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WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA, 1999-2019.

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ABSTRACT

All over the world, the invincibility of women in politics act as a limitation to the promotion of gender equality and the accomplishment of the sustainable development goals. This paper interrogates the political representation of women in Nigeria's fourth republic. It is driven by the desire to unravel the challenges faced by Nigerian women in their quest for equitable political space and its inference for sustainable development in Nigeria. The findings of the study reveal that there has been significant improvement in the lives of women in Nigeria since the return of democratic governance in 1999. It also indicates that the low representation of women in politics is largely as a result of certain socio-political, economic and cultural hindrances. The paper concludes by stating that the sustainable development goals can only be achieved with gender equality. It recommends that the Nigerian political space should be made accessible to women.

Keywords: *Women, Politics, Sustainable Development Goals, Gender Equality, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is generally described as activities undertaken by the large majority of the populace in the quest of shaping or influencing the political sphere. Political participation is a prerequisite of democracy and equal participation of all citizens in public affairs remains at the heart of true democratic consolidation. It is believed that when men and women actively take part in political decision making, the outcome will be a balance that truly replicates the structure of society. This will in turn augment the acceptability of the political process, making it more egalitarian and responsive to the needs of the people, thereby resulting in sustainable development.

Women constitute more than half of the world's population and have contributed greatly to sustainable human development either as mother, home manager, producer or community organiser and socio-political activist (Anifowose, 2004). Women's participation in the political and decision making process was accepted as a political right after the adoption of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) in 1948. Since 1948, Nigeria has been a party to numerous international instruments upholding women's rights and gender equality men (World Bank, 1994). Despite these realities, the majority of women in African countries like Nigeria have been deprived of several socio-political and economic rights and are underserved in the society. More often than not, African women are denied equal access to lucrative employment opportunities, quality education and training, and active involvement in the decision making process. In fact, all over the world, women face political, social, economic, physical and social marginalisation from their male counterparts and also remain largely inconspicuous in the decision making processes at all level of governance. In 2019, the United Nations estimated that Nigeria has a population of almost 200 million people, with women constituting more than 50% of that figure. Despite this figure, women remain largely underrepresented in politics at the various level of governance (Agishi, 2014).

This paper examines the root of gender inequality in politics, the challenges facing women in their search for equitable political space and the implication of these inequalities on sustainable development in Nigeria's fourth republic between 1999 and 2019. It is grounded on the belief that sustainable development is unattainable without gender equality in all aspect of societal life.



WOMEN IN POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

There is no gainsaying the fact that women have always been instrumental in the societal development of most African societies. As far back as the pre-colonial period, women have played traditional leadership roles in the societies in which they exist. During this period, women role in the society was complimentary to that of their male counterparts and the issue of gender inequality and stereotyping against women was almost non-existent as each gender performed varying roles geared towards societal development. Women were active participants in the public and political life of most pre-colonial Nigerian societies, acting as rulers and leaders of communities. They also had socio-political influence over other groups through their representatives and organizations (Afolabi, 2019). The heroic act of women like Princess Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin, Kambasa of Bonny, Queen Amina of Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwole of Ibadan, Princess Inikpi of Igala provide evidence of women's leadership role in pre-colonial Nigeria (Esidene & Abdul, 2013).

Colonialism however marked the advent of gender inequality in African societies as it propagated subjugation against women (Afisi, 2010). Colonialism and its Victorian ideal however altered the status and recognition of women in the Nigerian political space relegating them to the background of societal affair and overall development (Agbaje, 2019). The Victorian family philosophy was centred on the view that a woman's role should be limited to household management. Apart from women who fought to assert and express themselves politically, women were largely invisible in Nigeria's colonial political space. People like Mrs Margaret Ekpo of the Aba women riot, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union, Madam Efunroye Tinubu of Lagos and Egba land and Hajia Swaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) are examples of women that achieved political feats in colonial Nigeria (Esidene and Abdul, 2013).

