that some of the traditional statuses of women in traditional politics are still upheld and relevant but for the influence wielded on them by westernisation which brought with it some challenges highlighted in this paper.

### Related Scholarly Works

This paper is of critical importance because it draws together issues on the challenges of women's participation in politics in Nigeria. It distils from that corpus, the key issues that needed to be addressed to maximise the potential of women. It focuses attention on critical but little known issues, which paint a clear picture about the seriousness and importance of women's situation in political participation in their society.

In the political sphere, scholars (Agatha, 2006: 4) (McFadden, 1999) lament the current political structure in most parts of Africa which tends to marginalise the position of women in decision making in various corners of the continent, despite all the strategic roles played by women in the old Africa. The British administrators were working for the government in which there were no women at any level and, therefore, they did not expect or wish to find women involved in Nigeria. Even in areas where there had been powerful female chiefs, women generally were excluded from having any say in the administration (Mba, 1982). Scholars like (Ardener, 1997), (Irukwu, 1994) and (Long more, 1959) already emphasise the limitations wielded on women due to the introduction of western education and religions. They identify inequality in gender as the primary reason responsible for the gradual erosion of

women's power Nigeria politics. (Denzer, 1998) and (Cornwall, 2005). Similarly, Fadipe (1970) agrees that the current erosion of women's political power was caused by the intrusion of foreign systems with gender orientation and new paradigms of power and of organisation. Such orientation as emphasising on sexuality and individualism, conflicts with the status of men. It was the women's marginalisation, which started with colonisation that eventually led to the various challenges that arose thereafter. In the course of time, some challenges have surfaced in the African nations with adverse effects on women. Such is the dilemma highlighted (Long more, 1959) that the white man's education, without the white man's environment working on the Africans, must have results different from those in a white community. The introduction of western education and religions (Islam, Christianity and several others) equally brought with them some lapses that serve as canker worms devouring the peaceful values of Africans, which unfortunately, have subjected women to muteness in the contemporary African societies. Ardener (1977) asserts this limitation on women by stating that women who persist in talking when the society does not wish to listen are regarded as a treat to its structure.

This is the same reason given (Irukwu, 1994) as responsible for the gradual erosion of women's power in traditional African societies. Mcfadden (1997) mentions poverty as another major challenge before the women. She believes poverty has become a very effective silencing mechanism. This paper disagrees with the opinion that perception of women as inferior is traditional to African continent (Ardener, 1977) and thus agrees with her on the opinion that it is important to erase the popular perception about women as inferior.

### **Contributions to Knowledge and Research Methodology**

The women and their concerns with regard to local and national politics have been relegated to the side-lines. Nonetheless, women's multiple contributions in Nigeria politics are in fact, highly important, sometimes decisive. Ascertaining what framework should be in place to increase or maximise the contributions of women in politics require substantial research to be conducted on the area. In addition, the gendered character of existing challenges militating against women's progress in politics is central to a clear comprehension of the context and path to inclusivity. Needless say that politics provides a

critical opportunity to reshape the security and broader socio-economic landscape of a nation state. Women, however, have been consistently marginalised in their political efforts. The low number of women at the decision making levels demonstrates a gap between the aspirations of many global and regional commitments, and the reality women face at the local and national levels. In the present, President Mohammadu's Buhari Ministerial cabinet have only six out of 36 ministerial positions awarded throughout the nation. No woman has attained the positions of president, vice-president or even governors and when they are made deputy governors, they are treated like spare-tyres. In essence, this study was undertaken to serve the purpose of documentation on the status of Nigerian women in politics and strengthened awareness on the challenges before the women in the process. In order to address these knowledge gaps, this qualitative research approached the discussion from holistic perspective by providing justification for women's involvement in politics and its effectiveness. Therefore, the methods were adjudged accurate and robust in terms of confidence and means of verification to the degree that the nature of challenges faced by women in Nigeria in their bid for political participation has been established on the basis of responses from the various interviewees, textbooks, journal articles, internet and newspapers.

The challenges of gendered politicking and the pattern of continuity and change in Nigeria across the ages were established on the bases of accepted assessment model. The researcher interviewed women who have been involved in politics and political processes including both old and young and explored both the obstacles the women have faced and the importance of their contributions to national development. Analysis was founded on data obtained from these sources pertaining to issues concerning women and politics in Nigeria.

