

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: NOW NOT LATER

By

JEGEDE FRANCIS OLABISI (Ph.D)1

English Department,
College of Languages and Communication Arts Education.
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin Lagos.
bisikemijegede@yahoo.com

JEDEGE OLUSEGUN (PhD)2

English Department,
College of Education, Osiele, Abeokuta
&

OTSUPIUS ANTHONIA IGHIEBEMHE (PhD)3

School of Management Sciences,
Delta State University, Abraka

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8306920>

Abstract

This paper converses the inclusion of the womenfolk in Nigerian political space and project their relevance in the Nigerian political trajectories as a nation state. Women have been excluded from active politics in Nigeria since independence by successive government. Rather than compete with men on the political turf, they have been compelled to accept certain affirmative percentage in appointment into political offices. However, being given affirmative percentage is not the same as active participation in the Nigerian political arrangement where women should compete with men for elective positions. Relying on Sotunsa's **Iwalewa Obirin** indigenous feminist theory, the researchers establish the fact that except thoroughbred responsible women of sterling character join the political fray, women would continue to play the second fiddle to men especially in serious decision making that touches their very existence. It is, therefore, suggested that rather than settle for political appointments, women should take up the gauntlet by contesting and winning elections so as to contribute positively to nation building. The paper concludes that women's mobilization and active participation in politics are panaceas for peace, progress and national cohesion in Nigeria.

Keyword: Affirmation, Cohesion, Exclusion, Matriarchy, Panacea. Second fiddle

Introduction

Women's quest for space in the Nigerian political turf has been kept alive and sustained with renewed vigor with the dawn of democratic dispensation in Nigeria. Beyond cry for freedom and the sing song of oppression and marginalization, the character of the calls and agitation to jostle for space is taking a new dimension and gradually becoming fascinating. In the past, women activism has been seen as protest against men oppression and marginalization. Any time the voice of the woman resonates, it is predicted to be usual agitation against domestic oppression. However, women activism surpasses a struggle against men domination at the home front. The nature of the activism being canvassed to which these researchers lend their voices is such inclusion in the political process as a matter of civic right and responsibility. True, it will be difficult to actually push this position without, as much as one would want to avoid it, placing patriarchy in its proper perspective. Catherine Acholonu (1995) actually set this tone in her attempt to unveil patriarchy as an inappropriate concept in African socio-cultural setting for its Eurocentric posturing because men and women co-exist. According to her:

Patriarchy, the system that places men on top of the Social ladder seems to be an inappropriate term for describing the organization of the social systems with ranging degrees of dual sex hierarchies in which man and women exist in parallel. And complementary positions and roles within society p.6.

This is the position of the researchers here that although society has been organized in a way that seems to be skewed against the woman, it is needless crying over spilt milk. This is not an attempt to pretend that all is well or that the woman has arrived, rather it is a resolve to brace up to the reality of the fact that much needs to be done. Women must begin to address the point, according to Igbo proverb, to know where the rain started beating them. Women must wake up to the realization of the fact it is on the political field her fate is decided just as the fate of other men. Like the Yoruba adage that says *Ai ba won sini be laiba won dasi*, that is only when you are there you become a part of it. This call has received wide attention from both sexes for centuries because of the need to integrate the woman in the social order for social, political and economic relevance. The strength of the woman should not only be useful as supporters of political office holders or contenders. Rather, their strength numerical, intellectual and emotional must be harnessed to contribute to the process of pushing the woman to the mainstream of decision making. The approach canvassed in this paper is such that women are recognized on the strength of what they can offer and at equal terms. However, this will be done not through violent agitation but a systematic way of working with men to jostle for political space in the polity. It requires a systematic way of reinventing matriarchy or what Alice and Goettner- Abendroth (2020) termed mother-centered societies, based on material values: equality, consensus finding, gift giving and peace building by negotiations. The result, according to them will give birth to "a gender- egalitarian society, in which each gender has its own share of power and action: societies that will be characterized by matrilinearity, matrilocality and women as keepers of the land and distributors of food based on a

A Publication of College of Languages and Communication Arts Education, Lagos State University of Education

structured gift economy. This we believe women can achieve with their good nature, intellectual prowess and enviable moral conduct, on strength of which contesting for a political position with men guarantees success.

