

Nigerian women, politics and the national identity question

Adenike Olufunke Olufade

Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Women involvements in political activities in recent times have been on the decline. Often times, women's right is denied against the provisions of the constitution and other international instruments of human rights and this does not allow them to participate in government adequately. It takes conscious political actions to address the issue of women's political marginalization and disallowing women from political participation enhances women invisibility in government and strengthens men's arrogance in power. This paper focuses on the issues attributed to women's attitude to politics and the challenges of women in leadership positions. Going by the recent number of appointments of female ministers and senators in Nigeria, the paper reveals the potentials of women leaders in government and the emancipation of favourable laws in the interest of women. The paper then concludes by analysing the problems and prospects of women involvement in political activities towards promoting good governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian women, politics, national identity question.

E-mail: real855@yahoo.com. Tel: +234-8034-0045-51, +234-7056-7920-88.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, politics is presumed to be a man's turf, where *No Woman Need Apply* (NWNNA) – an unspoken slogan reminiscent of the discrimination against Irish nationals in 19th century Britain. This unwritten rule is one that only a small percentage of the female population has defied successfully.

Politics can be said to be the act of making public choice and making decision on behalf of people through the medium of the State and its apparatus. It is accepted that for development of any kind to be successful, women, who make up a larger proportion of the population, should not be left out, because there is no doubt that both men and women have some potentials and rights to contribute meaningfully to the development of their countries throughout the world, Africa inclusive. There is abundant historical evidence that African woman have for long been playing crucial roles in the politics of their countries. Many great women of yesteryears have helped in shaping African politics. They have played crucial roles in redeeming or elevating their countries (Mohamed, 2000).

Despite being a patriarchal society, Nigeria has a rich history of women breaking out of the mold to participate

in politics. Our pre-colonial history is replete with the exploits of Queen Amina of Zaria, who led armies to drive out invaders from Zaria; and Moremi of Ile-Ife, whose sacrifice for her people speaks to selfless leadership that we are so bereft of these days. Our recent past speaks of prominent women leaders like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, a crusader and challenger of despotic leaders, who led Egba women on a protest against taxation; Margaret Ekpo, a prominent civil rights activist; and Hajia Gambo Sawaba, who championed the cause of the oppressed in northern Nigeria. Iyalode Tinubu of Lagos exemplifies the rich participation of women on the economic scene.

The legacies of these women are at risk of extinction. Even though an increasing number of women are finding their way into boardrooms and providing leadership for blue chip companies, the majority of women in Nigeria only minimally participate in economic development or politics. Female participation in decision-making is still a far cry from the Rwandan experience, where the economy rode to recovery on the backs of women. It is instructive to know that in some parts of our country, women were not allowed to participate until 1976 — sixteen (16) years after Nigeria's independence from

Great Britain. There are nagging fears that the exclusion of women might continue indefinitely (Okome, 1997).

Equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Comprising over 50% of the world's population, women continue to be under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena.

Despite the effort being made by our sister countries in Africa to bridge the gap between men and women in politics, Nigeria government has not deemed it necessary to implement this. However, the recent election of female presidents in Africa, Latin America and Europe is being hailed by many as a seminal movement for the advancement of women in politics. The international community has encouraged countries to keep at least 30% seats in their national parliament reserved for women. In the last republic (2003) election, three women made it to the 109-member upper house, while 21 were elected in the 360-member lower house. Six women were appointed ministers, with three as subordinate ministers and the other three as full ministers. This is a very poor representation. In Nigeria, the roles of men are more highly valued than those of women when it comes to politics. Women today are still seen as poor political/social problem solvers and therefore ineffective leaders. Despite the huge contribution they have made in developing the country, they are still sidelined in both elections and appointment into public offices. For instance, it has been observed that rather than blossom the activism of late Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti, Hajia Gambo Sawaba and Margaret Ekpo, among others into politics which should propel Nigerian women to the fore front of governance, Nigeria's independence has not witnessed much women participation in politics (Ogunleye, 1993).

