

# African Women's Active Participation in Politics and Nation-Building: The Case of Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Women have played a significant role in the development processes of various societies of the world, most importantly their participation in social, economic life. Discrimination against women in politics is a phenomenon that excludes majority of women from taking part in the politics of their country. Nigerian women constitute about half of Nigeria's population. Their participation in the political arena is below expectation. Women remain a segment of the population that has been disadvantaged for ages. Women are underrepresented in roles that involve leadership, intelligence or a balanced psyche and could not inherit property and their social standing was primarily determined through marriage. The paper examines the status of women in Nigerian politics, challenges women encountered in their bid to participate in politics as well as the way out of such challenges. The paper explores the use of relevant information from primary and secondary sources. It further adopts descriptive approach and content analysis as its methodologies. The paper tries to answer why men are considered superior to women in Nigerian politics and how this can be amended so as to improve the position of women in Nigerian politics and nation building. The paper recommends among others that: legislative changes in favour of gender equality be implemented, that economic power of women should be increased and reinforced so as to diversify their means of survival, and the establishment of a coalition of NGO and grassroots women association that coordinate the support and advocacy for women aspirants.

## INTRODUCTION

Nigerian Women according to Agbalajobi, (2010), represent over half of the country's population and are known to play vital roles as mothers, time manager, producers, community organizer as well as social and political activist. In spite of the major roles these women play and their population, the society has not given them recognition they deserve. In African countries/societies, it is generally believed that women are only to be seen and not heard. One African president remarked that his wife belongs to the kitchen. It should be stressed however that women are great repository of wisdom and if given enabling environment and opportunities, they will contribute greatly to the development of their country and African societies at large. Every individual should be given the opportunity to grow, develop their own skills and contribute to their communities in a meaningful way. In the process of contribution, some individuals are denied some of these skills as well as opportunities most especially women. This is tantamount to discrimination which is not only peculiar to African or Nigeria alone but a global phenomenon. Women have for long suffered various forms of gender discrimination, inequality and exclusion, especially in the area of politics. Women remain a portion of the population that has been disadvantaged for ages. Women are underrepresented in political positions and are given infinitesimal percentage of elected offices both at local and federal levels.

Political participation should be a voluntary activity by which members of a society share in the selection of

rulers directly or indirectly and in the formation of public policy. Women participation in nation building seems to be one of the contending issues facing world democracies in Africa and Nigeria in particular. According to a 2021 Inter Parliamentary Union report, between 2002 and 2022, the percentage of seats held by women in national legislatures worldwide only rose from 15.0% to 26.4%. This meagre increase over a 20 year betrays the underrepresentation battling women participation in politics, the world over.

There was a consensus that democracy has to go beyond party politics, and include all types of women's organizations and other institutions within the civil society. The minority of women entering the political landscape are extremely visible and often criticized and vilified especially if they are single, divorced or non-conventional in any way. It was believed that some women are not brave enough to enter into unequal playing field of politics and political parties, so as to contend favour of necessary changes for women and at the same time take steps to transform the rules and practices of this playing field. It was also believed that most women are illiterate and not in a position to refine the prevailing concepts seen to subjugate them.

Since it is evident that women are very important in every sphere of life and constitute a greater percentage of the population, their importance cannot be under-emphasized. For any meaningful development and nation building to take place in any country, education must be accorded its place of priority in facets of life. Makama (2013) stated keenly that educating a woman, enables her and the nation to harness the hidden or untapped potentials geared towards National Development Women are the first teachers of their children, and so the nation gain economically and socially in educating her female population. The youths are leaders of tomorrow and their first contact in life comes through women (Mothers). The United Nation since 1975 has revealed many findings of valuable assets about women which are worthwhile and should be considered if any meaningful programmes of development and nation building can be achieved, especially in developing and third world countries. These valuable facts include the following as reiterated by Nwaoku & Efang (2011) citing Egunjobi (1991).

1. Women head up to 30% of the world's household.
2. Women head between 25% to 66% of rural household worldwide
3. Women contribute two thirds of world's working hours:
4. Women grow 50% of world food, but
5. Women receive only one tenth of world's income.

Al-khalifa (2009) claimed that women adopt management styles, with much greater emphasis on collaboration, cooperation and other 'feminine' behaviours. These styles are compatible with 'masculine' aspects of management. Coleman (2004) presented evidence that women managers in education tend to be more democratic than men demonstrating qualities of warmth, empathy and cooperation. The dynamics transforming women have much to offer in nation building for sustainable development of the nation. It is only when significant number of women holds public and legislative functions that there can be total development and nation building.

