



## **The Role of Women in Nigerian Politics: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues for an Enhanced Political Participation in the Fourth Republic**

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**Abstract.** This paper is an exploration of the role of women in the Nigerian politics. The inferiority complex of women regarding active political participation and representation constitute the bane of this study. However, it could be argued it was argued that the inferiority nature of women generally was a function of chauvinistic nature of men to perpetuate their domination on them in all ramifications. This gender bias in Nigeria's political system is often traced to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria. Thus, the western cultural notion of colonialism woven around male superiority reflected in their relations with Nigerians. The authors adopted both conceptual and theoretical analysis of issues of political participation and representation to ascertain how women are generally dominated by men in the scheme of things. The most critical element of this discourse is however that women are, and have been sidelined in the political scheme of things in Nigeria and this state of affairs spells a dangerous omen for the Nigerian system which is now literally dominated and controlled by men. In the past, experience has shown, of course as demonstrated in the study, that women's political roles have contributed immensely in the shaping of the Nigerian politics not only in democratic governance; but also during the pre-colonial era. So, it will be unthinkable to wish away the critical efforts of women in the making of Nigerian state while arrogating political powers to the male folk. It is also unhealthy to ascribe political powers strictly to men in this era of globalization where the role of women in global politics is considered to be relevant in overall world peace, tranquility and mutual co-existence. In line with the above discovery, the authors recommend that there should be equality in the sharing of political offices on the basis of quota system between competing candidates. This will enable both men and women have equal chances of control in such public offices.

**Keywords:** Women; Political participation; Political Representation; Nigerian Politics; Gender Inequality

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## **Introduction**

The growing debate by scholars and intelligentsia about the role of women in politics globally is an issue that has generated serious controversies than resolving the perceived gender inequalities in terms of participation in politics of nation states, be they advanced or developing. Several arguments have cropped up about the place of women in politics over the years. Thus while the conservative theorists (Arowolo 2010) argue that the actual role of women and in fact, female folks generally ends in the kitchen, the liberalists (Yetunde, 2010; Agbalajobi, 2010 and Erunke, 2009), have variously opined that women's political process as those of their male counterparts, and hence, such responsibilities cannot be washed away in the societal scheme of things. Opinions are however divided on whether the role of women is predominantly in the home fronts or whether women can also engage meaningfully in other socio-economic and political activities like their male counterparts, thereby contributing their own quota in the sequence and development of the polity. This and several arguments about the place of women in global vis-à-vis Nigerian politics have constituted a huge problematique in gender discourses as it patterns to the low level of women involvement in politics at whatever level of analysis. This trend of high level inequality on the potential role of women in shaping the direction of politics in the Nigerian society from time immemorial constitutes a broader gender question of this research paper which the authors intend to address.

This gender bias in Nigeria's political system is often traced to the onset of colonialism in Nigeria. Thus the western cultural notion of colonialism woven around male superiority reflected in their relations with Nigerians. Agbalajobi (2010) and Yetunde (2010) have agreed on the subjugation of women by colonialists when they wrote that the 1922 Sir Hugh Clifford Constitution which was widely believed to have introduced the first elective principle in the pre-colonial Nigerian society disenfranchised women and limited the participation of adult male to the wealthy. This is not to say that, there was no existing element of gender inequality

in traditional state and stateless societies in Nigeria but the colonial order made gender discrimination more pronounced (Agbalajobi,2010). For example, in traditional Yoruba states, women held high political offices like the Iyalode, Iyaloja, Iyalaje and even the office of the Oba, and their political impacts in such societies were variously felt. But at the establishment of the colonial order, women became estranged to these rights politically, but could however still perform their traditional roles as in case of Yoruba Kingdom earlier mentioned.