HURDLES BETWEEN NIGERIAN WOMEN AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Like many countries, Nigeria maintains a national democratic constitution, boasting inclusive and equitable access to political participation. It was expected that facilitating Nigerian women's admission to one-third of positions in governing bodies would enable women to reach a critical threshold in the pursuit of changes in gender equity and thus, women's empowerment (UNIFEM, 2003). However, the under-representation of Nigerian women in politics is both descriptive (that is, the number of women in political institutions is not reflective of the number of women in society) and substantive (that is, the unique perspectives of women are being heard in political institutions to ensure that women's needs, demands and interests are incorporated into political

agendas) (Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000). When the reservation system was implemented, political parties were not necessarily inclined to support female candidates and the chances of being elected while not being a party member, or related to one, were slim. Moreover, the gap between constitutionally-instituted rights and the conditions which enable women to recognize and embrace those rights often remains fragmented by the absence of politically-reinforced responses to women's daily needs and interests.

According to Nussbaum (2002), Nigerian women's under-representation in the public and social domain, against their male counterparts and the inability to properly fit into political arena has affected Nigerian women's empowerment and social status. Without a more substantive conceptualization of female-male relations, both inside and outside of the public domain, filling quota prescriptions risks contributing to routes of women's empowerment with outcomes observed by Nussbaum (2002) wherein is seen as the emergence of a new social underclass. Similarly, Lama (2001), Banerjee (2003), Bird (2003), and Jacqueline (1997) document strategies for Nigerian women's empowerment which have necessitated the erasure of "femininity" within politics, the persistence of proxy-ruling and populist elections, and the regard for female leaders as goddesses imbued with a particular religious authority or vision. Moreover, the application of a gender lens to world politics reveals that today, when women do occupy political offices, they are often assigned to ministries dealing with the perceived "soft" issues of politics such as health and education, both of which are often shrouded under the "hard" political areas of defence, finance and international trade, all of which are currently dominated by men (Peterson and Runyan, 1993). The masculinization of certain domains in politics is frequently blamed for the marginalization of issues (such as comprehensive health care and education) which, when absent, are most apt to present women with destabilizing life conditions (Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000). While the strength and determination of Nigerian women's movements remain strong, the devolution of substantial political leverage is a complex and long process (Chaudhuri and Heller, 2002), for instance, the Aba women riot in 1929 portrayed the strength of Nigerian women in claiming their rights.

Several impediments have been identified as limiting the participation of Nigerian women on the social, economic, and political fronts. These barriers are cultural, economic and legal.

Cultural mores

"Men are the decision makers; women should be cooking in the kitchen while men play politics." – Comments passed to Dorothy Nyone when she announced her

intention to represent the Gokana area for the ruling People's Democratic Party (Frontline Women, 2007). Social conventions, values, and mores combine to maintain the stereotype of Nigerian women as kitchen dwellers who are only gatecrashers into spheres outside of their matrimonial homes. Women are socialized from birth to see their place as second to that of men. The birth of a male child is warmly received, to the extent that women often feel that their marriage is not secure until they give birth to male children. Cultural practices are often harmful to women. For example, burial rites in the eastern parts of the country ensure that women remain social outcasts: widows are forced to drink the bath water of their dead husbands as part of the mourning process. Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) results from the early marriage of teenage girls in the north. Victims of these cultural practices cannot participate socially as they are viewed as outcasts (Igbafe and Offiong, 2007).

Religion

Religion is an accomplice in the stereotyping of Nigerian women and reinforces the barriers that prevent them from participating politically, economically, and socially. For instance, in the northern part of Nigeria, women are held in Purdah in deference to Islam. Only their husbands have unfettered access to them and their movements are restricted to their quarters. They depend entirely on their husbands and families to meet their needs. The conditions of their lives can only be guessed at, as most households subsist below the poverty line. Religion ensures that a significant number of women are barred from participating in politics (either as voters or as aspirants to elective offices) as well as economic activities.

