

Challenges and Prospects of Women Political Participation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigerian women are squeezed out of electoral competition despite the numerical size they occupy in Nigeria's population. This disposition is aided by religious, cultural, biological and even cognitive dynamics. This has over the years limited their participation in electoral competition in Nigeria especially during the current Fourth Republic. This paper investigated the theoretical literature on women and electoral competition, impediments to women participation in electoral competition in Nigeria and possible ways that will encourage or ease women participation in electoral contests in Nigeria. Although it visited a background, this paper did not look at electoral competition in pre-Fourth Republic civilian dispensations. Through documentary analysis and one anonymous interview, the paper found out that women all over the world face challenges in electoral competitions including the most advanced democracies. It also found out that the situation in Nigeria is bleaker as women are politically decapitated and are made décor materials during electoral competitions. A major finding of this paper is women face social lynching, a form of blackmail, in their political ambitions. Finally, the paper found out that women participation in electoral competition can be encouraged by empowering women with quality education, and making personal trajectories more important qualities in registering and voting candidates in elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, Participation, Social Lynching, Electoral Competition, Gender.

Introduction

Democracy denotes the universal right for men and women to seek or aspire to leadership through elections. It does not limit the level where certain section of a society can compete for. However, human nature to dominate others has sidelined and stereotyped an important section of society from gaining access to political power through marginalization and other deliberate checks in electoral competition. In Nigeria, women have intentionally been restricted in electoral competition by exploiting religious and cultural settled beliefs as well as biological and cognitive abilities of the women.

Women constitute more than 50 per cent of world as well as Nigerian population (Agbalajobi, 2010). For a society to be democratic, the women bloc needs representation as 'nothing for women without women'. Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civilian rule, the debate that women have been constrained in electoral contests has been torching. Women groups, successive Nigerian civilian governments through policies such as The National Gender Policy and scholars such as Momodu (2003) have argued on the need to have more women participation in electoral contests. Despite these calls, the situation remains bleak.

Women Participation in Electoral Competition in Theory

Men are guardians over women by what Allah has favored some over others and by what they spend of their wealth.

The Holy Qur'an, Chapter Al Nisa 4:34

Let your women keep silence in the churches for it is not permitted unto them to speak. But they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

Corinthians, 14:34-35

Feminist theorization was started in the early late 18th century by Mary Wollstonecraft in her writing, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures of Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). Mary Wollstonecraft was not interested in equality of men and women per se but that the woman has a larger role in society than just keeping the home front. Consequently, several perspectives (Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, black feminism, critical feminism) of feminism have sprang up deriving inspiration from her work.

Gleason (2001:232) defined political participation as the involvement of citizens in public institutions through voting, campaigns, leadership and even lobby. Democratic constitutions have, since the 1960s, "enfranchise women" (Conway, 2001) to compete in elections. She further argues that in a "liberal culture" that values equality and freedom, women participation in electoral contests leading to positions of public decision making is common.

The feminist theory of women participation in electoral politics can be said to be a sociological theory derivative in that it expands from one aspect of it. One perspective of the feminist theory is the decolonial perspective. Developed by Akhona Nkenkana (2015), this theory seeks to explain domination of women by men in politics as a function of the "coloniality of gender" which packs the perennial marginalization of women in politics and society. Citing historical, cultural and contemporary situations, Nkenkana (2015) noted that until Africans divest themselves of these predetermined mindsets, the challenges of women participation in politics will remain.

Another perspective is the sociological feminist theory, as modified by Conway, Steuernegel and Ahern (1993). It emphasizes cultural forces as impediments to women participation in electoral competition. The theory also seeks to explain low women participation in electoral competition as a hangover of the patriarchal nature of societies. That is, male dominance plus relegation of women by them in politics and decision making makes it difficult for women to participate in electoral competition. Another aspect of this sociological feminist theory stems from the settled view of the religious establishment on what roles women have in society. The dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, do not offer women roles in public or political leadership. This therefore has made the participation of women in electoral competition low globally. However, despite this, women have anyway become leaders in certain Muslim countries: PMs Benezir Bhuto (Pakistan), Sheikha Hasina (Bangladesh), Tansu Ciller (Turkey) and President Atifete Jahjaga (Kosovo).

