

WOMEN PARTICIPATIONS AND ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA: ITS IMPLICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY

¹IDREES MAHMUD GANA & ²YUSUFU AHMED AUDU

Corresponding Authors E-Mail: Mahmud.idrees@gmail.com+2348064064787

^{1 & 2} Department of Political Science, Federal University of Dutsin-Ma Katsina State

ABSTRACT

The study examined women participation in electoral process in Nigeria and how it impacts on the country's democracy. In general, gender discrimination has emerged as a significant global concern that has sparked a variety of debates among authors on the subject of women's participation and its effects. Liberal Feminist Theory and Gender Streaming Theory served as the theoretical foundation and analytical framework of this study. Data were collected from secondary sources and subjected to qualitative content analysis. It was discovered that a number of factors, including zoning formula, discrimination in law and customs, intimidation, thuggery, and violence, lack of financial support, and women's perspectives on politics, among others, had impacted on women's participation in Nigeria's electoral process. It was further demonstrated that these encumbrances make it difficult for them to vote and this undermines Nigeria's ability to maintain a viable democracy. The paper suggests that the current policy on women's empowerment be changed to take into account the current situation. Additionally, this approach places a great priority on hiring women for positions of authority in order to maintain a democratic government for growth and development in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Women, Election, Participation, Electoral Process, Sustainable Democracy*

1.0 Introduction

Women's participation in politics differs around the world, and today's discussion of development and governance are incomplete without mentioning how they participate in politics and the democratic process. Research consistently demonstrates that in many parts of the world, women still linger on the periphery of politics, and their participation in governmental structures and the democratic process remains low (Oyekanmi & Orulebaja, 2014; Akeusola, Oyekanmi & Shittu, 2018). This is in spite of the clamor for women's political empowerment by international organizations. Gender inequality in Nigeria represents a distinct dimension that exacerbates and is exacerbated by the country's governance issue, which is caused by religious fanaticism and ethnic chauvinism.

Studies show that women have been active in politics in Nigeria even before the colonial era (Denzer 1994). According to Mba (1982), from the colonial era through the post-independence period women organized and opposed all forms of oppressions that pervaded their economic, socio-cultural, and political realms. Over the past two decades, women's political representation has grown significantly, with all areas making substantial progress toward the goal of 30% female representation in decision-making (IPU, 2015). Worldwide, the proportion of women serving in national parliaments has doubled since that period. Africa has seen the fastest growth in the number of women in politics worldwide.

While Nigeria and other African countries have made little progress in this area, other African countries are making significant efforts to increase women's political representation. Since returning to democratic rule on May 29, 1999 Nigeria has held seven general elections, which would have given women the opportunity for better political representation (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023). Despite calls from around the world to increase women's participation in public life, Nigeria seems to be heading in the wrong direction. Only 157 women, 39 senate members, and 119 out of the 469-member chamber were elected at that time, as opposed to 2,665 men (616 senators and 2,041 representatives) (Premium Times, 2023).

The outcomes of the general elections held on February 25, 2023 have further highlighted Nigeria's failure to put into effect a number of treaties and legislation it signed in order to ensure women's participation in politics. Only 3 of the 92 women who ran for the Senate in the February elections were successful, while only 15 of the 286 candidates for House of Representatives seats were declared winners as at the time of writing this paper as many election petition cases were still pending at the electoral tribunals. Given that women's role in Nigeria's socio-economic and cultural landscape appears to be growing, it is surprising that

there has been little advancement in women's political representation. It was anticipated that as women's role in society grew, so would their participation in politics.

For Ibeanu (2009) there are four significant socio-economic and cultural reforms that might significantly improve the status of women in politics in Nigeria. The first is that women now have a greater "voice" and a higher visibility in the workforce, in volunteer work, and in many other fields of professional and public activity. The second is the cultural barrier to how women are viewed in public affairs is gradually but steadily eroding over the past three decades. The third is the quickening pace of activist women's organizations' activity in favor of more women engaging in politics, which has led to an increase in the number of women running for office. The fourth is the growing propensity of women to assume economic responsibilities in the home that were formerly held by men and to challenge the stereotype of the "male as the breadwinner" in many middle-class and low-income homes.