THEORETICAL CONCEPT

The theoretical framework for this study is an indigenous African Feminist concept located in Yoruba cultural milieu. It is known as *Iwalewa Obirin* proposed by Sotunsa (2012). *Iwalewa Obirin* is also in the category of Motherism, Womanism, STIWASM, Negofeminism, and Snail Sense Feminism of Acholonu (1995:110-111), Kolawole 1997:34), Okonjo Ogunyemi (Kolawole 1977:36), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:1), (Nnaemaka 2002:12) and Ezeigbo (Sotunsa 2012:101) respectively, *Iwalewa Obirin* emphasizes good character, good nature as the actual beauty of the woman. This explains why the Yoruba will counsel a damsel to enter into a marriage with inner beauty which signifies enviable moral conduct rather than physical beauty. Sotunsa says:

Iwalewa Obirin first privileges an indigenous label over the plethora of derived conceptualization from the West that produces the various 'ism'. Secondly, it is grounded in African (Yoruba) which has been acknowledged as capable of encapsulating African indigenous theoretical underpinning (Sotunsa 2012:104)

This theory fits into the call for women to take active political participation in politics. This is because both men and women, young and old will be disposed to voting female candidates with strength of character and amiable disposition.

Women and Politics in Perspective

It cannot be denied that the domination arising from how society has been organized and the political differentiation strengthened by obnoxious laws and tradition had for centuries created barriers for women's growth and capacity to contribute to the total societal transformation agenda. However, women who were amazons have struggled through history to stamp their feet on the sands of time. It is rather unfortunate that the exploits of women who have sustained matriarchy have been consigned to the realm of myth which continues to redefine them as merely playing the second fiddle having misused power in the past. Julien Julien (2017) says:

Myth and rituals have been misinterpreted as persistent reminders that women once had, and then lost, the seat of power. This loss accrued to them through inappropriate conduct. The myth constantly reiterates that women did not know how to handle power when they had it. The loss is thereby justified so long as women choose to accept the myth p.166.

To deconstruct the myth, women must approach politics well equipped with good nature, sound mind and acceptable moral conduct given the fact that they are in a contest with men on a difficult terrain long dominated by men. Again, this renewed determination must be borne out of a total rejection of being content with appointment, but to contest elective positions at all levels. Julien (2017:166) further contends that “... if women are ever going to rule, they must rid themselves of the myth that states they have been proved unworthy of leadership roles. The final version of woman that emerges from these myths is that she represents chaos and misrule through trickery and unbridled sexuality”.

The poor representation of women in active politics is but a continuation of the myth of matriarchy that makes her irrelevant in the political equilibrium that shapes her destiny. This much has gone on for centuries and it requires active political agitation and deliberate effort by women to warm their way to the political center stage in order to contribute their quota in nation building. The woman must begin to see herself as partner in progress with equal right to elective positions and not as stereotyped weaker vessel. The weaker vessel cum child image which has made the woman subservient to her male counterpart is responsible for her being content with political appointment rather than contesting elective position. Julien further contends that:

Such visions will not bring her any closer to attaining socio-economic and political status, for as long as she is content to remain either goddess or child, she cannot be expected to shoulder her share of community burdens as the coequal of men. The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. p.163.