Generally speaking, and from contemporary perspectives in Nigeria, it would appear that women had never been influential in the realm of Nigerian politics. In the past, and even in the present democratic dispensation, there has been and there is still some fair share of recognition of the increasing role of women in the Nigerian society, be they social, economic or political. It is interesting to note that the place of women in politics during the pre-colonial period is sufficiently familiar. Thus, the exploits of legendary women like Queen Amina of Zazau in Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Princess Moremi of Ife, Princess Inikpi of Igala and Emotan of Benin readily comes to mind. During the colonial period, women asserted and expressed themselves politically. Some women who make political marks at that period included Mrs Margaret Ekpo of the famous Aba women riots of 1929, Madam Tinubu of Lagos and Egba land; Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union of 1948 and Hajia Swaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) to mention but a few. It is however worthy of mention here that though women enjoyed higher level of authority in Southern Nigeria, men have always been dominant in the political structure with women playing sedentary roles as inferior and subordinate partners (Erunke, 2009). Thus, the question of equality of representation and clear cut democratization of the Nigerian democratic space to accommodate women in line with the dictates of the 35% Affirmative Action specification is of growing concern to this paper. Even when women are deeply involved in the highest level of decision-making in Nigeria, their involvement is

superficial, grossly inadequate and lacks the moral justification for effective representation.

### **Conceptual Issues**

For the purpose of clarity, the concepts of **politics**, **political participation** and **power** will be used interchangeably in the discourse.

The concept of politics have been given various interpretations and conceptualizations with each of these having common linkages to one thing, which is control of power and resources, domination of a certain group by others, assertion of some level of political authority and subversion of both individual and group interests to serve personal aggrandizement (Erunke, 2012; Omodia, 2008) by the wielders of such powers. Citing the works of Professor Laswell, subverting group or individual interests as contended by Erunke (2012); Omodia (2008) reinforces itself in the all important Laswellian dictum of “who gets what, when and how”. Okuosa (1996) quoting Etzioni (1970) opined that politics stands for the competition (and in most cases such competitions could be fierce and unhealthy) for the control of the public policy-making process within the organized framework of government. Okuosa (1996), further argued that in a democratic society, power acquisition and control is achieved privately or collectively, irrespective of gender through a process of active participation and representation, which then means that the question of gender discrimination is ruled out in terms of contestation or even nomination of persons or groups into political offices. The aforementioned presupposes that politics therefore is not the exclusive preserves of the male folk and, so, the inordinate dominant of the epicenter of political platforms by the male folk is perceivably unacceptable and runs contrary to democratic dictates as well as specifications of the thesis of Affirmative action. In any case, however, it can be said that in modern democracies, there cannot be political power without political participation and adequate group representation. And by extension, political participation connotes a variety of ways in which people try to (and of course are

supposed to) exercise influence over the political process, the kind of political process which has the potential of attracting best brains cutting across all gender, whether male or female. This level of participation also means that there should be a level of playing field for accommodation of diverse interests and opinions and, the general rule and perception of exclusivity of men as having natural rights over political powers to the detriment of women should be thrown to the dogs. Thus when this is the case, for sure, there will be the likelihood of equity in the level of participation and representation of the opposite sex in the scheme of things, thereby clearly and conspicuously integrating diverse human potentials in the political arrangement in the society.

However, Maclosky (1968) and Lawson and Wasburnn (1969) have seen politics very differently. To Maclosky (1968) participation in politics is voluntary and the kind of activities involved allow members of society to share-in direct and indirect selection of rulers in the formation of public policies. This definition however falls short of acceptable democratic practices. Voluntary power play in society means that there will be room for laxity and certain groups of people in such societies will be excluded in the political arrangement, thereby disenfranchising vast majority of persons or groups of voting age. And besides, the concept of 'selection' as used by Maclosky (1968) presupposes a rather dangerous signal to any democratic society whose thrust generally is the general principle of collective representation, selection at whatever level of analysis is lopsided, devoid of basic indices of collective bargaining and democratic value preferences. This kind of scenario is likely going to exclude certain persons and sections of the society, from active participation. It could also entrench some traces of political apathy in the mind of such persons or groups. According to Lawson and Wasburn (1969) opined that political participation defines both individuals and group agitations and interests, with each of these individuals or groups acting singly or through group organization and attempting to influence decision-making or altering the manner in which power may be distributed and the principles by which it may be distributed and the principles by