Important research on women's political engagement in Nigeria have analyzed women's marginalization in both appointive and elected offices in a one-sided manner. Political scientists, political historians, and political philosophers have all adopted similar methods, leaving a gap in the literature that has to be urgently filled. There have been heated debates over whether or not women should get involved in politics in Nigeria throughout the years. Some contend that social conceptions that overlook women's significant contributions and place them in a subordinate position to men in the political structure of the country have led to their perception as the weaker sex. Even while all citizens now have the legal right to democratic governance, indicating that women are not legally excluded from government in Nigeria, various obstacles still prevent them from fully participating. To expand and broaden the Nigerian government's commitment to democratic governance, which by definition encourages diversity and the engagement of many groups; more women need to participate in the democratic process. Therefore, women cannot have a significant impact until they have attained the necessary critical mass. In view of sustainable democracy in Nigeria, this study examines the nexus between democracy and women's participations within the context of ongoing downgrading and marginalization of women in Nigeria.

Given that it is thought that there are no constitutional restrictions on women's participation, the political enfranchisement of women in Nigerian politics appears to have maintained, at least on the surface, a level of gender equity politically. But what specific issues and opportunities do women face when trying to get involved in politics? It might be argued that women's movements play a significant role in the rise of women's political engagement.

It is against this backdrop that this study examines women participation in Nigeria's electoral process and its implications for sustainable democracy in the country. The paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction. Key concepts are clarified in section two. Theoretical framework is the focus of section three while section four discusses women as political contestants in Nigeria. In section five, factors that hinder active women participation Nigeria's electoral process are examined while in section six, the paper draws conclusions and makes some useful recommendations.

2.0 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 The Concept of Gender

The variety of traits used to define and distinguish between masculine and femininity is known as gender. These traits may include biological sex (i.e., the condition of being male, female, or an intersex variation), sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles), or gender identity, depending on the viewpoint. In the current sense, the idea of gender is a relatively new development in human history. Gender was not understood in the ancient world in the same way that it is understood today in the humanities and social sciences. For the majority of history, the word "gender" had been connected to grammar, and it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that it began to shift toward being a fluid cultural construct.

Gender refers to the social characteristics and possibilities associated relationships between girls and boys, women and men, and women and women. These characteristics, opportunities, and interactions are socially formed and acquired through socialization techniques. They are responsive to context, time, and flexibility. Gender dictates what behavior is acceptable, expected, and valued from a man or a woman in a certain setting. In the majority of communities, men and women have varying means over resources, varying opportunities to make decisions, and varying roles and responsibilities. Gender is a part of the larger socio-

cultural milieu. Other important variables in socio-cultural analysis include age, ethnicity, socio-economic level, race, and class.

Over time, gender has depicted women as the weaker sex. According to the gender stereotype, women are primarily interested in fashion and beauty and have little patience for profound thought (Awajiusuk, 2015). According to this way of thought, female children are educated to see themselves as inferior, and when they become adults, their main responsibilities are caring for the family and having and raising children. In contrast, male children begin to receive leadership training at a young age (Awajiusuk, 2015). Women who participate in politics go against the gender norms that have been allocated to them culturally.

2.2 Women Participation: Towards a Conceptualization

The major caretakers are women and at the center of the family, as well as the protectors of society's social, cultural, and basic values; therefore, full community development is impossible without their remarkable cooperation and effective participation (Omoruyi et al 2008). Despite the fact that women's participation and contributions to any democratic state's political and socio-economic prosperity are immeasurable; they are yet to attain equality in Nigeria's politics and national life.

Since women became aware of their rights, they have continued to compete with the men in all spheres of human endeavours (Fasugba, 2000). Many women currently participate in activities and vocations that were once regarded to be solely the provinces of men. Since the first republic, Nigerian women have faced many obstacles that have worked against them in the political sphere. However, the present democracy has been hailed as a new beginning for women's political participation because it has more women in elected and appointed positions of government than any other democracy in the political history of this country.