The renewed call here for women to take active part in the political evolution of her time is in tandem with the labour of the heroines past. Women must reinvent the heroism of the known matriarchs, the amazons who have contributed immensely in nation building. This is particularly necessary according to Julien (2017) because “the existence of the matriarchal myth during the out-of-Africa process indicates that the tale in which females holds primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property at the specific exclusion of men was already relegated to the mythical past, at least 65,000 years ago”. However, women are now being seen globally “as avant-garde” in nation building especially in developing nations of the world. To say that it is easy ride to the top, is to beg the issue. There will be resistance no doubt especially from the political class which has not been used to woman slugging it out with men on the same level-playing field, and of course, even fellow women who will see such move as too ambitious or those who will for fear of failure refuse to contest. The fact that Nigeria is yet to produce a female president since independence should challenge the Nigeria woman to work hard to make the dream come true in no distant future.

What, however, gladden the heart is that despite the difficulty faced by women in politics, they continue doggedly with their political ambition, contributing enormously to the political, social and economic development of the nation. Women over the years could be said to have recorded

some measure of appreciable achievement on the political terrain, meeting their political objectives with limited supports and resources at their disposal. The political philosophy of a given society will determine whether the political institutions so established will be inclusive or exclusive. Towing the same line of argument, Ndlovu Garsheni (2014:37) believes that “the political thought that the African cherished determined the sort of political institutions they established, their political behavior and the manner in which they articulated their political needs”.

Erediauwa (2002:68) contends that in 1957 during the pre-independence era of Nigeria, a couple of women political activists such as Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Janel Molelu and Ms. Young were members of the Eastern House of Assembly. They were strong forces 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 vital political roles in Nigeria in spite of all the limitations and encumbrances.

The Babangida era remarkably marked a turning point in the history of women struggle in Nigeria, when Maryam Babangida institutionalized the office of the first lady in 1987. She became the first working first lady and launched the “Better Life for Rural Women” programme. Other women who have made impact in the country’s political scene include, Mrs. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former minister of finance, and currently the Director-General, World Trade Organization, who saved the nation billions of Naira in debt relief as a result of her hard work and ingenuity as a public officer. Mrs. Obi Ezekwesili also left a legacy of reforms through her courage in initiating reforms in the nation’s education sector, Prof. Dora Akunyili, the NAFDAC boss of blessed memory has also performed credibly, leading a protracted battle against adulterated pharmaceutical drugs. For her rear courage to take the cartels in the drug industry head on, she etched her name in gold and her name can never be forgotten in the annals of Nigerian history. In fact, her unyielding position and belief in the rule of law during the President Yar’Adua succession debacle remains legendary.

Liberia’s head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made history as Africa’s first female president just as Senator Hilary Clinton has made a positive impact in America’s politics. Also, the Republican Party’s presidential candidate John McCain picked a woman-Sarah Paulin, the Governor of Alaska as his running mate for U.S. election. In January 2021, Joe Biden, the current American president, road to the White House with Kamala Harris, a Black American woman beside him. This lends credence to the fact that women constitute a strong factor in the political equation of any nation and the reason many countries of the world are making efforts to bridge the gap between men and women in politics today.

In Nigeria, however, it could well be said that the representation of women in government even though has improved than before is still very low compared to what obtains in other nations of the world. And this is the political vantage position being canvassed in this paper. No doubt, Nigerian women who have found themselves in positions of responsibility, especially in public office have been able to give good accounts of themselves in the way they have carried on with the duty of corporate governance at their own level. Their credible performances have no doubt given

women more slots in the current President Bola Ahmed Tinubu government. This has further strengthened the argument that the panacea to the debilitating problems confronting the Nigerian woman ranging from cultural, social, economic to political can only be successfully addressed through a political solution.

However, it must be unambiguously stated here that, the women being celebrated today for their astuteness, deft, credibility and the capacity for transformation in their various positions were mere appointees. We believe that these notable, intellectually robust women would have given to their society more than they gave or are giving if they were to be elected into office. Of course, he who pays the piper, surely dictates the tune. It is not uncommon that no matter how loaded these women are in terms of ideas, innovation and ingenuity, such ideas are subject to the approval and disposition of the one that appointed them. Even when the government in which they are serving is no longer on the path of good governance, they hardly can muster the necessary courage and strength of character to proffer political solution, other than to either tag on or resign.