The acrimonious nature of post-colonial politics further promoted gender inequality in Nigeria as politics and political parties became paternalistic, ethnic allegiance and personality-based (Ikpe, 2004). During this period, women's power for collective action was lost because ethnic and party loyalty became more imperative than gender cohesion (Ikpe, 2004). Since the 1970s, gender equality has occupied a central position in development discourses, with several women groups and organisations making demands for equal participation of women in issues of societal concern. Several conferences have also been organised to advocate women rights and empowerment in the society, with these conferences bringing about positive results and socio-economic and political empowerment of women. In Africa, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf emerged as the first female African president. In Nigeria, women are beginning to take up elective positions in National and state legislative assemblies and are getting appointed in ministerial and state commissioner appointment. In recent times, some of them have also emerged as deputy governors, speakers of state legislative assemblies and chairpersons of local government councils. There are also actively involved in the economic and social sector as managing directors and director-generals of public corporations (Afisi, 2010).

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration declares that women should occupy 30% of all positions in government and government-owned institution. As a signatory to the Beijing declaration, Nigeria vow to implement this policy but still gender equality in politics continue to elude the Nigerian state. Nigeria witnessed a return to democratic governance on May 29, 1999, marking the fourth republic. The 1999 constitution conferred on every Nigerian citizen, without discrimination to sex or gender, the right to democratic governance. According to section 40 of the constitution,

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 (Esidene & Abdul, 2013).



This period following the return to civilian rule witnessed advancement in human and women's right. After decades of military rule, it was expected that the return to democratic rule will also result to increased participation of women in the decision making process. Yet, women participation and representation in Nigerian politics are low as they are yet to occupy up to 15% of all elective political positions in the country. In 1999, out of 990 positions available at the State House of Assembly, only 12 were occupied by women. In the House of Representatives, there were only 13 women and only three female senators as against 109 male senators elected that year (Fashola, 2009). In the 2019 election, only 62 out of the 2,970 women won election in the various contested positions: 7 in Senate, 11 in the House of Representative, 4 as Deputy Governors while 40 were elected into the State House of Assembly (INEC, 2019). Since 1999, there has been no female president or vice president, neither have there been a female governor. In 1999, women managed to secure only 3% representation in contested positions, 4% in 2003, 6% in 2007, 5.6% in 2015, and 4.17% in 2019. In other words, the national average of women's participation in Nigerian politics remains 6.7% which is less than half of the 30% benchmark set by the Beijing 1995 declaration.

Despite this alarming reality caused by certain socio-cultural challenges and constraints, women have also made incredible advancement in the political development of the country. In recent times, there has been an increase in women's engagement in the political space as we now have women as deputy governors, speakers, and members of the house of assembly, ministers, commissioners, special advisers and special assistants (Erunke, 2009). Prominent women in Nigeria's fourth republic include Dr Okonjo Iweala who served as the minister of finance, Professor Dora Akunyili who served as the head of the National Agency for Food Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Aishat Ismail who served as the minister of Women Affairs and Youth Development and Kema Chikwe who was formerly appointed as the minister of transport and later transferred to the ministry of Aviation (Anifowose, 2004).

CHALLENGES IN WOMEN'S QUEST FOR EQUITABLE POLITICAL SPACE

OECD (2018) sees effective women's political participation as a human rights issue and an essential element for sustainable development, peace, democratic consolidation and inclusive growth. While the Nigerian government have made substantial progresses in the last twenty years to promote gender equality and active women's participation in politics, there is still room for a lot more because Nigeria is often ranked as one of the countries with low level of women representation in the political landscape. Furthermore, despite the fact that the Nigerian constitution does not discriminate against equal participation in politics, women continually face obstacles in their quest for equitable political space. Several economic, political and socio-cultural barriers hinder women from political participation and decision making in Nigeria, creating inherent discriminatory tendencies and situational imbalances between men and women especially in patriarchal societies like Nigeria. Some of the constraints and challenges on women's political effectiveness in Nigeria include:

Patriarchy and Gender Role

Patriarchy is built on male domination over women. In most African societies where patriarchy exists, women are often regarded as being subordinate to their male counterparts. They are often portrayed as being weak and incapable of making independent decisions. Across generations, the family unit plays a vital role in sustaining the patriarchal order. Children grew up and accept the different roles as laid down for them by the society. A typical African woman grows up thinking that she is inferior to her male counterpart and so should not expect to be treated equally. This is one of the greatest psychological weapons against women in Africa, for they are depicted across time and space to be capable of dealing only with trivial matters, gossiping or satisfying the men. In most of these societies, men and women have clearly defined roles that are laid down by the dominant patriarchal ideology. While the men are usually seen as breadwinners and the head of the household whose major duty involves making decision both within and outside the home, tradition continues to stress that the major role of a woman is to act as housewives and mothers and should be limited to managing the home. This patriarchal structure favours sexually segregated roles and cultural values that work against the progress, development and active participation of women in the political and decision



making process (Ikpe, 2004). These stereotypical ideas and societal view about women's leadership ability create major barriers for women and impede women's advancement in political participation. As a result of these socio-cultural traditions, most women are also reluctant to pursue their political rights as active participant and are comfortable with being relegated to the background. In cases where they run for political office, they fail to attract support from party members to win.

Time Constraints

Uneven distribution of family care duties means that women spend more time at home with the children than their male counterpart. Women are also overburdened with family work and several household chores which make them busy and impede their involvement in the political activities of the country.

Religious Factors

Religion constitutes another socio-cultural obstacle militating against women's participation in politics in Nigeria. For centuries, religion has been used to disregard women from various aspects of socio-political life across Africa and Nigeria. In most dominant religion like Christianity and Islam, there are arguments supporting women's inferiority to men. These religions are conventional and patriarchal in their opinions on the place of women within and outside the church. The preaching in these religions endorses patriarchy and encourages women to be agile and responsive in their domestic responsibilities to their husband. For example, 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 states:

A man has no need to cover his head because he reflects the image and glory of God. But woman reflects the glory of man, for man was not created from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for woman's sake but woman was created for man's sake (Good News Bible, 1976).

Furthermore, 1 Timothy 2:11-14 states:

Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men, they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first and then Eve, and it was not Adam who was deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and broke God's law (Good News Bible, 1976).

Like Christianity, Islam also acts as enemy to women's right encumbering the pursuit for equitable political space. Islamic law is normally inferred in a way that limits women's political activities. In Sura 4: 34, the Koran says,

Men are managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other.

Like the Bible, the Holy Koran also has several passages that spoke on the submissiveness of the women to her husband, all of which are used to limit women's participation in politics.

Economic Hindrances

The historical experience of Nigerian women places them at a disadvantaged position economically. There is a relationship between women's socio-economic condition and enhanced representation and participation in politics. The lack of financial resource is one of the biggest and overwhelming obstacles that stop women from actively participating in politics. Most Nigerian women are financially reliant on their husband making it difficult for them to campaign for political office. The high cost of running an effective political campaign in Africa often poses a serious impediment for women. This is largely because women's participation in politics depends on their access to paid work which gives them not only financial independence but also increased self-confidence and additional professional skills. In Africa however, a woman's access to financial resources is often determined by men which makes them ever economically dependent on men, leading to



their low presence in the political arena. As a result of their low material resources, they also lack the budget to enhance their political campaign with multidimensional activities (Agbaje, 2019).

Lack of Cooperation with Women's Organisation

In as much as we blame patriarchy for the low representation of women in politics, another factor to consider is the lack of cooperation from women themselves. Nigerian women often face the challenge of garnering support from women and women organisations. Rather than promote gender cohesion, women are fond of bringing down their fellow women, which further helps to reduce their self-confidence. Furthermore, there is the proliferation of women's organisation in Nigeria which means that women are more concerned with seeking their individual economic interest that coming together towards the advancement of the status of women (Anifowose, 2004). The attitude of women towards their fellow women is often uncomplimentary, with most of them believing that politics should be left for men, unmarried women or women that are without commitment to domestic responsibilities. The lack of women gatekeepers and group consciousness also serve as limitations to effective women's political participation.