Others factors include:

1. Patriarchal institutions that tend to push women back into the private sphere.
2. Cultural and religious socialization that considers Nigerian women as subordinates and men as their superiors. For instance, some religions do not allow women to go out in public and they can only communicate through the men.
3. Poverty, that is, women do not own resources; they are usually co-owners and as such property lies in the hands of men.
4. Illiteracy: The few literate women are usually marginalized and isolated by society.
5. Repressive nature of socialization and lack of self-esteem.
6. Women's multiple roles such as reproductive, productive and community roles.
7. Lack of general security that tends to affect women more.

8. Sexual and gender-based violence.
9. There is no universal civic education from a gender perspective.
10. Lack of solidarity among women.

Factors facilitating Nigerian women's participation in the political transition process include:

1. Existence of political parties.
2. Existence of women's movements and synergies
3. Political will from government.
4. Gender-sensitive donors that tag financial support to women's participation in politics and governance issues.
5. Women who contribute actively in political campaigns or armed conflicts are rewarded with positions in decision-making.
6. Education of women, that is, educated women have more chances to participate in political processes.

NIGERIAN WOMEN'S PERCEPTION OF POLITICS

Politics is a dirty game

Politics is perceived as a dirty vocation that is reserved for unrefined people who have little scruples with bending the rules and subverting due process. Nigerians are regaled daily with the details of the unsavory actions of members of the political class. Politicians are adept at manipulating the popular will of the people. Nigerian women in politics are seen as similarly corrupt. They are treated as deviants. Contesting for public office as a woman is often considered 'unladylike'.

The demands of politics

Politics is time consuming and demands a great deal of attention. There are caucus meetings, primaries, campaign stumps, and fundraising. Participation often requires attending evening meetings. For women without supportive spouses, it is difficult to juggle conventional roles with an interest in politics. Some women in politics pay a costly price for their careers. The tradeoff may be politics for marriage and marital happiness. Female politicians are often perceived to be divorcees and marital failures (Mohanty, 1988).

Violence and threats

One of the potential disincentives to participating in politics is the crudeness of Nigerian politics which brooks no opposition and resolves dissent by visiting violence on political opponents. The 'do-or-die' nature of politics in Nigeria is barely veiled. Threats are made intermittently to warn opponents that when push comes to shove, the

side with the monopoly of violence will own the day. The spate of politically motivated killings has not helped matters.

Funding

One of the frightening bogeys that politics conjures is the figure of a potbellied, avuncular male figure that holds court in a political party as a godfather. His role is not mentoring; rather, the godfather's role is to provide a robust war chest and clear the path for the selection of the godson or daughter for the contested office. In return, the godfather receives unrestricted access to the corridors of power and inflated contracts that are rarely executed. The election process requires tons of cash to buy votes and compromise consciences. Candidates without deep pockets or wealthy backers cannot actualize their dreams of contesting for public office. Nomination forms to contest for elective offices in most parties are very expensive. According to the Gender Empowerment Index, women in Nigeria earn 0.45 of a full salary, which may partly explain why they are reluctant to actively participate in politics. On the economic frontier, limited access to credit and finance also scuttles women's dreams of participation.

Poverty

"In Africa, poverty wears a woman's face." - UN's Economic Commission for Africa. A corollary to funding is the stark poverty that confronts Nigerian women. Under stifling economic conditions, women have less access to education, credit information, skills, loans, and health care - all crucial to attaining financial independence. The combination of all these factors, added to the burdens of child rearing and housekeeping, conspire to keep women off the social and political scenes. In some cultures in Nigeria, women have no property or inheritance rights. African women are said to own just one percent of the continent's assets. This makes it difficult for them to access loans, as they do not have collateral.

