

Women and Politics in Nigeria: The Restructuring Question

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Abstract

Most human societies are known to be patriarchal-wherein male dominance in all social and political relations is unquestioned. Nigeria is not an exception; even from the pre-colonial times to present. Currently, only about 3.1% of women have been elected into political offices and about 5% have been nominated to appointive positions, despite the allotment of 35% of elective political positions to Nigerian women. In Nigeria, women constitute about 49.7% of the national population, but in spite of this numerical strength, women remain disadvantaged and insignificantly represented in many spheres of life particularly in Nigeria's politics. It is in the light of this gross under representation of women in Nigerian politics, this paper examined the need for restructuring to enhance women participation in Nigerian politics in the 21st century. The study relied on socialist/Marxist feminism and the liberal feminism theories. A review of Nigerian women political roles since the pre-colonial era was examined. Secondary sources of data were largely used with emphasis on narrative, descriptive and quantitative analysis of data employed in the study. Furthermore, Suggestions on how to enhance, promote and sustain women in the Nigeria's political growth were finally adduced in the study.

Introduction

Most human societies are patriarchal and patrilineal. (Onwuejeogwu, 1975:87-88) asserts that even in the so-called matrilineal societies of East and Central Africa like Mayombe, the Bemba and Gao, the role and influence of males is still pervasive. In this regard, gender is a socio-cultural phenomenon that divides people into various categories such as male and female with each having associated with dress modes, roles, stereotypes, among others. Thus, in most parts of Africa, women have been discriminated against through cultural and societal norms set up by the males. Women have been restricted to certain gender roles by tradition; they have been forced to accept positions lower in status than their male counterparts. The marginal position of women in most extant societies is known to have been imposed on them by environmental factors, especially, the socialization process, lack of education and discrimination by men. (Ojiakor, 2001:219). However, from the 20th century, International Conferences on women like Mexico Conference of 1975, Copenhagen-Denmark Conference of 1880, Nairobi-Kenya Conference of 1985 and Beijing-China Conference of 1995, among others (Ojiakor, 1999:70), were organized to articulate issues of concern on women, and to seek for ways of significantly involving them in societal processes such as governance, while also significantly reducing their disadvantages and oppression.

Gender disparity in political participation appears to be a global phenomenon, and literature abounds showing that the low level of women's participation at the highest levels of political activity accounts for their invisibility at the top positions of power. Such low representation cuts across countries with different political systems and at different stages of economic development. Thus over the years, women have been deprived, neglected, exploited, and oppressed, but has metamorphosed from mere house wives, hewers of wood, drawers of water, peasants on the farms to role models in the socio-economic and political milieu.

In Nigeria, women constitute 49.7 percent of the national population (NPC Gazette, 2006, 96[2]). In spite of this numerical strength, women remain overwhelmingly disadvantaged and insignificantly represented in many spheres of life particularly in Nigeria's politics. There is urgent need for restructuring the Nigerian political system and this will enhance women participation in Nigeria's politics. Restructuring has currently become the latest buzz word in the political landscape with political and non-political actors pushing forward their ideas of words that was not too long ago, an anathema to many state actors. But what exactly is the idea of restructuring? Given the view of some that Nigeria is presently a federation, it is not surprising that different political

actors would give different perspectives to the concept of restructuring. However, restructuring is simply a call for the restoration of federalism in the 21st century Nigeria. In other words, the clamour for restructuring is more stringent in countries with a federal form of government and perhaps also a federal constitution, but with a unitary practice. William Riker (cited in Stepan, 2007:4) noted that “what counts is not the rather trivial constitutional structure, but rather the political and economic culture”. However, if the political structure is restructured, there are greater chances of addressing the poor women representation in Nigeria’s politics.

It is in this light of the gross under-representations of women in politics that the paper looks at the need for restructuring and its benefits to women participation in Nigeria’s politics, an overview of women political roles since the pre-colonial era, and finally problems and solutions to low-participation of women in politics.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

It is of utmost importance to define the key concepts used in this study. These are woman, politics, political participation and restructuring.