which it may be exercised in a particular society. This definition therefore encompasses some degree of democratic ethos in participation. It also demonstrates the capacity of a free society which allows for expressed group representation in the decision-making processes. This position by Lawson and Wasburn (1969) therefore could be seen as a direct antithesis of the position put forwarded by Maclosky (1968). Although, the concept politics has been expressed in various ways by different scholars, there seem to be a common thematic point of view which is that participation or representation means such activities aimed at the objective of controlling the decision-making machinery. It is therefore a means to an end. Thus political power is a product of political participation and representation. And this further explains the relative importance of citizenship participation in politics as very crucial aspect of politics because it determines how much power is controlled in any society.

By the concept of power, it means the capacity to overcome part or all the resistance to introduce changes in the face of opposition and this includes sustaining a course of action or preserving a status-quo that would otherwise have been discontinued. The concept of political power or powerlessness is applicable when the capacity to overcome resistance is related to the control of public policy. Consequently, the political power that women or any group of persons in a society have would be linked directly to a degree of their participation in the political process of that society.

The fact that Nigerian women are in active politics is not in doubt in the on-going Fourth Republic. Prominent women for example, Dr Okonjo Iweala (who currently serves as Minister of Finance and coordinating minister for the Nigerian economy), no doubt, has played significant role in not only the political economy of Nigeria. She has also set a pace at the international scene. Iweala, for example, during her first ministerial appointment from the post-1999 democratic dispensation, was very instrumental to the debt negotiation between Nigeria and the Paris or London Club.

It was her diplomatic efforts that brought about the eventual cancellation and eventual forgiveness of Nigeria's debt running into billions of American dollars. In the same token, it can be said that drawing from wealth of experience as an employee of the International Monetary Fund (IMF/ World Bank), she has logically brought her ideas to bear in the Nigerian economy. However, critics from several quarters – the academics, public analysts and the intelligentsia generally have argued that most of Iweala's ideas are simply drawn from the culture of the west comprising Europe and America. And that, such policies may not be in harmony with acceptable norms and peculiarities of the Nigerian state and its people at large. In all fairness, however, it must be said that as a woman, Iweala has greatly influenced the direction of the Nigerian politics through her economic agenda as coordinating minister of the economy of Nigeria. One basic point worthy of mention however is that most of her perceived policies are undemocratic, and so do not reflect the growing interest of the Nigerian people. For example, the abrupt increment of the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) in January 2011. Critics however have contended that the increment was not the singular idea process of the minister. And that it was the initiative of Dr Goodluck Jonathan as serving President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Nonetheless, critical minds have also drawn inferences from very many public lectures given by the Minister of Finance to the effect that Nigeria cannot afford to lose out like the Republic of Greece in the face of the increasing impacts of the global economic meltdown.

In another dimension, Professor Dora Akunyili, who of course served as head of the National Agency for Food Administration and Control (NAFDAC) has not contributed the least to the Nigerian economy, nay, and Nigerian politics. The relative decrease in the level of counterfeit drugs importation from several countries of the world to the Nigerian market has been reduced considerably. And it was during the leadership of Professor Akunyili. The in-prints and legacies of the professor has made it possible for not only drugs, but also food items, body lotion, creams, soap, water, assorted drinks, etc. These items coming through the various

borders to Nigeria would have to be certified safe for human consumption before they could be allowed entry at the various ports. This is not to say that the system had no challenges. The inherent challenge was the persistence in which die-hard drug importers exhibited to continue to flood the Nigerian market to date. The dangerous effects of unwanted imported contrabands on the lives of millions of Nigerians are better imagined.