Women's dogmatic management shown to have a number of positive social effects, including the reduction of inequality (WEF, 2017); an increase in cross-party and cross-ethnic cooperation (Markham, 2013) Also, a higher priority is given to social problems like wellbeing, teaching, parent leave, and retirement fund. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that women in their communities are especially influenced by women's political participation. The presence of women in decision-making positions throughout the public and private sectors is positively correlated with factors like female voter turnout, female political participation, and public service responsiveness to women (Burns, Schlozman, &Verba, 2001).

To most political commentators, women ought to be more involved in Nigerian government and politics. Since its inception, Nigeria has had both democratically elected and military governments, and all of them have acknowledged that women have not been treated equally relative to men in the country.

2.3 Electoral Process Conceptualized

Elections are one of the characteristics of democratic forms of government, especially representative democracy. Elections are essential to the functioning and survival of democracy because they establish the degree of citizens' freedom in choosing who will represent or rule over them in government (Ajayi, 2015). Elections are one of the ways a democratic government can be established and realized, especially in the modern era. In fact, because direct democracy is no longer workable in the modern world, modern representative democracy can only be achieved through the electoral process. Therefore, it is claimed that democracy cannot be implemented or institutionalized without elections. Due to the relevance of elections to the democratic process, any issue relating to the electoral process would directly affect and have an effect on the democratic institutions. Therefore, discussing the electoral process is essential to discussing democracy (Nnadozie, 2007).

The electoral process consolidates many societal needs into a small number of options and ensures that a range of viewpoints are represented in the arena of policymaking. As a result, the procedure gives the political establishment credibility upon which to erect their regime and set their policies (Jinadu, 1995). In essence, a number of actions interact during the electoral process. The announcement of transition programmes, the appointment of electoral managers, the announcement of the election schedule, voter registration, voter education, voting, election monitoring and observation, security and surveillance of the election process, the announcement of the election results, and the resolution of disputes arising from the conduct of the election have all been identified as essential parts of the electoral process in the existing literature.

2.4 The Concept of Sustainable Democracy

According to Asua and Udofia (2016), democracy is a type of rule in which citizens can vote for officials to represent them and participate in political decision-making. Consequently, this paper views democracy as a type of governance that entails the transfer of the people's sovereign power to the elected in order to both establish a government and to legitimate the exercise of governmental control by the created government over the people. In a self-ruled state, the people are the owners and custodians of the autonomous power over the administration, which they delegate to the elected officials. Citizens must participate in true democratic governance, usually through elections. The result of democratic government without the people's sovereignty through elections is absence of dividends of a true democracy (Obiora, 2017)

Sustenance is known as the process by which democracy gains a broad and deep level of legitimacy among its constituents, making the likelihood of its collapse very low. It entails societal and institutional adjustments that regulates democratic politics and reduces its unpredictability. To achieve this normalization, civil society must expand citizens' access, cultivate democratic citizenship and culture; extend leadership recruitment and training and improve national integrative instruments, among others.

The act of defending and advancing the people's right to vote, as well as democratic culture and principles, in a society is known as sustainable democracy. It is the process of fostering a healthy democratic environment and developing democracy in all of its facets for the benefit of both present and future generations. In order to maintain a healthy democratic practice in a society, sustainable democracy necessitates considering how to address the root cause(s) of anti-democratic behaviour by combining political education, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Sustainable democracy is therefore a logical process of modifying the mindset and behavior of the populace as well as the institutions of government through ongoing political education that will enhance democracy in a society.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the eclectic approach. It is anchored on Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) and Gender Mainstreaming Theory (GMT).

3.1 Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT)

The Liberal Feminist Theory was propounded by Mary Wollstonecraft. The theory promotes the idea that women should have the same full range of rights as men, and as a result, be free to choose their place in society and pursue their full potential in a level playing field with men. In other words, no artificial hindrance or barrier should exist to hinder women from engaging in any lawful business they think necessary. The argument goes on to assert that no sex should receive undue favoritism based on their gender, and they should have equal access to opportunities and privileges.

