
HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Every Society exists in order to ensure the protection of some fundamental values, principles and beliefs without which the society would cease to exist. The issue of rights, freedom and justice is therefore, indispensable in the maintenance of the cohesion of any society. Women political participation is a key to fundamental rights that plays a vital role in the general advancement of women. This paper discusses the concept of human rights and the level of women participation in politics in Nigeria. The paper revealed that in spite of the provision of the 1999 constitution, the Government Human Rights record remained poor and government officials at all levels continue to abuse women right. Women's political participation and the increase in the number of women in decision-making positions will help to put women's agenda at a higher priority level. Finally, some recommendations made include the need for sensitive investments in physical and social infrastructure, employment, social protection, and equitable participation of women in decision making processes at all levels.

Keywords: Human Rights, Women political participation, political Awareness,

Improvement in women's political participation is an important concern for several reasons. One of the reasons is the immense benefits of female decisional participation in governance while the other reason centres on the beneficial effects that female political participation has on the well being of individuals, families, and societies. Globally, mounting efforts have been made by governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental bodies to boost women political participation which is their right. Conferences have been held, communiqués have been raised and

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global platforms for actions have been drafted and adopted by different countries of the world. These forum emphasize the need to take action to facilitate women's participation in the peace process, increase the number of women in post decision-making, build their political influence, and make governance processes more sensitive to gender. Women political participation is considered as a right and paramount to global development and social reconstruction.

The Concept of Human Rights

Human Rights are those inalienable rights the constitution granted to the citizens of any nation. Human rights are universal rights or enabling qualities attached to human beings. These qualities flow from the realization that, as a matter of scientific fact, man is distinguishable from other living beings because he is a rational and moral person who must shape his life in accordance with moral and rational purpose (Lautepacht 1950: 102). No man may be deprived of these rights without grave affront to justice. (Ezejiofor, 1964:3). Human rights are inalienable rights which are conferred by God or nature and discernable by human reason. These rights include the right to life, right to free speech, right to equal treatment without discrimination as to religion, tribe, race, sex, right to freedom of thought, freedom of expression and association among others. These are man's natural rights and have been re-enacted into man made-laws by various international organizations and countries of the world. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides in Article 1: that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (United Nations, 1995: 15-26). They are endowed with reasons and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood. The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between men and women are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society (United Nations, 1999:27). In Nigeria, the government's human rights record remained poor and government officials at all levels continue to commit serious abuses against women (Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2006). Gains for women's right occurred in an isolated fashion in part because, they came primarily where the cost was least: that is women's rights were respected only when no competing interests dictated otherwise (<http://hrw.org/worldreport 99/women4.htm/tthrwreports>).

Women Political Awareness

In Nigeria, awareness about the role and need for women's political participation gained momentum in the later half of 1980's (Omu and Makinwa, 1987) This awareness was further enhanced in 1995 as a result of effective participation of Nigerian women in Beijing China. Despite this awareness, other factors holding back women in Nigeria are what the society notes as the "four C's –culture, Child care, cash and confidence (Sandra, April 2,2004). In Nigeria, women were severely side-lined in terms of representation in government. Although they constitute 50 percent of the

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population and 51 percent of voters in elections, women have never had more than three percent representation in national government, with the military government women were virtually non-existent in governance in Nigeria (CLO 2003:6) The biggest hurdle against the participation of women in politics is the increasing monetization of political contest and the resort to violence through the use of thugs. To participate in political processes, women need to enjoy the full exercise of their civil and political rights. These rights are entrenched in chapter four of the 1999 Nigerian constitution.. Specifically, the issue of the right of political participation as fundamental right is clearly stated in sections 40 and 42 of 1999 Nigerian constitution.

Women Political Participation and Human Rights

It is the rights of all men and women to participate in the political system of their country (United Nations Development Programme, 2008). Women make up approximately 50 percent of the population in most countries. In addition to this fundamental right, women's background and experience provide them with a distinct perspective and abilities that can add great value to the complex process of restoring good governance. Women political participation encompasses a wide range of actions and strategies. It includes voting and voters education, candidacy in National and local elections, lending support to candidates who carry gender sensitive agenda, campaigning against those who have policies that are anti-women's right, and advocating for the integration of women's rights agenda in the platform of candidates and parties. (United Nations, 1999: 24-29). Political participation strategies include mechanisms that enhance women's political participation. Examples of these are gender quota that allots 30-50 percent of decision making positions to women; gender mainstreaming strategies that promotes a culture of gender sensitivity in government, National Machineries for women, which have the primary role of lending and monitoring gender mainstreaming strategies of government; gender or women's budget that allots a percentage of national budget for gender mainstreaming and affirmative actions for women's advancement (United Nations, 1999:29). Women's equal participation in politics plays a vital role in the general process of advancement of women. Ayo, (1991.5) carried out an in-dept study on the constitutional recognition of women's rights and the practical protection and justification of these rights. He describes women's situation as a very unfortunate one. He stresses that the internal logic of under development gives gender discrimination a special accent in developing countries like Nigeria and argues that in spite of the provision of the 1979 constitution, retained in the 1999 constitution, the legal framework for the protection of gender in Nigeria remains inadequate. Expressing liberal views in reference to the potentialities of women (Plato 12:442) believes that, as far as the state is concerned, there is no difference between the nature of man and that of women. Women ought to be admitted freely to all the duties and rights of men. He stresses that the state loses a lot as a result of their restricted spheres of activity, (Encyclopedia of Social Sciences T₂: 442).