In a nutshell, the empirical evidences as given above depicts the potency or otherwise of the contribution of women in the formation and restructuring of the Nigerian economy and politics in general. It then means that women can play active roles in shaping the direction of Nigerian politics even far beyond the imaginations of the male folk. By any standard, however, women participate in politics as voters, party supporters and usually attend political rallies in large number. Some even run for top political offices (the case of Sarah Jibril who contested for the office of President with Goodluck Jonathan and Hon. Mulikat who strongly vied for the seat of Speaker House of Representative is apt in this direction). As a matter of fact, women are said to constitute over 60% of the Nigerian electorates. And the 2006 census puts Nigerian women at about half the population of the entire country. Despite this numerical advantage and the massive participation in voting, less than 20% of political offices are held by women.

From all intents and purpose, it appears that the Nigerian situations seem to defy the political theory that political power derives from political participation because women participate fully and actively in politics but have not succeeded in gaining power. The fundamental reasons responsible for this constitute the problem of this paper, and frantic efforts will be made to address this gap in the course of the discussion.

## **Theoretical Issues**



Empirical evidences from the works of scholars around the world are replete with a common theme of domination of women by men in the socio-political and economic scheme of things. According to Agbalajobi (2010) and Kira (2003), the increasing domination of women by men have several theoretical underpinnings and are varied. On the one hand, women are less represented in politics due to persistent cultural stereotype, abuse of religious and traditional practices. On the other hand, the relegation of women from the realm of politics is akin to the kind of societal social structures in operation at a particular point in time. In most societies of the world, economic, political and social structures are strategically dominated by men and the women have been largely subjected to the roles of 'second fiddle' in the affairs of things. Agbalajobi (2010) then contended that the discrimination against women in terms of participation and representation is universalistic and has long historical standing dating back to the ages. The practice of gender discrimination and sexism according to him plays itself out even in the most advanced democracies of the world including Europe and America. Substantiating his claims, Agbalajobi (2010) further states that, women are unjustifiably discriminated against; not only in elective offices; but that they are also victims in matters of jurisprudence and litigations. For instance, in some courts and police stations in Nigeria, women who propose to stand for sureties for accused persons who have secured bail routinely disqualified simply because they are women. For the fact that democracy and its principles of freedom is the most cherished dictum the world over, it appears that the values of democratic exercise is still largely elusive in Africa (Nigeria inclusive). At the same time, it can be adduced that political participation which is sine qua non of democracy and allows for diverse interest and representation of both men and women cannot effectively thrive when women are excluded from the scene.

To Anifowose (2004) , in some established democracies like Britain and the United States of America, democratic polyarchies, for a long time, were in fact male dominated polyarchies. He noted that even famous advocates of democratic and Republican government rejected claims that women should be full citizens. This

further corroborates the position held by Agbalajobi (2010) who opined that gender bias is not restricted to only Africa and of course, underdeveloped nation states.

Anifowose (2004:77) argued further that:

For the most part, they adopted the prevailing view that the proper role of women was marriage, procreation and family, not politics... they never recommended that women be allowed to vote and considered it more or less self-evident that in family matters, the husbands have the final say.

By any standard however, Anifowose (2004) claimed that locating the historical background of male dominance over women in matters of society is practically impossible. He then maintained that such expectations are better appreciated when one considers the genetic make-up and the relative difference that exists between both men and women. Unarguably, however, Anifowose opined that:

Men are generally heavier, taller and even physically stronger than women and therefore more capable than women to enforce their will through physical violence and threat of violence. Women on the other hand are vulnerable because of their role of child bearing and nursing. In addition, discrimination and subjugation of women is further enforced by custom, traditional practices, beliefs and the law, behind which stood coercive force of the state (Anifowose,2004:77).

Drawing from the above excerpts, one can conveniently adduce that discrimination against women has its root in the character and content of our social milieu which rather celebrate the male folks as unique beings, who are considered stronger and unique and so, fit for public space while women are merely weak, feeble minded and so, reserved for domestic use at any point in time. This tendency has gone several miles away in disconfiguring the apparent role of women in politics, thereby

according them low level of participation and representation in the political scheme of things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The 1999 Constitution and the Place of Women in Nigeria Politics: Matters Arising**

The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred on all citizens by law. The Nigerian 1999 constitution (as amended) spells-out this privilege very clearly in section 40 viz:

Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular, he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interests: provided that the provisions of this section shall not derogate from the powers conferred by this constitution on the Independent National Electoral Commission with respect to political parties to which that commission does not accord recognition (FRN,1999).