Woman: A woman is an adult female person, who has passed the age of puberty. Womanhood was defined within the African cosmic order as “a human being endowed with all the capacities and talents required to effectively function and make an impact on all levels of life within the society (African Leadership Forum Dialogue, 1993:5). The above African definition of woman implies that human beings are equally created and endowed to effectively participate in the life of the community. In the light of the above, Women were therefore seen in the African traditional context to be effectively and dynamically involved in all levels of the social process as they actively participate in the life of the community.

According to (Zulu Sofola, 1981:52-53) the world view underscores the idea that both genders (male and female) have the same divine source even though each has its distinctive roles to play in the life of the community. In essence, one cannot do without the other, and any form of inequality is unacceptable. However, the African woman is also perceived on the following levels of her reality:

1. As a human being, a counter part of man at all levels of the social and economic order.
2. As a daughter, the counterpart of a son, with the roles and a presence which only a daughter can fill. Important and powerful institutions of daughter (e.g Umuada) have remained vital.
3. As a mother, seen as the seat of life, and plays the role of nurturing, sustenance and stabilization of life within the family in particular and the community in general.
4. As a wife, spouse to a man and partner in the business of making a home, a community and a society. (African Leadership Dialogue, 1993:5)

In light of the foregoing, if a woman is all these and perhaps more, what then is wrong with being a woman? Why then are women being treated as second class citizens, an aberration, and a necessary evil? Why mete out discriminatory and unsavory practices against her in the name of culture? Why have her opinion and ideas remained ignored in major decision making process (politics)? and the male folk assuming the role of their representatives. Why relegate her to the background and strip her of all that made her central and valuable in the socio-political and economic domain, especially now women constitute about 49.7% of the Nigerian population, this numerical strength of women should not be allowed to waste, because there is a lot talent and abilities inherent in them that is locked down. There is urgent need to maximize the capacity of the women folk, otherwise it limits the country's productivity as a nation.

Politics: The term politics is derived from the Greek word "Polis" which means city-state. Political scientists have defined politics in various ways which are complementary to one another. They all border on "who gets what, how and when?" Amaitai Etizone, sees it as the "competition for the control of the public policy making process within the organized framework of government". She explains further that in a democratic society, control is achieved privately or collectively, irrespective of gender through a process of participation. She concludes that in a modern democracy, there cannot be political power without political participation". Etizone, 1970:22).

Aristotle observes that man by nature is a political animal and politics is inevitable among men. "Politics is a word used by the ordinary man for crafty behaviour, scheming and manoeuvring for advantage" (Chikendu,2002:2). That is to say, when two or more people interact with one another, they are invariably involved in a political relationship. However, it is pertinent to note that politics has been with us before the first city-state was formed. In this regard, (Emejulu, 2005:48) adduced

that in our different traditional societies in pre-literate times, even before the advent of “civilization” and its trapping, people engaged in politics.

Political participation: This entails involvement of the citizens in some way with decision making in the political system. Robert Edward describes participation as a term which is usually applied to voluntary rather than coerced activities. He proceeds to explain the term by saying that when participation is used in political context, it is

the voluntary activities of an individual in political affairs including inter alia: voting as one of the tenets of democracy, activities connected to political groups; political movement and parties; office holding in political institution; the exercise of political leadership,; informal activities such as taking part in political discussions or attendance of political events such as demonstration; attempts to persuade the authorities or members of the public to act in particular ways in relation to political goals.(Edward, cited in UN’s Development Report, 1991).

Participation, therefore, is the voluntary involvement of eligible citizens in the political, social, and economic activities of the political system. A.M Okolie perceives participation as “freedom of expression, association, right to free flow of communication, right to influence decision making and the right to social justice, health services, better working conditions and opportunity for franchise. (Okolie,2004:53). Political participation is one of the key ingredients of democracy in its real sense.