### **Women and Challenges of Politics**

To start with, despite the fact that treating all people equally is still a basic ethics imperative in the Nigeria of present times, the problems, however, lied in the implementation of this equality in social matters due to the conflict created by social classification which elevated masculinity over femininity. Based on Sen's (1999:44) concept of human development, which he describes as freedom, assigning the value is not identical to being the same kind. This is the critical difference between equality

and sameness. This was the principal factor responsible for the challenges that hinder the possibilities of women to flourish and better achieve in the area of politics. In 1957 during the pre-independence era of Nigeria, a couple of women political activists such as, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Janet Mokelu and Ms. Young were members of the Eastern House of Assembly. The late Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, though not a full-fledged politician, was a very strong force to reckon with in the politics of the Western Region. And Hajia Gambo Sawaba waged a fierce battle for the political and cultural emancipation of women in the North. One can say that women have always played viable political roles in Nigeria in spite of all the limitations and encumbrances. Although, few women in present day Nigeria politics are respected for their multi-tasking roles in their political jurisdiction, they are not properly represented in terms of making crucial policies especially those that affect women in general... It is implied that even when women leaders and organisations are active in civil society forums, these mechanisms did not necessarily find their way into the formal peace processes. Today, women are participating more actively in political issues than ever before as a result of political re-awakening and awareness. More often than not, they are besieged with challenges.

### Insufficient Political Strength and Vision

The first identified challenge was the lack of sufficient political strength and political vision. Women of Nigeria suffer from political illiteracy. They lacked an ideological framework that could give teeth to a strong position adopted by collective women. Policy making was considered a political activity and therefore required political strategy for engagement. Women have always been kept secluded from the political arena and sphere of decision-making; thus, in many situations they were unable to participate. Without a political platform, therefore, women are constantly on the margins of action and often lack the confidence in participating in the political processes. The women also noted that the under-representation of women in governance of Nigeria might serve as a retard to any democratic decision making process in the society. The stereotyped portrayals of women, consequently, deny the significance of women's contributions to politics (Agatha, 2006). Moreover, the voice of women in the present dispensation is very thin. There are still very few women representatives in the public sector

and the few who managed to rise to a remarkable position in government are denied adequate participation in policy making. In addition, lack of experience, exposure and skills in negotiation, advocacy and lobbying techniques are also evident. Consequently, Nigeria now witness outrageous crisis of political, social and religious nature. Perhaps, the involvement of women in some of the official and local peace deliberations might douse tensions and thus increase the level of harmony in the society. Also, because the work of women is often relatively unrecognised, it is discovered that the support from outside sources, including resources and training, have been lacking.

This lack of attention led to the failure in understanding the nature and importance of promoting women participation in the municipal. Another discovered challenge is the lack of visibility. Women's political activities are usually confined to the periphery of official space. In addition, even if women contributed to the promotion of political parties, they are not often invited to participate in formal activities.

Nevertheless, it is discovered that there was no time in the history of Nigeria where women were totally excluded from running the affairs of the society. What is evident, however, is that there is a decline in their involvement in the process due to the influence of colonialism. Another discovered challenge was the lack of sustainability in political participation. Women were usually represented in policy making but in few numbers.

More often than none, their presentation does not necessarily mean meaningful and recognised participation that has an impact on substantial inputs in policy agreement. In addition, once a campaign process is over, women often would return to more traditional activities, losing their gains and public presence. These losses made it very difficult for women to return to the public stage during subsequent political activities.

### Limited Resources

Furthermore, lack of resources (material and financial) is discovered as a challenge to active political participation by Nigerian women. Most of the time women's groups lack the financial means to back up their actions. In some instances, they are unable to get across to the media network to enhance their political campaign because they do not have a budget for multi-dimensional activities.

Moreover, they are not part of main fund raising channels and networks. They work on a voluntary basis at the grassroots levels, pooling their own resources together to get necessary resources needed for political emergence.

According to scholars, (Mcfadden, 2005), poverty has become an effective silencing mechanism. Therefore, in the contemporary Nigeria society where the amount of wealth dictates the amount of respect given, women might not be able to participate fully in decision making due to the level of poverty among them. Women are seen in objective conditions of poverty, or low wealth status.

### Patriarchy

Moreover, the patriarchal nature of many Nigeria societies, built on male domination which surfaced with the colonisation of the people, implied that women must be under the control of men. This form of subjugation of women to men, particularly in decision-making, had hindered women's involvement in politics. Obviously, some men take advantage of the status-quo to determine what their wives become in the society, politics inclusive. This is exactly what Adewoye (1973) describes as 'social milieu'. That is, the imposition of foreign legal system on the indigenous legal system. This is also illustrated in the blueprints of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination which stated at its introduction that the "traditional" conception of the role of women in society is one of domestic drudges, wives and mothers.

This only reinforces erroneous perceptions of women's role in society. Contrary to the original traditional opinion of many Nigerian women as effective decision makers, the women in the country now battle the challenges posed by the intrusion of foreign culture (Awe, 1992). Furthermore, losses of respect for the status of womanhood have been pronounced. The present dispensation now witnessed female related vices like armed robbery, hired killing, kidnapping, terrorism smuggling, and street fighting among others. Unlike in the past, women now compete in every sense of the word with men instead of the complementary lifestyle that had hitherto existed in the community.