Women are typically at a disadvantage in relation to societal cultural standards, religion, and political ideas, hence Ako-Nai (2005) claims that feminism is characterized by looking at the man-woman connection. The feminist ideology, which seeks to free women from the institutions that have held them back, is founded on the inequity that has been created.

Because of the erroneous notion that females are inherently less educated and physically capable than males, Nigeria is an unquestionably patriarchal country where men control women in all domains. As a result, women frequently face discrimination in society. The supposition that women are subordinated stems from a system of social and legal prohibitions that keep them out of the so-called public sphere and this consequently hinder their success in life. This study promotes active female participation in electoral politics at the gladiatorial level in accordance with this theory and in accordance with the ideals of the feminist movement, which has been created to advance the interests of the female gender and removal of all blockades that prevent females from achieving parity with men in politics.

3.2 Gender Mainstreaming Theory (GMT)

The concept of gender mainstreaming was first proposed at the 1985 Third World Conference on women held in Nairobi, and has since then been pushed in the United Nations development community. The theory is based on feminist political framework that takes into account gender consciousness, gender awareness, and the purposeful integration of gender-sensitive practices into organizations and the society at

large. It has evolved over time from a theory and notion to a tactic and/or signal for highlighting exclusionary tendencies and proposing and fostering inclusivity (Anderson, 2018).

Gender mainstreaming was developed as a strategy to address the issues facing women, such as the recognition of the disparities in household power where decisions are made, unpaid work, the feminization of poverty, differences in legal status and entitlements, discriminatory practices, gender-based violence, and ultimately differences in legal status and entitlements. In determining who should be consulted and how, on matters such as the formulation of the issue, the definition of information needs, and assessment of options (UN 2002) as well as how policy options would be formulated and presented to capture gender equality issues.

Decentralizing to achieve equality, imagining an equitable future by utilizing gender impact assessment techniques, gender budgeting, and gender disaggregated statistics are all examples of gender mainstreaming. By integrating gender-sensitive behaviours and norms into the frameworks of public policy; gender mainstreaming illuminates a wide variety of actions that institutionalize equality. According to Daly (2005), gender mainstreaming should cover both the formulation of policies and theorizing political strategy.

The adoption of gender mainstreaming theory for this study is based on the understanding of the theory's relevance in promoting gender equality. This has been extensively discussed using examples from different nations. For instance, the Constitutions of Nigeria's two most important political parties include provisions for a women's caucus and the office of women leaders at the federal and state levels. Articles 14.20 and 14.21 of the All Progressives Congress (APC) Constitution established the positions of national women leader and deputy national women leader, who are responsible for mobilizing women and developing and carrying out strategic programmes that will endear the party to Nigerian women in cooperation with the party's recognized zonal and state women leaders.

4.0 Women as Political Contestants in Nigeria

Women have not had much of an impact on Nigerian politics since Hugh Clifford's Constitution, which established electoral politics in 1922. Nda (2003) asserts that women have participated in decision-making at all levels at a very low rate; leading to the conclusion that, although making up a bigger number of active voters, women were grossly marginalized in Nigerian politics between 1999 and 2023. Both men and women exist in the society, thus it stands to reason that both of them should take an equal part in politics. The democratic ideal, which emphasizes the equal representation of all interest groups in politics, lends credence to this supposition. Separate studies conducted by Dahl (1971) and Okeke (2015) identified a crucial characteristic of a democracy as the government's ongoing response to the needs of its constituents, who are treated as political equals.

Despite the high proportion of women over 20 years old, women continue to face discrimination in the political systems even in democracies, especially when it comes to running for offices and appointments to high-ranking positions. While Nigeria continues to rank 139th out of 156 nations in the list of countries with the largest gender gap (Kareem 2022), women's representation in elective positions at the federal and state levels has not increased above 6% since 1999 (Womaniesto 2021), indicating a significant reversal in Nigeria's most recent elections.