CONFLICT AND NIGERIAN WOMEN IN PEACE PROCESSES

In recent decades, trends in conflict have shifted towards intrastate violence - civil war. Negotiating peace in these environments has proven to be far more multifaceted than traditional interstate ceasefires.

To effectively foster this type of peace requires more than merely having policymakers and the agents of violence at the peace table, but also hinges upon the knowledge and experiences of civil society at large. Conflict is highly gendered, and Nigerian women's

experiences during conflict are often vastly different from those of men, making their determinations of post-conflict priorities and needs distinct (Wallensteen, 2007).

The fluid environment of the post-conflict state can be an opportune moment for significant social and political change as new governance and social structures are negotiated, and the negotiation of a peace agreement is often among the most critical steps in this societal reconstruction. The post-conflict state can become an ideal terrain to facilitate women's political participation, to reinforce advancements in their status, and generally to "build back better," using the malleable conditions to build better infrastructures, foster stronger state institutions, and transform gender relations.

Numerous studies have reaffirmed that the involvement of women in political life significantly enriches policy and decision-making. Nigerian women through their insights, experiences, approaches and points of view facilitate political debates substantially from their male counterparts (Mohamed, 2000). There are indicators that a "critical mass" of women (over 30% of a given group), can wield significant influence in political decision-making: changing both the outcome and the process itself (Norris, 1996).

Researches in contemporary social sciences and humanities supports that Nigerian women are generally more collaborative and inclined to compromise than their male counterparts (Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000), rendering their place at the peace table of even greater value. Furthermore, a review of 21 major peace processes since 1992 indicates that where women have been involved in the peace process, even as silent observers, they ensure that certain number of issues that affect them are addressed and included in peace agreement, including human rights guarantees, physical, economic and legal securities and increased participatory rights (Mohammed, 2000). "Peace negotiations not only shape the post-conflict political landscape directly, through peace agreements... but also indirectly," lending legitimacy to those represented at the peace table. Through their inclusion, the status of women in society at large can be elevated, while at the same time enriching the peace-building process.

Nigerian women's participation in peace processes is thus important to make sure their needs are met. "An effective peace process should be built on the widest base of experience," and therefore, to exclude women from negotiations is to risk losing a well-rounded and functional peace agreement. In addition, a peace process is an opportunity for societal transformation.

A 2008 study of 33 peace negotiations around the world found that just 4% of participants, 11 out of 280, had been women. Another sample of 24 major peace negotiations since 1992 exposed that a mere 2.5% of signatories, 3.2% of mediators and 7.6% of negotiators were female.

In lieu of adequate access to formal participation, most

of the recent progress on increased women's participation has stemmed from women's advocacy groups in civil society. In Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and throughout Latin America and the Asia-Pacific, women's advocacy groups and female-run NGOs have played a decisive role in the peace-building process. While such involvement is of great value, increasing the presence of Nigerian women at formal peace negotiations is a critical step in ensuring that their needs are better represented, their status elevated, and peace agreements more holistic. However, the array of pervasive barriers earlier mentioned remains, stunting the involvement of women in the peace process worldwide. If women are ever to fulfill their participatory potential, these barriers must urgently be addressed.

ORGANIZING TO DEMOLISH BARRIERS

There are four keys areas where Nigerian women can focus on to tear down the barriers blocking their economic and political empowerment:

Setting agendas

Women can form advocacy groups to articulate and voice concerns about workplace issues, redistributing economic resources, and creating job opportunities for women, among other issues indicative of gender inequality. These groups can also help educate women on the implications of government policies on their businesses and participation in politics. Organizations like Baobab for Women's Human Rights and WIMBIZ have played significant roles in this regard. These and many other groups also help by bringing valuable firsthand input and experiences into the legislative process to demolish barriers like patriarchal land and property laws that make it difficult for Nigerian women to own property. These groups encourage the political class to enact legislation to encourage the participation of women. The infinitesimal percentage of Nigerian women in legislative bodies (less than 35% affirmative law) still affects the passage of gender-friendly laws in the country.