Suffice it to stress that the political enfranchisement of women in Nigeria politics seems to have maintained on the surface level of gender equity politically, because it is assumed that constitutionally there are not yet barriers to women's participation. But what exactly are pros and prospects women encounter in their quest to participate in politics and nation building? Women movement can be said to have been largely responsible for increase in political participation of women. According to Orisadare (2019), low literacy rates promotes underrepresentation of women in politics as it hinders women from garnering the necessary knowledge and awareness as to the extent of women under representation in governance, especially when compared to their male counterparts. Against this background, this study examines and evaluates the extent of women's full participation as active citizens in politics and nation building in Nigeria. This paper examines the active role of women in Nigerian politics and nation building. The paper explores the use of relevant information from primary and secondary sources. It further adopts descriptive approach and content

analysis as its methodologies. The paper tries to answer why men are considered superior to women in Nigerian politics and how this can be amended so as to improve the position of women in Nigerian politics and nation building.

### Theoretical Perspective

Throughout recorded history in all parts of the world, women have been subjected to domination by men. The reason may be because of persisting cultural stereotype, abuse of religious and traditional practices, patriarchal societal structures in which economic, political and socio power are dominated by men and the role women have historically played as the followers of male political leaders. Discrimination against women in politics is not simply an African or Nigerian phenomenon but global one. The only difference is that it has lasted for so long in Nigeria than other developed nations of the world who are moving towards gender equality and equity. Women are unjustifiably discriminated against in many ways. In some courts and police stations in Nigeria for instance, women who propose to stand for sureties for accused persons who have secured bail are routinely disqualified simply because they are women. It is a fact that political participation which is a sine qua non of democracy and allows for diversity of opinion and participation of both men and woman cannot thrive by excluding the women folk that constitute half of the world population.

Corroborating further, Agbalajobi (2010) citing Anifowose (2004) submitted that some established democracies like Britain and USA, democratic oligarchies, for a long time were in fact male oligarchies. The famous advocates of democratic and publican government rejected the claims that women should be full citizens. For the most part, they adopted the prevailing view that the proper role of women was marriage, procreation and family, not politics. John Locke held that “all men are by nature equal, never recommended that women be allowed to vote and considered it more or less self-evident that in family matters, the husbands have final say (Agbalajobi, 2010). He further posited that while the historical origin of male domination is impossible, one highly plausible explanation is to be found in physical difference. Men are generally heavier, taller and physically stronger than women and therefore more capable than women to enforce their will through physical violence. Women on the other hand are vulnerable because of their role child bearing and nursing.

Discrimination and subjection of women is further enforced by custom, traditional practices, beliefs and the law, behind which stood the coercive force of the state. These beliefs about women have gone a long way to affect women’s perception of politics and therefore lead to a very low level of participation and political interest, knowledge and activity of women in politics.

### Women and Political Participation in Nigerian Politics and Nation Building

Women involvement and representation in Nigerian politics at both local and federal levels was very low. Women participation in nation building and decision making at all levels has been very low, warranting the conclusion that women are at the periphery of Nigerian politics despite the fact that they have constituted a larger population of active voters, Mofoluwawo (2014). The areas where women participated include voting, campaign, rallies, organizing and contesting. The total number of registered voters in 2015 was 68,833,476, where men had 22,944,984 registered and women had 45,888,492 registered, (Zipporah, 2019). From the above, it is evident that Nigerian women are only relevant in rallies, campaigns, voters’ registration, voting and contesting. This would suggest that women have numerical strength but their numbers are irrelevant in governance and nation building.

Suffice it to stress that women have been involved though in passive way long before the colonial masters. For instance, women like Moremi of Ile-Ife, legendary Queen Amina of Zazzau in Zaria who was reported to have ruled over an empire and Queen Idia of Benin, Madam Tinubu of Lagos et.c, sacrificed themselves in the service of their varied communities. The 1979 Nigerian constitution guaranteed the rights of women

to participate in active politics; however, the last three decades have witnessed a relative increase in participation with certain standards like the number of women who vote in election, the number of public offices held by women; number of women related policies implemented by government and so on. Adeleke, (2003) observed that when Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, several efforts were made to comply with the Beijing declaration but only less than 20% of the cabinet were women between 1999 and 2007 when Olusegun Obasanjo was president. This was less than provided for by the declaration made at the fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, which advocated 30% affirmative action, (Oloyede, 2016). The National Gender Policy (2006) also recommended a benchmark of 35% of seats in parliament to be filled by women. This has also not been achieved so far.