In explaining this, Conway, Steuernegel and Ahern (1993) rightly submit that this has developed social norms and role expectations that assign women to domestic life and even prescribe work roles like nursing, clerical, secretarial, or teaching for women. Looking at the past practices, this is true with all societies including the democratic ones. In contemporary times, too, it is not difficult for one to notice cozy plans by men dominated societies to allow women contest in elections and making sure they are defeated at polls. This paper therefore adopted this modified sociological feminist theory in analyzing the challenges of women participation in electoral competition in Nigeria as the theory is able to explain the root of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, sociocultural and even the psychological factors that constrain women from effective participation in electoral competition in Nigeria.

Participation by women in the election process is one of the indicators of liberal democracies. This involves the formal and informal avenues in which women partake in electoral competition. For example, women can partake in electoral competition by getting registered and contesting for elections as candidates seeking political office in either the legislative or executive arm of government.

Constraints of Women Participation in Electoral Competition in Nigeria since 1999

Momodu (2003) argues that women participation in electoral competition can only be seen in real numerical as well as qualitative representation in electoral contests. Although electoral contests are not guarantee for political power, the fact that women partake in elections as candidates will serve as corollary to access to political power. One is therefore compelled to state that women participation in electoral competition in Nigeria is dismal especially if the observation of Ruqayya Momodu (2003) is to be considered in analyzing the number of women registering and contesting as candidates of large political parties.

In Nigeria today, many factors limit the level of women participation in electoral competition. However, most notable are: sociocultural, socioeconomic and psychological constraints. As stated earlier, sociocultural issues affect participation in electoral contests as most communities in Nigeria are still configured in the traditional patriarchal mode where men call the shot. This is due to religious as well as cultural reasons.

As quoted earlier (The Holy Quran and The Holy Bible), the two dominant religions in Nigeria all limit the roles of women in society to largely domestic affairs or at least to the instructions their husbands or guardians. However, according to Elias (2013) Islam does not entirely restrict women from aspiring to public role. Women can seek to serve society in any roles they desire except the leadership of prayer and command of the military. If this is so, then women cannot aspire or contest the office of the President of the Federal Republic as that office comes with the responsibility of the Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces and as such it is off limit for the Muslim woman to contest. However, women can still contest other positions that do not entail leadership of the Armed Forces such as legislative and even the office of a state governor.

In the northern Nigeria, the people psychology goes with the religious interpretation of limit of the role of women to domestic as well as other public leadership representation on issues concerning women and children. From 1999 to date, fewer women have contested for public positions in northern Nigeria. Hajiya Najaatu Mohammed led the charge by contesting Kano Central Senatorial elections against late Alhaji Kura Mohammed. The elections was overturned to favor the male candidate, Alhaji Kura Mohammed. What is instructive about this case is that it is a valid instance that conforms to the patriarchal nature of electoral contest in northern Nigeria. It also shows how establishment leaders use religion and culture to manipulate the results of electoral contests involving women to their advantage.

Further in northern Nigeria, the few women that held political appointments at national and state level also successfully contested and won elections, and in many instances defeating

male candidates. These women had this edge due to their closeness to the corridors of power, their political exposure and their financial strength. In Kaduna State, former Finance Minister, Nenadi Usman, contested and won the Kaduna South Senatorial seat in 2011. In Yobe State, Hajija Khadijah Bukar Abba Ibrahim, a commissioner in the Bukar Abba Ibrahim Administration, contested and won the House of Representatives seat in 2007. She re-contested and won in 2011, 2015 and resigned later in same year to become a minister in the President Muhammadu Buhari government. Honorable Khadijah Bukar Abba Ibrahim's success in electoral competition may not be successful due to her husband's political influence alone but her late father Waziri Ibrahim's political empire as she re-contested and defeated her stepson, whom her husband, Senator Bukar Abba Ibrahim "anointed as APC candidate" (Matazu, 2019) for the Damaturu/Gujba/Gulani/Tarmuwa Federal Constituency seat in 2018 primaries.

In 2015 in Taraba State, a woman, Senator Aisha Jummai Alhassan, for the first time contested the office of a state governor in a major electoral contest in northern Nigeria. According to News Agency of Nigeria, NAN (2015) Senator Alhassan was to contest against PDP candidate, Mr Darius Ishaku. It should be observed that given the patriarchal nature of politics in Nigeria, 'Mama Taraba' as Senator Alhassan's supporters fondly call her, may not have made it in the primaries had she not been a sitting senator and the political backing she enjoyed from party stalwarts like Alhaji Atiku Abubakar.