For instance, 1,552 women contested in the 2023 general elections, according to data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Among the positions that were open are the Presidency (President/Vice-President), Governorship/Deputy Governorship, Senate, House of Representatives, and State Houses of Assembly. The information was compiled using the INEC's list of candidates. History has shown that few Nigerian women participate in politics (Punch.ng, 2023). Further studies showed that 288 women contested for seats in the House of Representatives out of the 3,122 candidates, representing 8.35 percent of 1,101 aspirants competing for Senate seats. An additional state-by-state analysis reveals that, out of the 36 states in Nigeria including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), five did not field a single woman as a candidate for the Senate and one did not do so for the House of Representatives. The states deficient in this regard are Jigawa, Kano, Sokoto, Taraba and Yobe for the House of Representatives and Zamfara for the Senate.

Despite women's greater political awareness and involvement, these developments reaffirm historical myths of women's marginalization in political representation. Minimum effort is exercised in allocating quotas to

women on the basis of their outward appearance (Pogoso, 2012). There are four approaches for examining the difficulties of women's political representation and participation in politics and administration (Afolabi & Arogundade, 2003). These include access, involvement, representation, and transformation. Access to political institutions, participation (which includes control of power within such organizations), and quantitative and qualitative representation will ultimately result in a social and political transformation of the polity. To increase women's participation, these four conditions must be realized. Three factors back up the notion that having more women in politics is crucial: Politics is first and foremost an important context for decision-making. It is up to people holding official positions in the government to decide how to distribute the available scarce resources, such as tax money among others. Politicians often make decisions that favour certain people at the detriment of others. Politicians frequently take stances that support some behaviours while opposing others; influencing the decisions that people make on a personal level. Second, political influence is a useful resource. One social institution that is impacted by politics is the family. Third, having power is required to participate in politics (Paxton, 2010).

Factors Hindering Active Women's Participate in Nigeria's Electoral Process

Women who want to participate actively in party politics in Nigeria face many challenges. Some of the variables directly responsible for some of these challenges are as follows:

Zoning Formula: To ease the concerns of the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria; it became imperative to introduce zoning formula in the county's electoral politics. It is thought that if politics were to follow the tenet of "survival of the fittest" or the maxim "might make right," minority who are not only numerically weaker but may also have lower educational attainment may never hold certain political positions. Therefore, zoning is being used at all levels to make elective positions go round in order to ensure that the privileged groups do not use their strength to dominate the political landscape at all times. It has been suggested that zoning is undemocratic because all competent candidates are not allowed to run, even if it is meant to ensure that no area is permanently barred or discriminated from a particular political office. Additionally, it promotes mediocrity because the finest might have slept off. But this is not the issue at hand. The problem is that it is also employed to snare undesirable candidates. Strong women contenders are typically "zoned out" by the political parties at the lower levels (especially state and local government levels), where women's impact is much more felt than at the national level.

Discriminatory Laws and Practices

In many modern countries, customary practices are discriminatory because they devalue women's self-worth and treat them as property that belongs to men. The overall effects of gender bias, cultural norms, and practices have made women feel inferior to men and put them at a disadvantaged position in the socio-political landscape, even in urban areas. For example, the aspiration and participation of Senator Aisha Binani in the gubernatorial elections of Adamawa State brought about many controversial and discrimination along the cultural and religious line. Additionally, women overplay their "feminist posture" as a result of these socially built norms and stereotype roles because they accept their status as "weaker sexes," overemphasize the delicate aspect of their sex, and associate outstanding performance with men. For instance, most traditions favour sending a boy to school over a girl, who is supposed to take care of the siblings and get married off. This slightly increases the number of illiterate women and makes it more difficult for them to compete with their male counterparts in politics. The Nigerian federal law contributes to this discrimination rather than being a protective body for the women. Section 6 of the Nigerian Criminal Code does not recognize spouse rape; Sections 353 and 360 of the Criminal Code spell out lesser punishment on assaults where the victim is a female; Section 55 allows wife's chastisement by the husband but denies the wife similar rights on the husband. According to Olateru-Olagbegi and Afolabi (2011), some of the cultural and religious beliefs have been in practice for a long time such that they are now embedded as legal norms in the society. As a result, equality laws and international instruments, which should protect women's rights, are violated in the name of the age-old beliefs and cultural practices.