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According to Nyerere, (1980:50) society cannot attain total perfection without women. In Nigeria, where women issues had always been relegated to the least priority, the increase in the number of women in decision-making positions will help to put women's agenda at a higher priority level. International instruments are in place, particularly the opportunities provided by the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and the convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women ((CEDAW) should be maximized, strategies to implement them such as advocacy, policy reforms, special measures and alternative actions, accountability and evaluation system and other means should be explored (United Nations, 2005) The 1985 Nairobi forward-looking strategies also laid down the ground work for women's participation. According to CEDAW (2003) women political leadership is further strengthened to realize the agenda of people centered on sustainable development and reconstruction; and working towards elimination in law and in reality of discrimination based on gender, race, caste, among others.

Jahan (1999) emphasizes on the need to strive for a deeper understanding of the structural imperatives of the societies in which women political participation are instituted. Makenna (2005) opines that women's effective political participation will break this vicious circle in the nature of political culture in Nigeria with all its faults.

Women activists at the global arena have resulted in various strategic documents and instruments that will ensure and promote women participation. Such strategies guided government in ensuring women's equal participation in all national and local legislative bodies (WLP'S, 2002). Neither the universal Declaration of Human Rights nor the Nigerian constitution differentiated between male and female when it comes to political participation. The fundamental rights as given by God made no distinction between rights of women and men. Therefore, women's participation is a right.

Political Participation of Women in Nigeria: Historical Overview.

Historically, women played prominent role in the political history and decision making process of some traditional societies in Nigeria. The legendary role played by princess Inkipi of Igala and Moremi of Ife as saviours of their societies during warfare, to the extent of sacrificing their lives to ensure victory were remarkable. Other notable women of valour who helped in directing the course of history of their traditional societies in the pre-colonial era included Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Kambasa of Ijaw and Queen Qwari of Ilesa (Obi, 1998:134). In the pre-colonial communities with dual political systems, women were generally mobilized for theirs and their families welfare. The leader of women usually got their position of authority and influence on

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merit. They could articulate the views of women and had the financial wherewithal to maintain their status.

During the colonial era 1900s, the political set up drastically changed; along with the abolition of the kingdoms, the colonial government largely eroded the dual political system. In the kingdoms where there were women chiefs. They lost the power base and were no longer reckoned with the decision making process, the colonial authorities ignored women. The side Lining of women during the colonial era was behind the earliest mass protest movement by women in the Eastern Nigeria, the Nwaobiala movement in 1925 (Mba, 1982: 224) A major highlight in the political development of women during the colonial era was the formation of women's party in 1944 spearheaded by Mrs. Oyikan Abayomi (Mba, 1982: 224) when other political parties came on board the NCNC in 1944, Ag in 1948, NPC in 1951, women resorted to forming women's wing of the parties. Some women stood on their own merit as party members and won party elections to attend conventions independently of women's Associations such women were Mrs. M. Ekpo, Mrs. H. Lawson, Mrs. K. Fashina and Mrs. Ededem (Mba, 1982: 236).

At Independence in 1960, the 36 member senate had a woman, Mrs. W. Esan nominated by the western Region as a member. In 1961 general elections two women Mrs. Ekpe and Mrs. Janet Mokelu won seats into Eastern House of Assembly. Through bye election Mrs. Ekpo Young also won a seat into the same house. 1983 election produced the first elected female member of the senate in Nigeria in the person of Mrs. Franca Afegbua. In 1999 election of the 109 members of the senate, there were three women and also 12 out of 360 members of House of Representatives. Out of the total of 44 ministers and special advisers there were women (Unifem, 1999: 60). A lot of women and civil society groups were sent to the drawing board following the abysmal performance of women in 1999 election, of the (118,81) available positions throughout the country, women contested for 631. Out of these, a total of 181 positions were won by women (Statement and Declaration at the National Summit for all women political held at Abuja June 28th 2002:2). At the local government level, women accounted for nine out of 774 local government chairmen nation wide. Of 8810 local government councilors nationwide there were 143 women. With the widening of the political space as evidenced by the eventual registration of 30 parties for the 2003 election. The 109 members of senate of Federal Republic of Nigeria had 3 females while the House of Representatives had 21.