Restructuring: Etymologically, the word “restructuring” is from its verb form “to restructure”, which, in turn, could be traced to what could be referred to as the root word: “to structure”, from which the prefix “re” was added to become “restructure”. To “restructure an organization or system means to change the way it is organized, usually in order to make it work more effectively. The term means the act of reorganizing the legal, ownership, operational, or other structures of a company for the purpose of making it more profitable, or better organized for its present needs. (Wikipedia)

Theoretical Framework: Feminists and gender scholars have rationalized various theories on women, which are often situated within the boundaries of physiology/biology, tradition, culture,

materials and modernity. Feminism is a social theory or political involvement that supports the equality of both sexes in all aspects of public and private life, specifically, a theory or movement that argues that legal and social restrictions on females must be removed in order to bring about such equality. The major assumption of feminist theory is that the gender differentiation and hence relegation of the women to the background is caused by the socialization process. Most Feminists, therefore, argue that re-socialization and awareness of the marginal position of women in the society is the key to gender equality.

The Liberal perspective on feminism applauds the importance of equality, it seeks individualistic equality of men and women through political and legal reform without altering the structure of the society. These women's social problems are addressed to bring women into occupations and professions of authority dominated by men through elections and appointments to government positions. The main contribution of this strand of feminism has been to show how much modern society discriminates against women by insisting that women and men must be treated differently. Liberal feminist theory is of the view that biological differences should be ignored in order to achieve gender equality. Women and men should be treated in a gender-neutral manner, especially under the law (Ramazanogh, 1989:19). More so, politically, Liberal feminism's focus has been on visible sources of gender discrimination, such as gendered job markets and inequitable wage scales, and with getting women into positions of authority in the professions, government and cultural institutions. Liberal feminists politics takes important weapons of the civil rights movement- antidiscrimination legislation and affirmative action programs-and uses the to fight gender inequality, especially in the job market (Lober, 2005:41). But this strand of feminism has been less successful in fighting the informal processes of discrimination and exclusion that so many women face in their career advancement.

Marxist feminist theory emphasizes the economic and psychological differences between women and men, and men's power over a woman that emerges from their different statues in the gendered division of labour as the main source of gender inequality (Lober:2005:46). Vogel .L argues that these theorists view women subordination as a class struggle between male and female, he goes further to cluster the variance in participation to the access and ownership of wealth hence proximity to power. It emphasises that capitalism gives rise to economic inequality, dependence, political confusion and ultimately unhealthy social relations between men and women, is the root

of women's oppression. (Vogel, 2013:17). Marxist Feminism advocates for women organizations that would eventually overturn the status quo at the national institutions such as parliament.

The Socialist feminism expanded the ideas of Marxist feminism beyond the family and the economy. Socialist feminism argues that gender inequality is not just the result of women's oppression as an unpaid worker for the family and as a low-paid worker in the economy. There are broader injustices from the effects of gender and class, gender and racial ethnic status, and all three combined. (Lober, 2005:64). Politically, socialist feminism calls for a redistribution of economic and social power sharing of family work would give women the opportunity to accumulate the economic and social power monopolized by men, thereby having access to high-paying jobs and positions of power at both governmental and non-governmental political power.

This paper therefore adopts the liberal feminism and socialist feminism, because if made practicable in patriarchal societies, it will enhance the contributions of both sexes to the political system/ideology is restructured to accommodate more women, the economic and social imbalances that hinders women will be addressed.

An Overview of Political Roles of Women in Nigeria since the Pre-colonial Era

Women play biological, social and political functions in the society. In the traditional setting in Nigeria, the woman was expected to give as many sons and daughters as possible to her husband. These children provide additional labour to the farm. On the social scene; the Nigerian woman plays a vital role. During festivals, women are expected to cook as many dishes as possible. They also see to the cleanliness of the village streams, markets and other public facilities. (Ochefu,2007:64-65).