The large population of contemporary Nigeria women whose dignity had suffered set back are often victims of violence both at home and outside the home, from the hands of men and

even from their fellow women. Such abuse as domestic violence, sexual assault, public disgrace, body-shaming, structural violence (especially in the workplace) and so many other unspeakable attitudes are being reportedly dispelled on women in Nigeria. The rationality of these negative developments was questionable because how could a woman make How can a woman give what she does not have?

### Lack of Cooperation

Furthermore, there are evidences of lack of cooperation among women themselves. This failure to stick together, have more or less results in women pulling down their fellow women rather than support them, which have, in various ways, resulted in women's lack of confidence in themselves. The gaps, which exist between educated and illiterate women, remain so wide that the former consider the latter as inferior, hence producing distinct instead of complementary efforts at decision-making in the society. The literate women perceived the illiterates as barbaric, while the illiterates view the literates' efforts at politicking as frivolous and over-ambitious.

In addition, some challenges arose from the religious sphere. Some religious leaders considered women who are involved in politics or public affairs as loose or wayward. As explained earlier, women's involvement in politics during the pre-colonial time often drew inspiration and support from religious sources and organisations; hence the society could be defined as religious.

As earlier mentioned also, many Nigerian societies were structured in an interdependent manner such that an aspect of their lives could not survive without the others. Little attention however, has been paid to these female actors and the political dimension of women's work for overall development of the nation. This is due, in large part, to the relative invisibility of their efforts. As a fundamental point of reference, across western religious traditions in Nigeria women are marginalised in religious spaces and rarely hold leadership positions, meaning that they do not receive the recognition that their male counterparts had. Since it is not a usual practice to make a woman leader in most religion, encouraging women religious individuals to perform the role of decision-makers will be an almost impossible task.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In essence, most of the characteristics of womanhood in the traditional African settings

still thrive within the contemporary but for some of the aforementioned changes, posing as challenges (both present and future) for the women,. In sum, some of the challenges identified by Nigerian women concerning their involvement in political processes in the society include poverty, gender discrimination, structural oppression, religious bigotry and violations of their rights as human. These challenges contested against the wider range of challenges facing women in some other parts of African nations where women were reputed as slaves, subjected to child labour and early marriage, faced poor reproductive health, human trafficking and even suffering from the menace of Human Immune Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV/AIDS). Noteworthy is that these dilemma were fathered by the concept of gender inequality introduced by the colonialists. This study supportively affirms the notion of scholars (Denzer, 1998) and (Fadipe, 1970) that colonisation created hierarchical as opposed to complementary cooperation between women and men. The notion that women were inferior to men in all ramifications gave birth to the mentioned challenges which adversely affected women's contribution to politics. As a result, women must be prepared to be subjected to slander and all kinds of threats, including death threats, if they wished to engage actively in present political fete in Nigeria. A woman's reputation is one of her most valuable assets; hence disparagement is a powerful tool to keep women quiet. Therefore by getting involved at a political level, a woman may be looked upon as dirty or as a prostitute and risks being ostracized by both her family and community.

While it might be impossible to bring back the kinship spirit, there could be a way of marrying tradition to westernisation in order to cater for the domestic, social and political need of the contemporary Nigeria women and for them to be effectively involved in political processes in their various communities. Such scheme if properly implemented should be free of gender or political bias. This paper, therefore, sought to reconcile the old and the new political institutions among Nigeria women in order to foster the harmony of the entire nation, Politics had been adjudged as a continuous performance of Nigeria women but for the restrictions mentioned above. Apparently, contemporary Nigeria female politicians now rest on masculine foundations for their historical reference and constructions. Consequently, existing salient challenges facing women in politics could

escalate to other mentioned and unmentioned problems facing women in the other African societies if not properly addressed.

This could lead to yet unknown forms of challenges in the future. Documenting the challenges women face in politics across the ages therefore, will contest the idea (Afshar, 2003) that historical construction helps to explain the exclusion of women from political processes. This justified this paper's aim at periodising the challenges faced by women in politics in order to reflect the changing roles of women in over the ages. The traditional roles of women of study transcended the domestic arena as it had been discovered that they were equally involved in the socio-political and religious platforms in the society, though not without some notable challenges, which were often consensual. The same was noted by scholars (Mugunya, 2009) and (Wood etal, 2000) who added that the implementation of outcomes of discussions embarked upon in this paper has a bearing on the long-time viability of solutions to issues about the involvement of women in politics. Undoubtedly, Nigeria women possess potentials to contribute meaningfully to the development of the country.

The government, therefore, should work towards achieving gender equality in democratic governance by increasing and encouraging women participation in politics. Finally, the inclusion of women in democratic and governance process is a key factor or ingredient in reducing poverty and creating fair, safe and secured nation.

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