The political approach canvassed in this paper is far beyond a benevolent appointment of few women who cannot influence any decision on the floor of political negotiation and horse trading where women interests are at stake. It is also beyond the level of self-glorification of First Lady syndrome as a form of compensation or concession to the women constituency. It is, therefore, logical that the woman becomes part of the decision that shapes her existence on equal terms with her male counterparts on the same political turf in order to better the lots of her feminist constituency.

There is no doubt that women have the potentials and the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the development of their country. And this is possible through the soap box. Politics has evolved in Nigeria today now that every political party is making deliberate policy decision to accommodate the womenfolk. This is partly because of the fantastic account of women in power and contributions women have made towards the growth and development of this nation. These political parties are now more disposed to opening more political spaces in order to increase women participation and achieve gender equality on the political plain.

Women's Quest for Political Positions and Empowerment in Nigeria

In Nigeria's political scene, women are almost totally absent, especially in military regimes. Participation in politics at the three tiers of government, (local, state & federal) is still a male-dominated affair. There is only a slight improvement in the number of women elected into political positions in 2003 when compared to 1999 figures. In the 2023 election, only a handful of them were elected into the House of Representative and the Senate. In fact, what would have been a record breaking political success for women was truncated by political gerrymandering when Aisha Binani was denied the gubernatorial victory in Adamawa State. The exploits of women to the labour market and the increasing desire to be educated will no doubt compel any sensitive government to see them as crucial elements in its transformation agenda. From independence in 1960 to date, culminating in over 63 years of existence as a nation state, Nigeria has witnessed

several military regimes and democratic governments in which all had had but little gains for women. There is no doubting the fact that the tremendous contributions of women to national development has not translated to better condition for them under successive governments in Nigeria.

No doubt, women played vital roles in the establishment of the political parties which dominated Nigerian political landscape from 1955 to 1960. However, with all their efforts and agitations, women were disenfranchised until 1954 when women of Southern Nigeria were finally allowed to participate in politics. One of such was Margaret Ekpo of the NCNC, a veteran politician who won elections into the eastern House of Assembly in 1953/54 and attended constitutional conferences. Other women politicians of the era were Lady Abayomi, Miss Young and Mrs. Femi Pearse.

In Northern Nigeria, women were not allowed to vote or be voted for until the end of British colonial rule. They were only allowed to rally grassroots women for voting purposes until 1976 when Obasanjo government through a decree approved the universal franchise for women in the North (Odah 2002). By implication, women in the South had been involved in partisan politics for over 22 years before their counterparts in the North.

From independence till date, there has been marginal participation of woman in political in the south while the Northern women are still largely excluded. Of course, successive governments in Nigeria have tried to address the issue of woman representation in government, but what comes out of such efforts are far in between given the population of women in Nigeria. For instance, President Goodluck Jonathan government promised 35 percent affirmation in 2012 which produced the likes of Okonjo-Iweala, Muinat Meina, Dora Akunyili, Diezeani Alison-Madueke, Obiageli, Ezekwesili, Faridah Waziri and a host of others. As election entered its feverish peak, the president again promised 45 per cent affirmation if re-elected. Good as this affirmation agenda is, either 35 or 45 per cent, the Nigerian woman has come of age and has come to a stage where mere handouts of a few positions in office is no longer representative of her feminist constituency. As a matter of fact, it has been discovered that she will do more if elected on her own merit and not appointed on the 'credibility' of some politicians whose political ideology and manifesto she does not know or understand.