Other Challenges

Another challenge faced by women in their quest for equitable political space is the lack of political vision and strength because most Nigerian women lack political literacy (Agbaje, 2019). Other constraints include colonial legacy, the lack of party support, marginal access to information, lack of political godfathers, low financial support, limited access to political networks and campaign fund raisers, intra party politics, low political education and the lack of access to well-organised education. The violent nature of politics in Africa and Nigeria also poses barrier to effective women's engagement in politics. The low representation of women in Nigerian politics is also driven by factors such as lower level of female education and employment, lack of effective government action, electoral violence, sexist attitudes and corrupt and patronage-based political system prevalent in Nigeria (Kelly, 2019).

IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER INEQUALITY ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Ojobo (2005) sees sustainable development at the continuous qualitative enhancement in the general standard of living of people in a society. Eneh & Nkamnebe (2011) defines sustainable development as the ability to meet the desires of the present generation without endangering the likelihoods of the future generation to meet their own wants. Sustainable development means social, environmental and economic development that guarantees ecological integrity, gender equality and social justice and the well-being and dignity of humans, both now and in the coming years (UN Women, 2014). At the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 5th of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lies gender equality (UNDP, 2018). Gender equality and women empowerment is often regarded as being essential for the attainment of sustainable human development. According to OSAGI (2001), gender equality means equal rights, chances and outcome for people irrespective of whether they were born male or female. Gbadebo et al (2018) assert that none of the three key elements of sustainable development can be accomplish without ensuring gender equality.

Marginalisation against women in Nigeria has had negative implications on sustainable development in the country. When the political process is dominated by the male folks, the decision making process is usually lopsided and does not reflect the interest of both the male and female populace. Equal participation of men and women in the decision making process is very important to achieving several of the SDGs such as the goals connected to ending poverty and hunger, promoting good health and wellbeing, ensuring quality education, reducing inequalities, addressing climate change, fostering peace, justice and strong institution among others (UNDP, 2018). Active participation of women in politics and leadership result in a society that is more inclusive, receptive and democratic (Markham 2013; Tamaru & O'Reilly, 2018).

The segregation of women from the political landscape has however deprived Nigerians of their unique capacity for leadership and governance. Marginalising women from the decision making process has also



hindered socio-political and economic development in the country and has stalled the realisation of gender equality. As a result of all these, five years after the adoption of the sustainable development goals, Nigeria is yet to achieve gender equality and accomplish any of the 17 SDGs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All over the world, women have contributed to sustainable development in a myriad of ways yet they are usually excluded from decision making and politics. Equal political participation of men and women is a fundamental human right and is at the centre of women empowerment and gender equality. However, in Africa, women's role in politics and development remains generally inconspicuous or trivialised. Gross inequality between men and women therefore remains a common feature of African politics. One of the goals laid down in the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment. The findings from the study reveal that the Nigerian political space is largely dominated by men, with women only playing supporting role. However, for any country to realise true democracy and achieve the sustainable development goals, there is need for the advancement of gender equality as the democratisation and developmental process cannot be complete without the equal and active participation of men and women in the decision making process.

The paper therefore endorses that women should engage actively in leadership and decision making process. To overcome some of the challenges faced by women in their quest for equitable political space in Nigeria's fourth republic, the paper also makes the following recommendations:

1. Any effort at improving women's participation in the decision making process should focus not only on increasing the numerical representation of women in politics but should also lay emphasis on the improvement of the quality of women's involvement through capacity building like political mentorship and training;
2. The Nigerian government should ensure that all existing gender policies are implemented to increase women's political participation;
3. Women's role in political parties should be augmented. Political parties should increase the number of women nominated for election and should make it easy for them to gain access to campaign funds;
4. Political parties should pursue a strategy of affirmative action that ensures that a minimum of 30% of party candidates are women;
5. To achieve effective participation of women in politics, women should support one another.
6. The political space should be made readily accessible to women. Politics should be seen as an even field where anyone can join irrespective of gender or social status.

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