Intimidation, Thuggery and Violence

Even when their fellow males employ violence, thugs, and intimidation against male hopefuls just as much, they have a bigger impact on female aspirants. Women are typically more sensitive than men, so they are less likely to use violence and thuggery in their political campaigns. In contrast, men use every weapon at their disposal to win elections. Women who lack the resilience to withstand the debilitating effects of

political violence and thuggery directed at them have no choice but to leave the race; this explains the relative apathy of the female population in Nigeria's political process. In connection with the foregoing, women typically find it challenging to navigate the choppy waters of Nigerian politics. Women, especially those who are married among them, are unable to attend the political parties' midnight caucus sessions, where the majority of the time, important decisions are made and positions that are meant to be up for grabs are divided. If the husband is politically indifferent or the immediate family is unsupportive, the situation is made worse. In the 2019 governorship election in Kogi state for instance, a People's Democratic Party (PDP) women leader, Mrs. Salome Abuh was shot and set ablaze at her residence in Ochadamu in Ofu Local Government Area (LGA) of the state on November 18, 2019 by suspected political thugs (Odogun, 2019). This kind of brutal killing in the name of politics is enough to scare women away from actively participating in Nigerian politics.

Lack of financial backing

Due to their long history of discrimination and marginalization, women are at a disadvantage financially. Political campaigns are costly and need strong financial support to be successful. Over time, the sensual division of labor and sex-based employment opportunities have given men productive gender roles and given them an advantage over women in terms of purchasing power. This economic inequality benefits men at the expense of women. Only a small percentage of wealthy women have the financial means to support political campaigns.

Woman's perspective on politics

Some scholars contend that high political virility is the cornerstone of Nigerian politics. These people have the ability to compete in an uncertain environment, the capability to use force when necessary, and the capacity to march violence with violence. Men are perceived as being more competitive, strong, independent, and willing to fight in political endeavors; but women are perceived as being too passive to participate in politics and administration. The societal norms and ideologies that, through socialization, created different gender roles according to biological distinctions also have an impact on this consensus. Women are further marginalized in politics due to their view of it as a dirty game and their fear of violence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The subject of women's political participation in Nigeria is crucial. Since women have historically been marginalized politically, there is a greater awareness of the underrepresentation of women in public life. However, the main reason why most women get involved in politics is to help other women; this is their fundamental duty, and it is on this basis that the majority of women succeed in getting elected to public offices. Even though they often perform at the highest levels in both the public and private spheres, women's potential to lead is frequently hampered by a vicious cycle of hurdles. Both internal and external barriers, such as patriarchy, societal and cultural stereotypes, the difficulty of balancing parental and professional obligations, and a lack of networking, have severely impeded women's effectiveness as leaders. Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are made:

- i. The women should create a network of women leaders so that they would be able to share their leadership accomplishments and challenges so as to motivate other women who wish to be leaders. There is an urgent need for the modification of the present women empowerment policy to reflect the current scenario.
- ii. Political parties should establish a network of support for potential candidates by matching them with experienced female politicians who will serve as mentors and help young or aspiring female politicians build their capacity in order to improve and develop them in advance for future elections.
- iii. There is a need to create a legal fund to support female politicians who wish to contest elective positions at all levels of political process.
- iv. Additionally, as a strategy for democratic government for sustainable development in Nigeria; high attention should be given to the recruitment of women to positions of authority.
- v. Lastly, Nigerian women must be resolute in their pursuit of the implementation of the three crucial gender policies, namely the Nigerian Gender Policy (NGP), Political Party Gender Policy (PPGP), and INEC Gender Policy (IGP) in the country's electoral process.

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