Mobilizing and networking

Regular town hall meetings for women can be convened to discuss issues that collectively affect women. The broadcast media in Nigeria can also be exploited to collate and publish issues that affect women. This is especially effective in rural areas where community radio stations are partners in communicating change. Businesses run by women can form coalitions to formulate policy positions and speak with a common voice before government. These groups can also interact

with thought leaders and think tanks to analyze the potential impact of proposed legislation on women's role in business and politics.

Spreading the word

Periodic publication of Institute of Economic Development (IED) materials that highlight specific issues can help galvanize broad support across social lines. These publications should be targeted at a broader audience, including young people. They should highlight the predicament of other demographics, like unemployed youth, widows, the aged, and persons living with HIV/AIDS. Quick wins by women should be celebrated. One such win is the recent nullification by a high court of the requirement of spousal approval in the form of a letter of consent before the issuance of an international passport to a married Nigerian woman. Young people can help spread reports of these quick wins via new media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. These social networking avenues present the opportunity to rally young people for the cause of gender equality and mobilize public opinion in favor of opening space for women's participation.

Skills and information

Skill acquisition centres should be established in rural areas for women to learn how to use modern agricultural tools, as the majority of the female Nigerian population is involved in agriculture. Nigerian women can form agricultural worker collectives where they can pool resources together to collectively acquire land and modern tools for farming. Collectives make it easier for women to access funding and training. Women can also build capacities in information technology and how it can be exploited for financial independence. They can participate in training opportunities such as Goldman Sachs Women's Enterprise and Leadership Programs.

Twenty young people can play important roles in knowledge transfer to disadvantaged women. They can volunteer during holidays to teach basic skills in modern agricultural practices, information technology, and business management. Young professionals can also volunteer to provide pro bono financial advisory services to women.

SELECTING AND ELECTING FEMALE AND MINORITY CANDIDATES

If the possibilities for international mobilization for better political representation of women and ethnic minorities are different, so are the domestic dynamics. At the domestic level, the focus of addressing the under-

representation of these groups has been on electoral rules, the role of political parties in candidate recruitment and selection, and on rules for affirmative action or quotas.

The relationship among these factors and the representation of women or ethnic minorities is not automatic, but is influenced by many intervening variables. While it is impossible to generalize across national contexts, it is important to note that women and ethnic minorities often fare very differently under similar rules. There is no single approach that is a panacea for the political under-representation of Nigerian women and ethnic minorities.

Electoral systems

Electoral systems are commonly categorized into three types. Proportional and semi-proportional systems of representation (PR) work on the basis of multi-member districts and party lists, which may be open or closed, and in which seats are distributed to candidates on a party list based on the proportion of the vote won by that party. Majoritarian systems work on the basis of single member districts (M-SMD), where one candidate is elected once he or she receives more than 50% of the vote. Finally, under mixed systems some representatives to an assembly are elected following majoritarian rules, while others are added using proportional rules. In general, the PR system is thought to produce more balanced and representative tickets. The candidate selection process under PR is more centralized. Under PR, because of the greater visibility of the whole slate of candidates, there is greater incentive for parties to present a list that *looks* like the voters. In contrast, in majoritarian systems, where candidates are selected for single member districts, the selection process is often in the hands of the local constituency party, and there is little incentive for each to pick candidates that will produce a balanced ticket at the national level.

Nominations under the PR system are also more idea-centered, whereas nominations in single member constituencies are more candidate-centered. When the focus is no longer on a single candidate, parties are free to nominate candidates who may fit less closely into the stereotyped image of a political leader. Within PR systems, there are a number of electoral variations that can be used to enhance the representation of women and ethnic minorities. One of these is cumulative voting, wherein each voter has as many votes to cast as there are candidates for a position, and may allot all or some of those votes to a single candidate. Another is preference list voting, which allows voters to specify their own order of preference within a party's list of candidates.