Woman and politics: The way Forward

To say that 35 per cent affirmative order is good but vying for elective position is better for the Nigerian woman is stating the obvious. It has been observed that no matter the percentage of affirmation given to women, such concession has not improved their lots politically (Odah 2002). Women, therefore, need to grow out of their timidity, fear and usual scarecrow believed to define the Nigerian political terrain. Again, as women are reminded of the hubris of women against women, meant to discourage them that even their own will not vote for them, they should also remember the fact that men also oppose themselves even more. That opposition is coming from women quarters against women vying for positions in the polity does not suggest in any way that women are their own enemies as been canvassed in the past. The time has come for the women to

stand in the soap box and tell the electorate who are currently yearning for a change, their transformation agenda. With the level of disenchantment and glaring political apathy of the electorate, if any of the strong contending political parties has fielded a woman, she would have been a credible alternative to the choice of the devil and deep blue sea scenario playing out today,

Another morbid fear that discourages women is finance. It is believed that not many women would be able to muster the financial energy to sponsor electioneering campaign in Nigeria. The question is who is that moneybags who will believe in a woman enough to 'invest' in her? Our answer is that, her integrity, inner beauty, enviable moral conduct and intellect are great investable potentials that will make her the bride of any forward-looking political party. Again, some of these women with potentials to rule this nation are indeed richer than some of the men parading themselves as political godfathers/mothers. These are women who have been captains of industries, technocrats, business tycoons, sound academics, self-made international ministers of the gospel, sought-after motivational speakers and highly creative minds. These women have been able to grow and sustain their brands and endeavors in life. And the truth is, they are actually rich enough to sponsor themselves or fellow women to position of political excellence in Nigeria. Consider the caliber of women below, it is stating the obvious that they are more than able to finance any election in Nigeria. This list was generated by *NewsAdmin on Sep 30, 2011*:

1. Senator Oluremi Tinubu
2. Dame Patience Jonathan
3. Stella Okoli
4. Obiageli Ezekwesili
5. Faridah Waziri
6. Justice Aloma Mariam Mukhtar
7. Stella Oduah Ogiemwonyi
8. Florence Ita Giwa
9. Senator Chris Anyanwun
10. Zainab Maina
11. Abike Dabiri Erewa
12. Justice Binta Murtala Nyako
13. Justice Mary Odili
14. Erelu Abiola Dosumu
15. Hon Mulikat Akade Adeola

16. Folorunso Alakija

17. Bola Shagaya

Finally, is the image issue. Charity they say begins at home. The woman who will stand to canvass, contest and garner votes must be in her best moral conduct, beautiful in and out. This is very important. It is the reason this paper is aligned to Iwalewa Obirin, Sotunsa's indigenous theoretical concept. Coined from Yoruba maxim, *Iwa lewa Obirin*, which means "character is the beauty of a woman," the beauty in this theoretical concept is not just the outward beauty but that on the inside which no camera can capture. There resides the woman in the woman. There, it is deposited, the allure, the fascination, the attraction, the magic, the tenderness, the compassion, the confidence, the radiance, the dignity, the wisdom, the intellect, the voice, the royalty and the soul. According to Sotunsa:

I propose IwalewaObirin as an alternative indigenous African Concept, located in the Yoruba cultural milieu.

The concept maintains a synergetic relationship with indigenous African womanism since it affirms the principles of African womanism and other conceptions of female African writers and critics (2012:104)

The electorate will not see the gender but the sterling qualities the female contender is and would be more disposed to voting her, *Iwalewa Obirin* holds for the woman the selfless urge to curry power for the good of all not for personal aggrandizement or weapon of oppression. The woman is an embodiment of love for recreation and advancement for all. Emphasizing the ties between love, care and power, (Perry, 1985) opines that:

Those who hold power and exert repression should know that, in the end, that road leads to their own killing. This would mean that for their own good, the powerful and wealthy should learn to love p.122.