Similarly, section 42(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) stated interalia that:

A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person be subjected to any form of discrimination.

The above excerpts shows that any man or women can proceed to court to seek redress if he or she's right to franchise is being violated and that the constitution in its entirety prohibits discriminations of any kind on the basis of sex or otherwise. Furthermore, section 77 of the Constitution states that:

- (1) subject to the provisions of this constitution, every senatorial district or federal constituency established in accordance with

the provisions of this part of this chapter shall return a member who shall be directly elected to the senate or the House of Representatives in such manner as may be prescribed by an act of the National Assembly, (2) Every citizen in Nigeria, who has attained the age of eighteen years residing in Nigeria at the time of the registration of voters for the purposes of election to the legislative house, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for that election (FRN,1999).

The foregoing analysis shows that the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which of course is the reference point for social co-existence amongst groups and persons has not by any means discriminated against anyone, man or woman in the socio-political scheme of things. It is therefore unjustifiable for men to want to dominate the Nigerian political scene and hence, boxed women to the corner. Available statistics however show that since the inception of democratic governance in 1999, women have been scantily represented in public offices either as president (which of course is an impossible fact to try by the female folk), or senate, and members of Houses of Representatives and Assembly at the level of states. Agbalajobi once again corroborated this shortfall in the representation of women in Nigerian politics when he argued that:

Following two decades of military rule, statistics revealed that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while 2007 they made only 6%... This survey shows a poor representation of women in 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections. In 2003 in states like Adamawa, Cross River, Ebonyi, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Nasarawa, Oyo, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara, no women was elected as member of the State House of Assembly, they are very few ( Agbalajobi 2010:78).

The very many reasons adduced by scholars of Nigerian politics as being responsible for low level of participation and representation of women in Nigeria politics forms the theoretical and ideological basis for analysis of a society that is largely unfair to a section of the same society even when the constitution is very clear on matters of gender equality. This is one issue that has raised critical questions of morality and rationality in the affairs of societies around the world, whether developed or developing. It therefore calls on serious debates as to how the calamity of misrepresentation of women in politics can be readjusted and amended to put women on the same scale with men as partners in progress considering the critical role of women in global socio-economic and political affairs.

### **Factors Militating against Women Participation in Nigerian Politics**

Several factors have been proved to stand on the way of women, thereby preventing them from active participation in politics, especially in the African/Nigerian context. Some of these includes, but not limited to the following:

#### **(a) Religion/Cultural Belief System**

Most societies in Nigeria, just like in many other African states prohibit women from taking part in active politics based on religion beliefs. Politics in this part of the world is seen as dirty game and sacrilegious and so, has the capacity of defiling any spiritual individual who is conscious of eternity, considering that there is life after death. There are however very many uncanny things that goes with politics in underdeveloped societies such as vote buying, ballot box stuffing, arson, assassination of political opponents, violence and the like. Therefore engaging in this kind of misdemeanors by adherents of true worshipers of God is a bad process. It therefore becomes a critical element in scaring away persons or groups from circular politics.

#### **(b) Virility Deficiency Syndrome**

Politics generally is a game of wit and the strong appears to take it all in the political gaining that follows. It therefore follows that man by nature are stronger and virile enough to play in the game of politics. As earlier pointed out in this paper, women are physically weak and hence, have no ego to compete favourably with men in the turbulent activities. Agbalajobi (2010) opined that winning public elections in Nigeria is a matter of force or “do-or-die” affairs. Therefore, those who possess physical stamina and strength to use brutal force are men. Hence, women would have to give way for the men to take whatever is available by force.