On the political scene, the Nigerian woman knows what is expected of her and refuses to keep quiet in the face of injustice and tyranny. Bolanle Awe is of the view that a study of the African society will disclose many contributions of African women even in pre-literate times. These contributions she acknowledges as not being "passive but supportive" (Awe,1992:25-26). To understand the history of women in Nigeria, it is very important to divide it into three phases, viz; the pre-colonial period, colonial period, and post-colonial period. The pre-colonial period should

best be referred to as the pre-capitalist days because it predates the incorporation of the country into the world capitalist system. Despite being a patriarchal society, Nigeria has a rich history that is sprinkled with the inputs of women who have broken out of the mould to participate in politics. During this period, no geographical entity called Nigeria, existed. Historical evidence shows that there were situations where women did not only contribute to the socio-economic development of their nations but were also involved in the historical struggles of their various communities. Their positions were not merely a passive, supportive role, but it was powerful, constructive, sometimes self-sacrificing roles. The roles these historical women play can therefore serve as a springboard for future generation women to build on some of these historical women especially the legendary figures, sacrificing themselves in the service of their communities. Another feature about these women is that they struggled to liberate women-hood from the shackles of tradition, which confined them to limit responsibilities in the community. The situation often of crisis, brought out the leadership qualities of these women, it is therefore fair to say that these women started the emancipation of women.

Pre-colonial history is replete with the exploits of Queen Amina of Zaria in the 16th century who was so powerful that she waged wars and conquered the whole of Hausa land and led her armies to drive out invaders from Zaria; in Yoruba land, Princess Moremi who lived in the second half of the 18th century in Ile-Ife, in one invasion during a war allowed herself to be captured only to learn the fighting tactics of her captors and came back to train her people who later defeated their enemies and her sacrifice for her people speaks for selfless leadership that we are bereft of these days. Oba Orumpoto who lived in the 6th century was the only known female Oba in Yoruba land. Before her, Yoruba land was often attacked by the Nupe and many of them taken captives, but when she came to the throne she trained her army in such a way that they were able to attack and conquers Nupe. In Benin, Wuli Emitar who lived in the second half of the 15th century was so powerful, intelligent and highly diplomatic that she was able to restore Oba Ogun to the throne by successfully staging palace coup. Queen Obuma Achibong of Duke town in Calabar, who lived between 1854 and 1864, prevented her rivals from overthrowing her by accusing them of sorcery. In Igboland, Omu Nwagbako was so powerful and influential that when the Christian missionaries came, she influenced almost all the women to go to church. And she was also the one who signed the treaty between Queen of England and Onitsha in 1884 when it was to be taken over by the British. Princess Inikpi in the 16th century allowed herself to be buried alive in order to save her

people from being taken into captive by the Jukuns during the Jukun-Igala war. The Igala people still pay tribute to her by leaving money on the grave side. (Agomor, 2004:272-284).

During the colonial period, prominent leaders like Mrs Tinubu, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, a crusader and scourge of despotic leaders who led the Egba women on a protest against taxation in 1918 and 1938 and formed the Abeokuta Women Union (AWU) (Agaba, 2007:80-85). Margaret Ekpo and Mrs. Janet Mokelu were members of the Eastern House of Assembly 1960-1966. Other female Legislators were Mrs. Wurola Esan and Mrs. Bernice Kerry. Hajia Gambo Sawaba, was the national chairman women's wing of NEPU (Northern Element Progressive Union) between 1958 and 1966 and in 1962. She led a group of women and men in an all-night attack on their political opponents in the northern parts of Nigeria to mention a few. Also in the Eastern part of Nigeria, the deed of Nwayiriwa is replete, having led the Aba women uprising of 1929. (Vitro-Vitch, 1997:159-160).

While the post-colonial period saw the emergence of women clubs and associations with the aim of creating the necessary avenue to mobilize and address women on issues that concerned their welfare and progress became necessary. Of the women's associations, three could be singled out for their consistency and longevity. These were the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) and Women in Nigeria (WIN). In a way, the women clubs and associations were responsible for initiating and sustaining a greater part of the predominant historical, social and contemporary trends that have come to shape the way women viewed their lives and carry out their roles in the society.

On the 13th of June, 1985, the Federal Government of Nigeria signed and ratified the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in Nigeria. Subsequently, the Federal Government began to initiate policies and programmes aimed at improving the lives of women.