Women's aspiration to participate in governance is based on the ground that women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Also, it was believed that all human beings are equal and women possess the rights as men to participate in governance and nation building. Many countries have complied with the United Nation Treaty Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to some extent.

### Factors Affecting Low Participation of Women as Active Citizens in Nation-Building

According to McFadden (2005), women need to deconstruct politics and give it a new meaning. The playing field is not neutral, and women need to transform the situations. There was consensus that democracy has to go beyond party politics and include all types of women's organizations and other institutions within the civil society. Different factors are attributed to low participation of women as active citizens in Nigerian politics and nation building. these include: Gender role, virility deficiency, socio cultural constrain, necessities and task of daily survival, lack of financial backing, lack of solidarity among women and a host of others. They are discussed as follows:

#### The necessities and tasks of daily survival

These take up all women's time and require their constant attention and limit their motivation. They are thus left with little time to engage in political activities. These needs of daily survival are linked to all the activities that women must undertake in order to reduce poverty, in particular income generating activities and other production activities. Other problems are raised by women's precarious health, malnutrition, ensuring the material survival of their children, lack of appropriate technologies, fatigue from long hard working days added to the lack of any sharing of family responsibilities with their spouses.

#### Socio-cultural constraints

These also constitute hurdles to women's participation in political life and nation building of Nigeria. Society has a fixed image of women, a specific vision of the socially constructed limitations to their roles. These social limits to their activities are maintained by traditional leaders, political leaders and even by other women. Women are considered as second class citizens. In certain countries, legislation does not encourage change in this regard. In other countries, socio-cultural imperatives take upper hand and eclipse the provisions. It also manifests itself in the form of pro-natal mentalities, so that women go through repeated pregnancies which exhaust them and make them more weak and vulnerable. The impact of traditions on their lives is such that sometimes they do not react to unjust legislative provisions, for instance in the area of inheritance.

#### Lack of financial backing

Women's historical experience of discrimination puts them at a disadvantage economically. Political registration and campaigns are expensive and require solid financial backing for success. Over the years,

sexual division of labour and job opportunities offered on sex basis have given men productive gender roles, enabling them to possess more purchasing power over their female counterparts. Societal value assumes that political activities are masculine and this makes it worse as financiers and sponsors of politicians prefer male candidates over female ones since they believe that they stand a better chance. Most success achieved by women in politics has been through women movements that sponsor women political aspirations financially and otherwise. Women political aspirations have been grossly hampered by lack of financial bedrock to subsist their endeavours, Gbadebo, (2015).

#### Virility deficiency

Some concerns have been of the belief that Nigerian women politics is based on higher political virility – those who have it what it takes to compete in turbulent environment. This consensus belief that men possess the superiority strength, competitiveness, self-reliance and are prepared to tussle in political endeavour, whereas women are considered too passive to engage in politics and governance. This consensus is constructed by societal norms and values, which through socialization has defined different gender roles according to biological differences. Women’s perception of politics as a dirty game and continued fright at the thought of violence has further alienated them from mainstream politics. According to Nkoyo, (2002), there was no critical understanding of the difference between “a visible agenda for women and an impacting agenda for women in Nigeria. Emphasis was only laid on women’s numerical strengths, but translating such into the attainment of power has been difficult as women are perceived as “team of cheerers and clappers, supporters’ club”.

#### Political insecurity and violence

Several factors are hindering participation of the women as active citizen in nation-building and politics in Nigeria. The reason may be because of lack of strict adherence to the rule of democracy by many actors. No wonder politics is being considered as a dirty game and exclusive right of thugs and hooligans in Nigeria (Mofoluwawo, 2014). No wonder, Nigeria politics is characterized by assassination, harassment, assault, acrimony intimidation, maiming and killing (Sunday Tribune, 2010). Nigeria’s storm-like political atmosphere therefore favours men to the detriment of Nigerian women. Women by nature are too weak, to face the storm of politics. Women are not brave enough to enter into the unequal playing field of politics and political parties. There was also the constraint of illiteracy in that most women are illiterate and not in a position to redefine the prevailing concepts seen to subjugate them. Since women by their nature like to preserve their dignity anywhere, the fear of being attacked is always in the heart of women.