A similar variation, "panachage," allows voters to vote for more than one candidate across party lines. Each of these variations enables women's or ethnic associations

to organize electoral support for the candidates who seem best able to represent their group interests. The claim that PR facilitates the entry of women into elected office in established democracies has been confirmed in a series of studies. For example, in their study of stable democracies, Darcy et al. (1994) conclude that, "on average twice a proportion of women (20.2%) are currently elected to list PR systems as compared to SMD (10.2%)." Based on her study of 23 democracies, Rule (1987) suggests that whether elections are run using some form of proportional representation, or using a single-member district system, is the most important predictor of women's levels of political representation.

The relationship is contingent on a number of factors, including district magnitude and the number of candidates in each district. The circumstances of residential concentration and strongly cohesive political identity do not apply to women to the extent that they apply to ethnic minorities, making M-SMD systems more uniformly disadvantageous for women's representation. Nigerian women's organizations interested in increasing the level of female political representation are right to focus on the adoption of PR, while for ethnic minority groups, PR alone (that is, without preference voting features) may not be sufficient.

Candidate selection:

The candidate recruitment and selection process is a key factor in accounting for the social biases of a representative assembly. Parties face "supply-side" problems in attracting sufficient numbers of female and ethnic minority candidates. But there are also significant "demand-side" problems in failing to select as candidates qualified women and minorities who do come forward. Candidates suffer in particular from "imputed prejudice" wherein the party selectorate argue that the voters are not ready to elect a woman or a minority. Pippa Norris emphasizes that the composition of the party selectorate matters a great deal in determining who is elected into parliament.

In marginal seats, who gets into parliament is determined by voters, but in safe seats with a predictable outcome the selectorate have a *de facto* power to choose the MP... In choosing candidates the selectorate therefore determines the overall composition of parliament, and ultimately the pool of those eligible for government (Norris, 1996).

Where women or ethnic minorities are absent in the selectorate, parties will continue to nominate mainly white males as political candidates. Another significant structural hurdle facing women and ethnic minorities is the "incumbency factor." The electoral success of a party is regarded with extreme importance, and there is a strong belief that it is better to field an incumbent with proven electoral appeal than to run an unknown and

unproven candidate. Incumbency is always a problem for under-represented groups; however, the extent of incumbency and therefore its effect on the entry of those groups vary from country to country.

Thus far, we have examined two external obstacles - the party selectorate and the incumbency factor - to the selection of women and ethnic minorities as candidates. But for ethnic minorities, there are factors related to the groups themselves that can influence whether parties perceive minorities as viable candidates. Crewe (1983) suggested four characteristics of ethnic voting behaviour that produce ethnic electoral power, and that therefore tend to produce ethnic candidacies within traditional parties:

- (a) The full electoral mobilization of the ethnic minority, that is, high registration and high turnout.
- (b) An ethnic bloc vote, that is, uniform support for one party, or at least against one party.
- (c) A strategic location of this ethnic vote in marginal constituencies such that it has the potential to deliver seats to one party at the expense of another.
- (d) A net effect in terms of seats over the country as a whole that outweighs that of the white anti-ethnic vote.

In general, an ethnic group must form a substantial enough part of the population to attract attention in terms of the competition among traditional political parties (or form their own parties). Additionally, the group must express a fairly strong collective identity, such that members will tend to vote as a bloc for a party that appeals to group identity and interests. The geographic location and concentration of a group are important as well; the likelihood of a traditional party selecting an ethnic candidate is greatest where the party believes that such a candidate can deliver new voter support where the party has historically not performed well. Yet parties will also be cautious to avoid being identified exclusively with the interests of ethnic minorities: in order to win the election, they need to garner votes not only from the ethnic community but also from the rest of the population.

Finally, constituencies that contain a *diversity* of ethnic groups (including competing groups) may yield more ethnic candidates as parties seek to mobilize and capture distinctive portions of the ethnic vote.