### **(c) Lack of Finance**

The dominant philosophy in Nigerian politics is money. The ‘money’ factor plays very vital role in the conception, mobilization and winning of political offices either at the presidential, governorship, senatorial, local council elections and even age grade meetings. Money is very critical in the shaping, making and unmaking of public office which is supposed to be on trust. Thus, the higher and larger one’s financial muscle is in Nigeria, the greater one’s chances of winning public office. Tor and Terkula (2011) opined that the system of corruption that has infiltrated the Nigerian system has practically put women on edge and everything seems to be working against them (women) in favour of man. Women generally appear to have little or no financial backing. They are by nature sympathetic, caring and think largely towards home-building, and hence, stalling from public offices to enrich themselves is very rare. However, men who are virtually blank, have little sympathy for the suffering masses, in the event that they are in charge of public coffers, steal massively to build their political empires in the future. This scenario is evident in the many cases of corruption scandals witnessed in Nigeria among top bureaucrats and politicians in recent times.

### **(d) Lack of Effective means of implementation of Affirmative Action**

According to Agbalajobi (2010) wrote that Affirmative Action is usually a measure intended to supplement non-discrimination. It is a broad term encompassing a host

of policies that seek to support weak groups in society, especially women. They include policies where deliberate action is used to stop discrimination. Thus, a policy process of this kind, according to him allows for rules that have the objective of enhancing equal opportunity for individuals and the improvements in the situation of marginalized groups. Accordingly, argues Agbalajobi (2010) the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The convention has been aptly described as the singular article of gender empowerment and Women's International Bill of Rights. Thus, the convention has since become a reference point since its adoption in the demand for the equality of women in the socio-political scheme of things.

The convention largely reflects the depth of neglect of the fundamental rights of women arising from biological differences by calling for equal rights for women notwithstanding their social status in virtually all aspects of life. The convention provides clearly that:

Adoption by states parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved (Article IV, CEDAW).

It is however instructive to note that the framings of the specifications of the Affirmative Action is not the problem in the elimination of gender bias. It is however the critical question of lack of implementation. And this appears to be a mosaic affecting virtually all nation states of the world in terms of the place of women in both elective and appointive offices.

## **Conclusion**

This study is a theoretical expression of the role of women in Nigerian politics in relation to the problem of marginalization and inadequate representation. The paper has examined the scholarly debates that have been going on for decades on the place of women in politics generally. While most scholars argued that women are best suited in the domestic activities of society, others and precisely, the liberal scholars are of the opinion that women play very vital role in the society's development process, and so, should be given equal representation as partners in progress. The most critical element of this discourse is however that women are, and have been sidelined in the political scheme of things in Nigeria and this state of affairs spells a dangerous omen for the Nigerian system which is now literally dominated and controlled by men. In the past, experience has shown, of course as demonstrated in the study, that women's political roles have contributed immensely in the shaping of the Nigerian politics not only in democratic governance; but also during the pre-colonial era. So, it will be unthinkable to wish away the critical efforts of women in the making of Nigerian state while arrogating political powers to the male folk. It is also unhealthy to ascribe political powers strictly to men in this era of globalization where the role of women in global politics is considered to be relevant in overall world peace, tranquility and mutual co-existence. In the light of the above critical roles of women in gender balance, the following recommendations will be drawn:

## **Recommendations**

- (i) There should be equality in the sharing of political offices on the basis of quota system between competing candidates. This will enable both men and women have equal chances of control in such public offices.



- (ii) The federal should make it mandatory that certain public offices be allotted to women on equal basis. This will dissolve any form of discrimination of women by men.
- (iii) Money politics should be discouraged in Nigeria while women who want to take active part in politics be encouraged to do so without any fear or favour.
- (iv) The doctrine of the Affirmative Action and CEDAW should be strengthened so that they could have considerable impacts on the political landscape of Nigeria thereby curtailing any form of discrimination against women.
- (v) There should be structures put in place such as the legal funds. These structures will enable women politicians challenge any form of electoral malpractice in Nigeria political terrain at minimal cost.

The aforementioned recommendations, if comprehensively followed, will no doubt enhance the political status of women in Nigeria thereby giving them on equal footing with their male counterparts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

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