#### Indigene-Ship Factor and Representation

Another challenge hindering Nigerian women participation in politics and nation-building is the indigene-ship factor which can also be described as the ‘son of the soil factor’. An individual is firstly expected to be recognized as a citizen before ethnic group but in Nigeria, the ethnic group comes first in most cases and this has adverse effect on women’s level of participation. In the Nigerian tradition, the society bestows respects on women based on marriage and it is something regarded as important for every woman who automatically changes her state of origin and become a member of her husband’s ethnic group. Ironically, in Nigeria’s political atmosphere, the woman is not fully regarded as a full member of that community rather she is seen as a foreigner and only a member by marriage. Such a woman is not given the right that should be for the “son of the soil”. The case is even worse for a foreigner (women) married to a Nigerian because she may never be appointed into any noteworthy political office because she can never be considered as true ‘indigene’ of any state (CEDAW, 1979). Political parties often sue such to disqualify women or discourage them from being flag bearers for the party during elections since they believe the political environment is hostile for such candidate that fit the profile.

## Lack of Affirmative Action Quota

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. A policy process of this kind allows for rulers that have the objective of promoting equal opportunity or chance for individuals, thereby leading to the improvement in the situation of marginalized groups. For instance, in 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). This convention has been described as: the “Bible of women empowerment” and “women’s international bill of rights”. Since its adoption, it has become a reference point for the women’s movement in the demand for gender equality. The convention reflects the depth of the exclusion and restriction practiced against women solely on the basis of their sex by calling for equal rights for women, regardless of their marital status in all fields – political, economic, socio-cultural and civil.

## **FACTORS THAT CAN FACILITATE WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS AND NATION-BUILDING**

The following are the suggested factors to increase active and informed women participation in Nigeria politics and nation-building:

1. Increase and reinforce the economic power of women, so that they can diversify their means of survival.
2. There should be provision of support to women’s traditional self-help activities, notably to their collective saving groups.
3. Government should reassess the allocation of national budgets, in order to reduce military expenditures and to redeploy these funds to social sectors, related to health, information and appropriate technologies. Health deserves particular attention due to the problems of AIDS which is decimating the active labour force.
4. Government should also diversify productive income generating activities in order to help assure that women have a steady income.
5. Women’s need should be included in the national planning.
6. With regards to socio-cultural obstacles, a two-fold approach is recommended: legislative action together with training and information is needed for women.
7. In the short term, legislative changes in favour of gender equality are required. It is not possible to wait until mentalities change; laws are needed to help force changes.
8. For the medium and long term, a concerted campaign of information and training is recommended, adapted to the different groups, men and woman so as to push for changes in mentalities and behavior patterns. Groups to be reached by this campaign include traditional leaders, men and women.
9. Institutional obstacles will be tackled by:
10. Permanent consultation between the grass roots level and the top levels, development of communication networks for mutual exchange of information, identification of the most urgent needs of women, efforts to involve more women in decision making processes and to make sure that their needs are reflected in national development plans.
11. Organization of Women Empowerment Programmes Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics (FONWIP) is an example, whose central objective is to promote empowerment and eradication of all forms of violence and discrimination against women. It supports women in decision-making in both public and private sector. The group in its agenda requested that government should yield to 30% minimum female representation in government appointments; and 60% maximum of either sex. There should be support network and prospective role models, through the identification of the aspirants and pairing them with established women politicians playing mentoring a role and providing capacity

building training to young or female aspiring politicians. Building a coalition of NGOs and grassroots women associations that coordinates the support and advocacy for women aspirants.

## CONCLUSION

Women participation in Nigerian politics cannot be treated with levity. Women discrimination in any area of human existence is an anathema to human existence, healthy relationship and development. At creation, God almighty saw the need for women to compliment men in his struggle for survival and necessary development. It is therefore apposite to stress that Nigerian women have potential to contribute to Nigeria's transformation. The intention of some women to participate in politics is to support their female folk. This is no doubt women substantive responsibility and it is even on this platform that most women emerge as public office holder successfully. The political paradigm in Nigeria needs to shift towards recognition of the role of gender in determining the outcomes of power distribution. Women should be given equity in harnessing available resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Women participation is very crucial to socio-political development, the world over. It is therefore recommended that policy making must be geared towards engaging and including women in decision making at all tiers of government. Women possess both natural and acquired leadership abilities which must be harnessed for nation building. Nigeria as a country must therefore create a level playing field for women to get into active participation in politics by implementing legislative changes in favour of gender equality, increasing and reinforcing economic empowerment schemes for women so as to diversify their means of survival. Coalitions of NGO and grassroots women associations that coordinate the support and advocacy for women aspirants must as well be established and promoted for sustainable national development can only be achieved with the combined efforts of all genders.

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