In southern Nigeria, electoral competition is still dominated by men although financial resources rather than patriarchy is the major variable that determines their success or otherwise in elections. Many women have won elections into legislative offices and even the executives offices as women at different times became Deputy Governor in Lagos and Ekiti States.

In national politics, a woman, Honorable Patricia Eteh, emerged as Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2007 (2007). Sarah Nnadzwa Jibril contested the 2011 PDP Presidential Primaries but lost to Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Although Mrs. Jibril has been in politics for a long time, this author believes her 2011 contest and the emergence Honorable Eteh as Speaker was pushed as a cosmetic in order to serve western audience that democracy is becoming entrenched in Nigeria.

The National Gender Policy: A Critique

In recognizing the low participation of women in governance, the Olusegun Obasanjo Administration passed the National Gender Policy into law. However, a fallacy in National Gender Policy Document is the acceptance of same differences patriarchy, culture and psychology put on women. According to this document, published by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development: "The gender problem should address the systemic inequalities between women and men in the society **without ignoring the fundamental differences between them**" (FMWASD, 2006:7 [emphasis ours]). This is an acceptance by a woman minister of the status quo between women and men in the society. The document did not make a serious case for women participation in electoral competition. It only suggested the need to have equity in "gender participation in politics and to draw up mechanisms for the empowerment of women in politics" (FMWASD, 2006:79). One would expect, the Ministry under a lady Minister to produce a more assertive document than this one which will put more emphasis on women participation in electoral competition. The document main focus was the issues of HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, poverty and others which are areas that seek government and foreign donor funding patronage on which "chop-I-chop" (Kaoje, 2009 cited in Suleiman, 2016: 326) can go.

Social 'Lynching' and Women Participation in Electoral Competition in Nigeria

In her thesis, Carmen McCain (2014:45) stated that the practice of making private sex video by the male partners with sole intention of blackmail has been a major factor militating

against the participation of women in electoral competition. As McCain rightly observed, the Nigerian cultural values frown on exposing the female body. Therefore, women that have suffered social lynching by their partners lose self-esteem and confidence. It will be difficult for such women to declare any political ambitions as the society will challenge them with those scandals.

Abdalla Uba Adamu (2014) further explained that a new culture of communication is forming in Nigerian media space that seeks to expose sexual clips or pictures of celebrities or politicians to public in order to blackmail them. Terming it “new imperialism in media flows”, he charged that many victims of such scandals are women celebrities in Nigeria. Pointing the case of Maryam Hiyana, a Kannywood actress who was *lynched* by releasing her private sex video to the public, Adamu (2014:39) stated that it will be very difficult “if not impossible” for her and “even her children” to aspire to political leadership as the scar will remain for a long time.

With another data from an anonymous interview this author conducted, this paper finds out that a former female Minister was blackmailed into stepping down her ambition to contest senatorial elections in 2015. Therefore in addition to other many factors, social lynching will continue to deter women from participation in electoral competition in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Women participation in electoral competition in Nigeria has been constrained by the multiple factors of culture, religion, psychology and of late, social lynching. This has restricted women participation in electoral competition typically to political mobilization and in many instances, political cosmetics. This paper disputes the argument that any “affirmative action to reserve” (Agbalajobi, 2010: 79) certain percentage of elective positions for women as panacea to their perceived marginalization in electoral competition.

It is the opinion of this paper that education, among other things, is the best empowerment that will encourage women participation in electoral competition in Nigeria. As written elsewhere by this author “education is the most vital element in human life” (Suleiman, 2016: 328). Once women are educated, they are emancipated because they will become fully aware of the political process that shapes their lives and will naturally partake or compete in shaping that process.

It is the opinion of this paper that Nigerian women should take advantage of the opportunities in the Nigerian film industry by engaging industry experts to come up with powerful scripts that will show the advantages of women participation in politics and electoral competition. Already, a northern Nigerian womanist, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, has taken the charge by producing *Juyin Sarauta* (Palace Coup) in 2017. The film is set in early 20th Century northern Nigeria and it shows how women influence leadership and society from the confines of royal palaces of that period. Although the film is historical, nevertheless, it sets the stage for such revolution.

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