Ethnic communities that satisfy more of these conditions will tend to be better represented (as candidates and, potentially, as members of parliament). It should be noted that women, as a group, rarely satisfy these conditions. There may be a significant gender gap in voting in many countries, but it is quite rare for women to share a strong collective political identity or vote as a bloc, or to have the potential to deliver seats to one party at the expense of another. In many countries and in many cities in particular, there seems to be a more realistic prospect for the accommodation of ethnic minority

interests within party structures than for the accommodation of women.

While women are obviously a large group, they do not share a strong collective political identity. By contrast, minority ethnic groups are relatively small, but often demonstrate cohesive and consistent allegiance to particular political parties. Race is a major political cleavage in the US, with African-Americans voting overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party. At approximately 12% of the population (but with a much lower turnout overall than whites) they can exert some influence over parties, especially in local areas where they are highly concentrated. A similar pattern applies among Blacks in Britain, who tend to vote overwhelmingly for the Labour Party. That these patterns have persisted despite growing socio-economic differences within these groups suggests that racial identity holds a stronger influence over political outlooks than socio-economic factors. Strong and cohesive party support among ethnic minorities is often the result of a historic link to the party, a link that endures (to a point) even when the party fails to advance the material and political interests of the group.

Yet cohesive and durable party identification among an ethnic group can be a double-edged sword. If a party already enjoys unwavering support from the vast majority of voters within an ethnic group, it gains little by promoting candidates from that group. Paradoxically, in these cases, it may be the parties with weaker support among ethnic groups who adopt a recruitment strategy to court the ethnic vote.

Quotas and affirmative action

Quotas, reserved seats, minority districts and similar statutory mechanisms of affirmative action are another route to enhancing the representation of Nigerian women and ethnic minorities. Quotas for women have become especially common over the last decade. The IDEA global database on quotas for women lists 45 countries (out of 90) where quotas for female candidates are presently mandated at the national or sub-national level, either by constitutional provision or by national law. And, there are many more countries where one or more parties have implemented voluntary quotas for female candidates. But whether or not a country has a quota is *not* a good predictor of the level of women's political representation. The average percentage of seats (lower house) held by women in countries that have a constitutional provision or a law establishing quotas for women in the national legislature, is actually *lower* than the percentage of seats held by women in countries without such a quota law. On average, women hold 15.8% of parliamentary seats in countries with quotas, compared to 16.9% of parliamentary seats in countries without quotas.

WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY

A derivative of two Greek words “demos” (the people) and “kratos” (to have strength or to rule), democracy refers to a governing system characterized by a civil-political relationship wherein elected representatives are responsible to the numeric majority (Spero and Hart, 1999). Commonly known as rule by the people (McLean, 1996), or government by discussion (Sen, 2005), democracy denotes citizens' ability to negotiate with governing bodies through voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or collectively. In application, however, democracies throughout the world take on a variety of forms and depend upon several key, yet negotiable, preconditions. These preconditions include the mobilization and social interaction of constituents, the dissemination of accessible, transparent and politically uncensored information, access to resources for the cultivation of autonomous decision-making and the promotion of rights, agency and equity that is documented at the constitutional level and embodied throughout civil society (Arora, 1999; Gleason, 2001; Ahern et al., 2000; Vissandjée et al., 2005). In sum, the degree to which governments engage their citizenry and (ideally) extend voice, agency and political participation to all constituents influences where, when, how, for whom and to what degree political empowerment may exist.

Women around the world often face daunting social, economic and political challenges. For democratic governments to deliver to their constituents, they must be truly representative, and NDI recognizes that women must be equal partners in the process of democratic development. As activists, elected officials and constituents, their contributions are crucial to building a strong and vibrant society. It is therefore essential to support women around the world because:

- (i) Women are highly committed to promoting national and local policies that address the socio-economic and political challenges facing women, children and disadvantaged groups.
- (ii) Women are particularly effective in promoting honest government. Countries where women are supported as leaders and are at the ballot box have a correspondingly low level of corruption.
- (iii) Women are strongly committed to peace building, as they often disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflict. Reconstruction and reconciliation efforts take root more quickly and are more sustainable when women are involved. By helping women become participating members of a democracy, one can look to mitigate conflicts or stop conflicts before they begin.
- (iv) Women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure and health standards at the local level. Where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development

and standards of living are also higher.