The British Council (2012) report reveals that women lost some of the ground they gained in 1999 at The 2011 elections. It noted that the low percentage of women which recorded a mere 9%, has earned the nation 118 position out of 192 countries in terms of gender parity. The 9% representation of women lawmakers in the lower

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House puts Nigerian women representative far lower than their counterparts from South Africa (43%) and Rwanda (65%). This corroborates the findings of the European Union on the elections that the performance of women in the National Assembly was a downward trend in comparison to 2007 elections...women were generally represented as voters and among polling workers”. The report reiterates the already known roles of women during elections that men are comfortable with the election which established women as active participants in the success of their male counterparts during elections.

It is regrettable that although women constitute the greater number of registered voters in any of the elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to win full representative positions. The role women play during the electioneering campaign and voting processes therefore demands that they be allowed to partake in leadership positions for their sacrifices to the success of the various political parties at the polls. Political appointments, supplementary seats in the National Assembly and enabling constitutional amendments to safeguard women’s position have been suggested as alternatives to female elective positions. These will remove from them the pressure of competing with the men and allow more women to be involved in policy making. The elections of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 which glaringly demonstrate that women in Nigeria are under represented.

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Table 1: Women Elected to Public Office in Nigeria 1999-2011.

Office	1999		2003		2007		2011	
	Seat available	Women	Seat available	Women	Seat available	Women	Seat available	Women
President	P	0		0	1	0	1	0
Senate	109	3(2.8)	109	4(3.7)	109	9(8.3)	109	7(6.4)
House of Reprs	360	7(1.9)	360	21(5.8)	360	27(7.5)	360	25(6.9)
Governor	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
State House of Assembly CSHA	990	24(2.4)	990	40(3.9)	990	57(5.8)	990	68(6.9)
SHA Committees Chairpersons	829	18(2.2)	881	32(3.6)	887	52(5.9)	887	-
L.G.A. Chairpersons	710	13(1.8)	774	15(1.9)	740	27(3.6)	740	-
Councilors	6368	69(1.1)	6368	267(4.2)	6368	235(3.7)	6368	-

Table 2: Women Elected to Political Office by Region (Nigeria)

2011	Governor	Senate	House of reps	State House of Assembly
North-Central	0	1	2	15
North-East	0	1	4	4
North-West	0	1	1	2
South-East	0	2	6	21
South-South	0	1	4	21
South-West	0	1	8	15

Table 3: Male and Female Contestants in April 2011 (Nigeria)

Office Contested	Gender		Total
	Female Candidates	Male candidates	
2011			
Presidents	1(0)	19(1)	20
Vice presidents	3(0)	17(1)	20
Governor	13(0)	340(36))	353
Deputy governor	58(1)	289(35)	347
House of reps	220(19)	2,188(341)	2408
Senatorial	90(7)	800(102)	890

The numbers in bracket represent elected candidates.

Conclusion

Nigeria political parties are traditionally and intrinsically male dominated. This trend of women’s marginalization in party politics runs through the political history of Nigeria and perhaps, is the most critical factor in the political underdevelopment of Nigerian women. Men hardly understand women’s potentials and quest to participate in decision making. It is a fundamental societal aberration to marginalize women in this respect, because they possess both the numerical strength and the gullibility which political participation requires. Their equal participation is not just a demand for simple justice or democracy but can be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interest to be taken into account and also broadening their opportunities and enabling them to realize their potentials as human beings.

Recommendations to Improve Women Right towards Political Participation For Development And Social Re-Construction

In order to improve effective political participation of women in development and social reconstruction of the society, it is therefore recommended as follows:

- 1) Women should be allowed to partake in election decision-making processes for effective awareness among all parties.
- 2) Relevant training pertaining to electoral activities should be given to women. This will further facilitate and contribute to some level, their participatory ego.
- 3) Efforts should also be made to address some specific problems being faced by women as they seek engagement in governance processes. Countries need to adopt an approach that focuses on supporting women in civil society through funding projects and initiatives, assisting the formation of coalitions, and conducting skills and capacity building. Governmental and non-governmental organizations should increasingly reach out to male decision-makers in mainstream political institutions to raise awareness of gender issues and strategies to promote gender equality in politics.

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- 4) Beyond the challenge of bringing a greater number of women into political participation, efforts should be made towards building and promoting gender equality in Nigeria's body polity.
- 5) Political awareness should be mounted through campaigns, mobilization, organization of seminars, workshops, conferences, symposium and / or political discussions, particularly, geared towards promoting women political participation both at National, state and local government levels.
- 6) Stimulus packages which include gender sensitive investments in physical and social infrastructure, employment and social protection should be implemented.

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