Under the Obasanjo-led PDP government in 2002, out of 49 ministers appointed only six were women. The situation has not changed till date because under the current Tinubu government only seven female ministers were appointed out of a list of 43 ministers. In a recent 2012 Gender in Nigeris Report, the Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Zainab Maina, informed Nigerians that the cost of gender inequality and general poor condition of women is huge, insisting that it is a major constraint to growth in the country. In an environment where such inequality defines the economic and social status of women, there cannot be sustainable national security and development. She further gave the following statistics of marginalization in Nigerian state in Nigeria Gender Report 2012:

- a) That 80.2 million women have worse life than men
- b) That 60-70 of rural work force are men, but men are five times more likely to own land

- c) More than 70 of girls are women between ages 20 and 29 in the North West who cannot read or write and only about 31 complete secondary school.
- d) Nearly 50% of all Nigerian women are mothers before they turn 20.
- e) Of the 360 members of the House of Representatives only 25% representing 66% are women compared with African recommendation average of 19%.

With the catalogue of woes for women in Nigeria, there cannot be meaningful growth and development in the country. For any socio-economic transformation to be meaningful and productive, the policies must include the interest and concerns of women in all spheres of human endeavors. Selective or tokenistic approach to socio-political and economic well-being of women, is mere palliative and is far in between. It is stating the obvious that there cannot be social security in an environment of inequality. The time is now for the women to move to the center stage of active political participation, one that transcends mere appointment to campaign, contest and election so as to be more relevant in policy formulation and decision-making process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For women to be politically relevant, nothing short of a level-playing field for the women in such a way that the primordial constraints of culture, religion, finance, intimidation and violence that constitute scarecrow in the political arena would have been eliminated. There is the need to appreciate women's role in the political advancement of the nation and their sincerity of purpose in nation building. Although the researchers believe that women cannot achieve this in isolation. It would be appreciated if men would realize also that neither they can do it alone. Women must therefore, be mainstreamed into the context of the nation's transformation, growth, developmental agenda which cut across economy, politics, education, health, etc, and project the level of inequality which they have been subjected and the need for relevance on account of what they can offer and not because they are women. If Nigeria will witness the desired transformation, political stability and national security, the conservative image of women as wives, baby-making factory and secondary income earners must change. The 35% affirmative action is but a token and the prevailing culture of First Ladyism only reinforces the stereotyped societal image of women as appendages to male power. Nigerian women definitely deserve better deal in the Nigerian state.

REFERENCES

- Acholonu C.O (1995). *Motherism: the Afro Centre Alternative to Feminism*. Owerri. Afa Publications.
- Barbara Alice Mann and HeideGoettner-Abendroth (2020). *Matriarchy Studies*. http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/browse?module_0=obo-9780199766567 downloaded 8 February, 2021.
- Hazel R. ans Sally B. (2000). *Gender and Development Concepts*

- and Definitions prepared for the department for international
Development (DFID), Report No. 55. Brighton
- Julien d’Huy (2017). Matriarchy and Prehistory: A Statistical
Method For testing an Old theory. In Les Cahiers de L’AARS (19).
Pp 159-170
- Kolawole Mary Mobolanle (1997). *Womanism and African
Consciousness* New Jersey, African World Press.
- National Gender Statistics Book (2006). Federal Ministry of Women
Affairs, Abuja.
- Paulo Freire (1985) *Politics of Education: culture d Liberation
Westport Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey.*
- Sabelo Ndlovu–Gatsheni (2014). “Querying African Political thought
On Governace: A Case Study of the Ndebele State in the 19th
Century” In Mary ModupeKolawole (ed) *Perspectives on African Studies. A
Multidisciplinary Approach.* Ibadan University Press.
- Sotunsa and yacob-Haliso (2012). “Globalising the Gender
Discourse: A Synthetic Indigenous African Women’s theory” in
*Women in Africa: Contexts, Rights, Hegemonies, Lagos, Jedidiah
Printshop.*
- Siwal, B.R (2005). *Basic Frame Work and Strategy for Gender
Training* New Delhi: