

Promoting Gender Equality for Women in Nigeria Political System

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Abstract

In Nigeria, only about 5.6 % of the Nigerian House of Representatives are women following the 2019 general. All the thirty-six state governors of the federation are males and their deputies also men-dominated (thirty-three males and three females) with Enugu state (South-East), Rivers state (South-South), and Ogun state (South-West). Another eye-opener is that the 8th National assembly recorded only seven female senators and twenty female House of Representative members while the current senate has only six female senators to one hundred and three of their male counterparts. This is, undoubtedly, a consequence of gender inequality in the pursuit of political opportunities in Nigeria. Several scholars have suggested that structural problems like the patriarchy and restricted economic opportunities for women is mainly responsible for their unequal representation in the country's politics. Advocates on gender equality in Nigeria have noted that a viable means of reducing the gender gap would be the use of affirmative action which provides an institutional and legal framework for marginalized groups of society to have equal representation. The counterargument so far has been that the constitution of Nigeria does not prevent any gender from aspiring to electoral position. but prevailing evidence has shown that this is not enough. This paper, therefore, aims at understanding the challenges that have undermined the participation and representation of women in active participation and also present panacea such as amendment of electoral reform model and involvement of civil society organization, and most importantly introduction of a quota system that is backed up by rules for defaulters in both political party system and in the federal appointments to improve female representation in politics and by extension women voices in decision making in the political discourse. to breach the gender inequality gap.

Keywords: Women, Gender Inequality, Politics, Democracy, Nigeria

Introduction

Indeed, the persistent, dichotomous sex-typing characteristic of many institutions of the modern world would be a matter of intellectual curiosity if the consequences of being identified with a sex were not so dire. Across the globe, gender determines who goes hungry and who gets adequate nutrition and water, who can vote, run for office, marry, or have rights to children, who commands authority and respect and who is denigrated and dismissed, and who is most vulnerable to violence and abuse in their own homes and intimate relationships (see, e.g., WorldHealth Organization and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine 2010; Htun 2003; Htun and Weldon 2011). These norms shape more than personal and family relationships or career paths, though they certainly shape those: they shape religious practice and the structure of markets and processes of governance (Charrad 2010; Brettell and Sargeant 2001; Lamphere 2001). This contrasts with the international standards which requires that both Men and women should have equal rights and opportunities to everything worldwide, most especially their involvement.

Globally, women constitute about half of the world's population and contribute in vital ways to societal development generally. In most cases, women assume some key roles, which are: mother, producer, home manager, community organizer, socio cultural and political activist. Of these various role and capacity, the last has been engendered by women movement. In fact, women are less represented in politics due to persistent cultural stereotype, abuse of religious and traditional practices.

Therefore, in recent times, there have been agitations by women globally for adequate representation and participation in governmental positions (both in the legislature & executive). The idea being that women political participation is a matter of human right and gender equality, inclusive growth and general development. The active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision-making and political involvement is essential to the achievement of equality, democracy, peace, growth and sustainable development and the incorporation of their experiences and perspectives into the decision-making process (Mlambo & Kapingura 2019) in all aspects and at all level of political process.

Although Scholars have documented women's underrepresentation in politics since the middle of the last century (Duverger 1955, Kirkpatrick 1974, Epstein & Coser 1981, Lovenduski & Hills 1981), this paper further establishes how gender inequality has affected political participation in Nigeria and provided a framework to increase women's representation in decision making.

Gender Inequality and Political Participation in Nigeria

Although 'the woman question' has often figured as a political issue since the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of the political significance of gender only became an issue in the study of politics in the 1970s. Before then, gender was not regarded as a category of political analysis and women's political behavior went at best undescribed or at worst misrepresented. If discussed at all, women tended to be regarded as surrogates of men and as their inferiors. Women were widely believed to be less politically interested, active and competent than men. Such contentions were often based on prejudice, a reflection not of scientific analysis or reasoned debate, but of sexism in a male-dominated profession. It arose partly in response to the women's studies movement which first emerged as part of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) which began in the 1960s.

Changing the Narratives

While the debate on whether the politicization of gender—increasing representation of women will make a difference and about whether women can constitute an interest continues, it is important to know that based on a proliferation of equal opportunity policies, a significant difference has been made (OECD, 2018).

In the turn of the 20th century, women across many countries had to contest established beliefs that politics was a man's domain (Nwankwo, 2012). Early suffrage victories were therefore often the result of long and trying national-level struggles.

The evolution in women politics, during the 1970's and to a large extent continued throughout the 1980's was spearheaded by the Women Liberation Movement. They began by mobilizing women and raising awareness about political integration that political institutions could not ignore. As time went on, the international women's movement linked these national struggles for political rights, helping to make women's political rights an accepted practice (Rupp and Taylor 1999; D'Itri, 1999; Berkovitch, 1999).

These changes were evident in voting behavior, in political activism, in agenda construction, policy formulation and political organization. By the end of the 1980's, The WLM was thus not only a large-scale social movement, it was also a powerful political force affecting state institutions, political parties, economic organizations and attitudes. Thereby, making women became a political constituency recognized and courted by a range of previously complacent, gender-blind or sexist organizations. This can be traced back to the issue of what women have done in the political terrain.

By the evolution of the 21st century, countries, such as Sweden, Argentina, and Rwanda, women have made remarkable progress in participation and representation making a large chunk of the 25.73% of national parliaments around the world (IPU 2018). In this decade alone, Hillary

Clinton has been the U.S secretary of state (the third woman to hold the position in the last three administrations), and Michele Bachelet, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, and Dilma Rousseff were elected as presidents in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, respectively. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia, and Christine Lagarde became the first female director at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2011. The parity cabinet (2004–2008) of Zapatero’s socialist government in Spain contained equal numbers of male and female ministers and outraged the defense establishment with the appointment of a visibly pregnant woman as defense minister (Waylen, 2012). And in November 2011, the lower houses of government in Rwanda and Andorra were composed of at least 50 percent women.

Although women are less likely to be present in political elites than men, as observed in practically all levels of the political system, due to the law of increasing disproportions that works for gender; “that the higher we ascend a power hierarchy the fewer women”, it is worthy to know that aside representation, women participation have been on the increase over the years.

Women have played key roles in national liberation struggles and in the great political revolutions of modern times. Women are prominent in the resistance movements of Latin America. There is also a robust and growing WLM in India.

The Political Terrain for the Nigeria Female Politician

In line with global trend, Nigerian women constitute nearly half the population of the country.

But despite the major roles they play with their population, women roles in the society are yet to be given recognition.

While some African countries are making giant strides in women’s political representation, others like Nigeria have achieved extraordinarily little progress. Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule, the country has conducted five general elections. Makama (2013) observed that representation in the legislative arm of Nigerian government (the National House of Assembly) has witnessed the presence of women, yet they remain under-represented when compared to their male counterparts. She stressed further that following two decades of military rule statistics reveal that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while in 2007 they made with only 6% (Makama, 2013). This can be attributed to some cultural stereotypes, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures. These have direct effects on representation, power imbalance and unfavorable political processes.

Although, the International Conference on women in Beijing in 1995 enhanced the effective participation of women in politics in Nigeria, General stereotype is still the trend in the political sphere. Despite all efforts put in place, we are yet to meet the 30% and 35% affirmation as contained in Beijing platform for action and National Gender Policy respectively.

As of December 2018, women comprised of only about 5.7% in both the Nigeria House of representatives and Senate. This is relatively low below the average of 25.73% of national parliaments around the world (IPU 2018). Also, at the state assembly level, there are 51 women out of 990 members representing 5.2 per cent in terms of representation. (Nigeria Observation Election Report, 2015)

Considering, the fact that ministerial positions and key appointments are given based on personal merit, one would expect a gender-balanced ministerial cabinet, but this is not the case; of the 36 ministers sworn in by President Muhammadu Buhari, only 6 people representing less than 20% of the cabinet were women. This is far an outcry from the much touted proposed 35% affirmative action for women in governance in line with the national gender policy.

In the 2019 Nigeria general election, only 6 women showed interest in taking over the affairs of the number one citizen of the country, however, all six women presidential candidates withdrew from their candidacy. This further highlights the repudiation of the gendered narratives that portray women candidates as incompetent and unable to compete in the world of politics.

From all indication, women can expect to remain a significant minority in elected offices in election cycle and the prospects for gender parity remaining a distant dream.

Challenges Affecting Women Participation in Politics in Nigeria

The challenges facing women are enormous, however, researchers have shown that the under listed are likely responsible for the huge marginalization of Nigerian women in politics.

Patriarchy: It refers to a society ruled and dominated by men over women, which in turn has given rise to women being looked upon as mere household wives and non-partisans in decision making process in households not to talk of coming out to vie for political positions. As expected of patriarchal societies that violently push women to the margin, it is the consensus that women should not stiff power because men, not women are born leaders.

Religious and Cultural barriers: Both Christianity and Islam do not accord women much role in public life, and same is obtainable in most cultural values, where women are seen culturally as quite submissive and image of virtue. However, they are not to be seen in public domain.

Therefore, it is a challenge to women participation in politics, more so, women found in the corridor of politics are not often religious in practice. In 2016, Senator Abiodun Olujimi proposed the Gender Equality bill, but it did not pass a second reading as opponents rejected it as an attack on religious beliefs and the Nigerian constitution. Although the bill had a wide scope of eradicating gender inequality in politics, education and employment; seeks to enforce women's land rights and offer protection from gender-based violence, it was voted down by majority of the senators. The bill was also condemned outside the senate by clerics based on its provision for equal inheritance.

Low level of education: Women's political representation in Nigeria is further constrained by the level of education and training that they receive. Although the gender gap in educational enrolment is closing, studies reveal that the gross enrolment ratio of girls is still significantly lower than that of boys. The UNESCO EFA Monitoring Report for 2015 puts disparity in the net enrolment ratio between boys and girls in primary schools at 68 percent and 59 percent, respectively (UNESCO).

Financing: Competing for political positions in Nigerian requires huge financial backup. Unfortunately, Most Nigerian women who seek these positions could not afford meeting the financial obligations therein. This begins with the monetary demand for purchasing a party nomination form to be able to stand election into a political position, which usually comes at a higher cost and women, given the fact that they do not earn incomes as high as their male counterparts, find this situation incredibly challenging.

Political Violence: Nigerian elections have always been characterized by one form of violence or another since the return of democracy. The zero-sum ('do or die) nature of Nigerian politics, the use of violence through forms of intimidation and assassination of political opponents have raised the cost of seeking public office, making women more worried about taking part and therefore resulting in drastic reduction of women participation in politics. A typical example is the case of a top woman politician Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, who lost to politically motivated assassination who were easily recalled as helpless Nigeria's violent brand of politics

(Ekpe et al. 2014).

Stigmatization: following the way politics in Nigeria is played, it is being perceived that it is for individuals that have no regards for human right and are quick at compromising their virtue for indecent gains. Therefore, women aspirants who ventured into politics are looked upon as shameless and promiscuous.

Besides this, the Nigerian constitution buttresses the power imbalance between the sexes due to legislation that disfavors women.

Strategies to Increase Women's Representation in Decision Making

Several efforts have been made to address the low representation of women in elective and appointive positions in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the interventions of various stakeholders, the barriers that prevent active involvement of women in the political process appear exceedingly difficult to break therefore more strategies needs to be addressed by various stakeholders in increasing women's representation in the Nigeria Political terrain. These strategies are highlighted below.

Electoral Model Reform

The most popular electoral model widely practiced across the commonwealth is the first past the post/simple majority electoral models, considered to support the incumbent and not favorable to women's political candidacy. In this model, the electoral district typically votes for only one person to represent them, and the candidate with the most votes win. This is in contrast with the proportional Representational (PR) system that requires voters to vote for a party with a designated list of candidates, and parties win legislatives seats in proportion to the number of votes they receive.

Studies have shown that, rather than operate only a post simple majority electoral model, an adoption of Party-list proportional representation and mixed member proportionality (a combination of party list and simple majority electoral models) as it is the case in Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa and in a number of caribbean countries (Rule 1981, Norris 1985, Rule & Zimmerman 1994, Paxton 1997, Kenworthy & Malami 1999, Reynolds 1999, McAllister & Studlar 2002, Paxton et al. 2006) and, in countries that use both PR and plurality majority systems simultaneously, women are elected at much higher rates under the PR system than the plurality-majority system (e.g., Norris 1993; Rule, 1987). For example, in New Zealand's 2005 election, women won 43% of PR party-list seats but only 20% of the plurality-majority districts. Similarly, women are a greater proportion of state legislators in the U.S. states that use some multi-member districts (Arceneaux 2001, Sanbonmatsu 2002, Darcy et al. 1994). Women do better under PR systems because these systems typically have higher district and party magnitudes, i.e., the electoral district or party sends a larger number of representatives to the national legislature (Rule, 1987;Matland & Montgomery 2003).

Quota System Approach

Gender quotas are "numerical targets that stipulate the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature" (Dahlerup et.al, 2013). They aim to reverse discrimination in law and practice and to level the playing field for women and men in politics. Electoral gender quotas are the main type of positive measure taken to increase women's political representation and a form of Affirmative Action to help overcome the obstacles that prevent them from entering politics in the same way as men. In a way, gender quotas represent a leap over historical barriers. They give the voters a possibility to choose women candidates, which they may not have had within their preferred party.

The use of gender quotas has proved to be one of the most successful means for getting more women into office.

Out of the thirty-seven countries that, as of November 2013, have more than 30 per cent or more women in the lower houses of parliament, 30 (81 per cent) use some type of gender quota. 14 countries (38 per cent) use legislated candidate quotas, ten (27 per cent) use voluntary party quotas, six (16 per cent) use a reserved seat system and only seven (19 per cent) do not use any type of quotas (Dahlerup et.al, 2013).

The quota system approach also has in its semblances of what Mazrui (1972) had identified as veritable steps to foster national integration where citizens of both sex are availed opportunity to contribute politically to the wellbeing of the state. One of such steps include (though not exclusively restricted to) the narrowing of the gap between elites and the masses, which inevitably involves giving opportunities to women and the not so affluent classes in the society, in order for them to be able to have political avenues to address the issues that are felt by those within their social groups and by extension the mass interest.

Unlike the constitutions of some African countries, notably South Africa and Uganda, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria takes no cognizance of the disadvantaged position of women and has no provision for gender equality (Agbalajobi, 2010), therefore putting in place a specific percentage of women to take part in elections would be to close the gap. Uganda for example, such legal framework has been used to rebalance gender-quality in the country's polity. Certain parliamentary seats are reserved for women in the 39 districts, and in Argentina, India, Eritrea, Bangladesh and Iran, a number of electoral laws were put in place, granting women specific quotas (Makama, 2013). For instance, all States within the Nigeria Federation has at least three senatorial districts, hence there could be laws that makes it mandatory for women contestants only to emerge from some of those Senatorial districts. Such policy would enable a sizeable number of women to emerge in Nigeria's lower and upper law- making chamber, and from there they can be able to bring to reality certain laws that would be beneficial to the welfare of women across the country.

Whereas gender quotas are an effective tool for increasing women's presence in political bodies, they do not automatically result in equal representation of men and women. Therefore, according to a study of 2013 of the European Parliament, quota provisions must incorporate rules about the placement of candidates on the list, and in a plurality/majority electoral system rules are needed regarding the gender distribution of "winnable" or "safe" seats (Nwachukwu et al., 2018),

Quotas must include rules about order of candidates and sanctions for non-compliance. The effectiveness of quota provisions also depends on the existence of institutional bodies that supervise the application of quotas and impose sanctions for non-compliance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite much progress in recent decades, gender inequalities remain pervasive in many dimensions of life - worldwide. But while disparities exist throughout the world, they are most prevalent in developing countries. Gender inequalities in the allocation of such resources as education, health care, nutrition, and political voice matter because of the strong association with well-being, productivity, and economic growth. These patterns of inequality begin at an early age, with boys routinely receiving a larger share of education and health spending than do girls, for example. Women are vastly underrepresented in decision-making positions in government, although there is some evidence of recent improvement.

Gender parity in parliamentary representation is still far from being realized. Without representation at this level, it is difficult for women to influence policy. A strong and vibrant democracy is possible only when parliament is fully inclusive of the population it represents. Parliaments cannot consider themselves inclusive.

Against this backdrop, the study recommends that electoral model reform and introduction of quotas into political party structure should be incorporated as it will bring about the rise of women's representation as the case in other commonwealth countries. Also, political parties, relevant policies may be adopted by a variety of

other organizations and bodies including international organizations, NGOs, women's groups, networks in civil society, trade unions and other stakeholders to ensure women participation in politics. Through their own equality policies and training programmes these organizations may have a key role to play in conducting information and awareness-raising campaigns to encourage women to stand for election, and in running capacity-building programmes to support women in this process. These actors can contribute to developing the skills, experience, knowledge, and the resources of women in the pipeline for elected office and for those that have emerged. Achieving and sustaining a better representation of women in politics presupposes that interested women can rapidly acquire relevant skills required to stay relevant. In addition, funded knowledge networks, mentoring programmes and training can all serve to strengthen the skills and resources of women candidates. It is important that political parties, media and/or non-governmental organizations be actively involved in such initiatives.

Finally, accomplished women can be targeted to join politics – Government and civil society groups can target accomplished, competent, and qualified women leaders and groom them for political leadership. These women have established families with reduced family responsibilities, wide experience, loyal constituency and are financially stable. These women can also be mentored by other women in political authority.

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