Babangida's government, recognizing the essence of the international concern over the plight of women set up a National Commission for Women Affairs under the leadership of a long standing female scholar and activists, Professor Bolanle Awe, and also gave a lot of visibility to the office of the First lady (the spouse of the military President). Her office supervised a national programme called the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLP). The National Commission for Women

and the BLP were meant to address the fundamental marginalization of women in society by enhancing their economic, educational and political status. In the same vein, the Abacha military government established the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs to give formal fillip to the advantages garnered under the office of the First Lady in the cause of women emancipation. The Ministry was over-shadowed by the First Lay's interest in the Family Support Programme (FSP). (Ojogbane, 2007: 94-95). Altogether, Nigerian women in these years found a fulcrum in these government sponsored programme. Thus in the subsequent years, Nigerian women in all strata began to reap the benefits of these organizations, as may be attested to in the current political dispensation.

Apart from Flora Azikiwe, wife of Nigeria's first president and Victoria Gowon, wife of General Yakubu Gowon, the various Heads of the Nigerian State were little known. Victoria Aguiyi Ironsi, Ajoke Murtala Muhammed, Yemi Obasanjo, Hadejia and Aishatu Shagari and Safinatu Buhari were hardly known by the Nigerian populace. None of them had an office at Dodan Barracks or for that matter a press secretary. The Babangida era marked a turning point in the history of women struggle in Nigeria, when Maryam Babangida institutionalized the office of the first lady in 1987. She became the first working first lady and launched the Better Life for Rural Women Programme. Other women who have made impact on the country's political scene include, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, and Late Professor Dora Akunyili. There are other women in politics even currently that have done very well and are still performing Excelently well to the political growth of this country.

The Need for Restructuring and its Benefits to Women in Nigerian Politics

The issue of restructuring is still on the front-burner of national discourse and there are various recommendations from different ethnic groups and regions. The amalgamation of Northern and Southern regions of Nigeria in 1914 which led to the formation of a country called Nigeria has been argued by some scholars to be the cradle of the secessionist issues arising in Nigeria over these years because of the existence of different ethnic groups in the country. While others argue that it was the military intervention to Nigerian politics that dislodged the good foundational plan handed over to Nigerian's by the British and the Independence/1960 constitution by state creation

and unitary declaration. (Vanguard: July 29, 2018). A few others contend that the root cause of the revival of secessionist sentiment is the marginalization of the Igbo people since the end of the 1966 to 1970 civil war. Additionally, ethnic groups also feel marginalized. Thus, the secession issues hinder effective political and economic development of the country aside other lingering issues. The clamour for secession in Nigeria by many ethnic groups like the Yoruba people to form the Oduduwa nation, the Hausa people to form the Arewa nation and the Igbo people under the aegis of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to form the Biafra nation- (which are in line with the ethnic secessionist movements) seems to be the remedy to Nigerian's socio-political problem but there is need to rethink the socio-political structure of Nigeria in order to accommodate other fragments or components to compete and successfully achieve a developed nation.

There is urgent need to restructure the Nigerian State, which could take one of three forms: (1) a unitary state, (2) a federation in which the individual units and central government are roughly equal, such as Germany and Canada, and (3) a confederation, in which the federating units are stronger than the central government, such as Switzerland. Of the above, much percentage of people argues in favour of federation, in which the current thirty-six states are replaced by six geo-political zones. The central will be less powerful but not weak, because it will retain core functions such as defense, foreign affairs, and a central bank. But the federating units would "look after themselves" without the "feeding bottle" of the central government. This implies wholesale rebuilding of revenue collection and distribution. (The Nation, June 29, 2017).

To all appearances, political restructuring in a federal polity is intended to achieve certain specific objectives. They include the following as put together by Kunle et al (2009); (1) Restructuring is meant to serve as steering mechanism to properly give focus and locus to attempts at collective identity and distributive politics. (2) Political restructuring is intended to lay an institutional foundation for a more just and a more equitable sharing of the political space by multinational groups cohabiting in a federal polity (3) Political restructuring is a better appreciation of the need for tolerance and respect for civil and civil rights of both aggrieved ethnic majorities and marginalized ethnic minorities.

The need to re-evaluate the political structure of Nigeria is widespread, and has accelerated, the country's key structures like the system of government to be practiced, whether presidential or

parliamentary system, how revenue should be apportioned, and how “federalism” should work. But there is tendency of this been opposed by those who benefit from the current system and still call the shots. Restructuring and devolution of powers will certainly not provide all the answers to our developmental challenges. The talk to have the country restructured means that Nigerians are to agree on unity in diversity, but that the political structure should be strengthen to make the union more functional based on comparative advantages. (Vanguard, June 30, 2017).