CONCLUSION

The exclusion of women from the economy and political arena is an affront to the spirit and values of democratic governance and free market economy. In fact, our society is worse off without educated and active women, because they are responsible for shaping the next generation. The onus is on young people to take the centre stage in overturning barriers to women's empowerment. Women have nothing to lose by participating in the social, economic, and policy arenas; conversely the incentives to gain are limitless.

There has been a concerted effort to ensure female representation at all levels of governance. As such, representation is now recognized as a fundamental human right in many countries that adhere to the principle of fair democratic representation. So far, the main strategies used to address the gender imbalances in the various structures of the private and public sectors are affirmative action, the quota system (where a certain number of positions are allocated to women), and through presidential appointments (in the case of parliament and cabinet). It is assumed that once the situation of gender equality has normalized, the attainment of such positions will be through a competitive process. However, it appears that it will take time to get to that stage due to the various challenges that confront women in public spaces.

Similarly, Nigerian women themselves have to create an alternative culture that will challenge the embedded traditions that dictate what women should or should not do or be, especially in the African setting.

It must be said at this juncture that countries of the world are making efforts to bridge the gap between men and women in politics. However, in Nigeria, the representation of women in government although has improved is still very low compared to what obtains in other nations of the world, particularly the developed nations. As it were, the number of serving female ministers is still very few. There is no doubt that Nigerian women have some potentials and rights to contribute meaningfully to the development of their country. Therefore, the Nigerian government should work towards achieving gender equality in democratic governance and increase women participation and access to politics. It must be realized that the role of women as home makers cannot be down played in that it equally has an extended impact on their responsibility in service. The woman touch anywhere cannot be matched.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By and large, much has been said about the challenges

of Nigerian women in aspiring for political posts and how socio-cultural factors have been a major constraint. However, the following points are recommended for Government, NGOs and individuals who are willing to fight these gender disparities for Nigerian women:

1. Ensure that in addition to national laws, relevant international instruments relating to full political rights for women such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on Political Rights of Women, are ratified, integrated into national law and implemented, especially in those countries where women are still denied the right to vote and stand for election.
2. Review the existing constitutional, political, legislative and regulatory framework, particularly in countries in transition and post-conflict states, for provisions that may hinder women equal participation, such as rules requiring high numbers of signatures to register as a candidate or high monetary deposits that can be discriminatory against women candidates.
3. Seek to achieve gender parity in all decision-making bodies by establishing incremental time-bound targets for increasing women's representation.
4. Include women in discussions on electoral system reform, such as the impact of proposed electoral systems; proportional representation or majoritarian, district magnitude and expected party magnitude; electoral thresholds; boundary delimitation; and closed versus open lists; and analyse the impact of the proposed changes on gender equality.
5. Enact special measures to guarantee women access to the legislature and decision making positions, including through legislated quotas within a proportional representation system or reserved seats with majoritarian systems with specific and effective sanctions for non-compliance. In majoritarian or plurality systems, the reserved seats should be directly elected.
6. Ensure that women and men have equal opportunities during the election campaigns, such as providing public funding, access to the state media, setting campaign spending limits, and ensuring that campaign finances and expenditures are disclosed.
7. Develop and promote gender-sensitive curriculum and teacher training on civic education for men and women.
8. Use ICT training as a tool in education and training efforts, in particular to overcome the digital divide between men and women in the use of new technologies and to provide women with equal access to information.
9. Design appropriate programmes and mechanisms to develop and strengthen a culture of ethic in public service.

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