Restructuring can benefit all Nigerians, irrespective of sex, location, religion or ethnic colouration, as long as office holders’ do not abuse power. It will curb over-concentration of power in the center; it will improve leadership and accountability, and address marginalization challenges while ensuring a healthy competition among states. On the other hand, the male folks will be more accommodative to the female folks and hence increase number of women in politics from the lower to the highest levels of government, when restructuring is achieved in Nigeria. More so, restructuring will reduce the social and economic imbalances hindering women from any involvement in politics because all the federating units would ensure to employ and utilize both male and female gender effectively so as to contribute their quota to achieve national development of the state in particular and Nigeria in general.

Factors Militating against Women’s Participation in Nigerian Politics

One of the factors militating against women participation in politics is often related to the issue of marginalization. This marginalization is seen in all spheres of women’s life, and they are considered to be an appendage of the men economically, politically, socially and even emotionally; therefore making women to be subjects to the whims and caprices of the men. As (Ojogbane,2007:97) puts it, he decides what she wants, what she should do and should not do and how and when she does what is accepted, what she should be and how she should become of it. This is marginalization wheather viewed from a theological or secular perspective, since it impinges on the woman’s social, political, economic, cultural and psychological liberty in the

wider Nigerian society. Also, Okpeh, puts it in the right perspective when he conceptualized the basic problems facing women in Nigeria thus:

The contemporary Nigerian society discriminates against women, and it is this tendency in its many ramifications which breeds their marginazation, oppression and consequently exploitation by man that is responsible for their ignorance, poverty and disease. (Okpeh, cited in Ojobane, 2007:96)

If the male folk play both biological and political functions effectively, so why not the females?, it is of essence that women should be allowed to play both their natural feminine or biological roles together with political roles like their male counterparts, without hindrances to them, or with the perspective that the women in politics lack good sense of decorum. However, women should not sacrifice their function as home makers and good mothers and wives at the altar of politics.

Another problem facing women is the lack of education. Women constitute a large percentage of the illiterate group in Nigeria because in most families, parents prefer to send their sons to school instead of their daughters whom they feel her education is a waste when she gets married and get incorporated into another family. Thus, a larger percentage of girls remain uneducated, unexposed and unfamiliar with the game of politics. Similarly, lack of adequate finance is a crucial hindrance to effective female participation in politics in Nigeria. A large portion of the Nigerian female population is not as financially strong as their male counterparts. Family responsibilities and child bearing also hinder women from participating effectively in partisan political activities. During a sizeable part of their adult lives, most women are involved not only in child bearing, but also in child rearing, thus much of the time they may have wished to devote to politics is taken up by their material challenges and obligations.

However, in the 21st century Nigeria, some of the obstacles highlighted above are already started trickling out, for example, education, which is invariably a source of political, economic and social power. The number of girls admitted into schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities has increased phenomenally. In some states in the eastern part of Nigeria (like Abia, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra), there are now more females than males in schools. While in the northern part of Nigeria, a quiet but significant social revolution is now taking place among women. It may not be very long before education reaches the corridors of the Purdahs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Restructuring could be the needed trajectory to achieve the desired increase in women participation in politics, thereby effectively utilizing the numerical strength of 49.7% of women population to actively develop the nation. More so, our gender based social system should be replaced with a gender neutral one. Nigerian women must be given a sense of belonging side by side their male folk. She must be given the freedom to become what she wants and fully integrated in our national development efforts.

Through restructuring, Nigerian women will be trusted with more political responsibilities by the populace who from the lower level of politics knows the capabilities of the women been selected, appointed and elected into political offices.

Finally, since education is seen as the bedrock of development, and current statistics has shown that in the 21st century Nigeria, that there is an increase in the number of girls been educated, they should be incorporated to participate in Nigerian politics in order to tap their educative intellects effectively and to chart a positive cause in national development.

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