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The Widening Gap of Gender Inequality in Nigerian Politics: Advocating A Quota System Approach

Okorie, Martha, Ph.D.

Lecturer of French,

College of General and Communication Studies,
Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike
Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria.

Email: okomart2004@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348037086144

Abstract

In Nigeria, only 25 out of 360 members of the Nigerian House of Representative are women and following the 2015 general elections, that number reduced to 17 out of 360. This is undoubtedly a consequence of gender inequality in the pursuit of political opportunities in Nigeria. A number of scholars have suggested that structural problems like the patriarchy and restricted economic opportunities for women is mainly responsible for their unequal representation in the country's politics. In fact, Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa. This situation, coupled with their socio-culturally ascribed roles as being restricted to motherhood or wife only serves to deepen their exclusion. Advocates on gender equality in Nigeria have noted that a viable means of reducing the gender gap would be the use of affirmative action which provides an institutional and legal framework for marginalized groups of the society to have equal representation. The counter-argument so far has been that the constitution of Nigeria does not prevent any gender from aspiring to electoral position, but prevailing evidence has shown that this is not

enough. This research paper therefore argues that for Nigeria to breach the gender inequality gap, it has to introduce quota system just like in federal appointments and in the educational sector to improve female representation in politics and by extension women voices within the political discourse.

Key words: Gender inequality, Nigerian politics, Quota system approach

Introduction

The discourse of gender equality has been an issue of contentious scholarly and policy debates, and rightly so for a number of reasons. Promoting gender equality is not only a justifiable pursuit, but also one which the world at large has come to acknowledge as highly crucial. Goals of sustainable development, both among developing countries or for the world at large would be missing a key ingredient if such goals do not entail bridging the gender inequality gap. It is therefore not surprising when Olayiwola (2012) observed that gender equality and other forms of women empowerment agendas had become one of the central issues in international treaties and declarations because women empowerment is considered an important element in curbing poverty, improving living standards, good governance and strengthening of social and political institutions.

In Nigeria, as well as most places in the developing world, the plight of women is similar to the plight of other women around the world. According to Agbegunde (2014), while half the world's population was made up of women, they account for only 5-10 percent of formal political leadership positions worldwide. Nevertheless, each society is likely to face unique challenges with respect to the marginal participation of women within its political or economic machineries.

This paper therefore attempts to explore the challenges of women within the Nigerian socio-political context, the reasons behind their marginal participation, and if and how things can be turned around. The paper begins by providing a historicized overview on the participation or rather non-participation of Nigerian women in the country's politics. Secondly, it analyses available literatures in attempting to make sense of their marginal role in politics and the structural challenges that impedes their participation. Finally, it suggests that a genuine way of advancing women's participation or addressing the gender inequality in Nigerian politics is to use the quota system approach, as this would allow women a certain mandatory percentage of women occupying several political positions and supported by a legal framework.

Gender Inequality in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

In order to understand the underlying reasons behind the marginal role of women in Nigerian politics, there must be an attempt to offer a historical context within which such culture of gender equality was allowed to prevail and perpetuate. It is worth

noting that women constitute about half the population of Nigeria and continue to play vital roles in the development of the country as mothers, managers, community developers, social organizers amongst other things (Olabisi, 1998). From the foregoing, it becomes pertinent to ask why exactly hasn't women being able to transfer their active participation in these other social sphere to the political sphere? To this, Olabisi (1999) noted that the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society is largely responsible for suppressing the ambition or channels within which women could be able to exercise their rights to political participation fully.

Stacey (1993) describes a patriarchal society as one with traditional norms which upholds the place of men as superiors and unchallengeable within all spheres of socio-political relations. It is a structure or a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women through a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which then provides material advantages to males while simultaneously depriving women of similar access to socio-political participation, or at best constraints their roles in order to relegate them as second bests (Stacey, 1993).

These structures of gender inequality Omolewa (2002) argued, had its root in the colonial system of education which was primarily tailored for the specific purpose of meeting the manpower need of the colonial government, and by so doing—systematically alienated women from educational and economic opportunities. This marginalisation continued to fester even in the aftermath of Nigeria's Independence, where women became harder-hit by economic deprivation than men, due to the nonchalant emphasis placed on female education, and the prevalence of early marriage which tend to further impoverish the womenfolk (Omolewa, 2002). In the absence of education, women often found themselves approaching social, economic, and political life from an initial point of disadvantage than their male counterparts who may have had a better head-start given their education.

Makama (2013) buttressed this point further, citing the 2005 *United Nations Human Development Report*, which classified Nigeria as a *low development country* in respect of equality in educational accessibility. *Female Adult Literacy Rate* (ages 15 and above) for the country was 59.4% as against male, 74.4%; the *Combined Gross Enrolment* for Primary, Secondary and Tertiary schools for female was 57% and male, 71%. Further to this, according to Ojo (2002), women are also fewer than men in certain socio-economic activities. Buttressing his point with statistical data, the author noted that the percentages of female workers in some selected professions were as follow: architects, 2.4%, quantity surveyors, 3.5%, lawyers/jurists, 25.4%, lecturers, 11.8%, obstetricians and gynecologists, 8.4%, pediatricians, 33.3%, media practitioners, 18.3%. These statistics, unfortunate as they appear, clearly reveals the toxic residues of

the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian state, one that doesn't equip its female population with all the necessary conditions to compete favourably alongside the men folk.

Nevertheless, the story of gender inequality in Nigeria has not being totally devoid of improvements. Some measurable success to close the gap, has being recorded in the last two decades. According to Ejumudo (2013), Nigeria has made some important efforts in establishing the necessary institutional frameworks required to ameliorate gender discrimination and in some way, restore gender parity and human dignity. For example, the first two decades of development planning in Nigeria from 1963 when it became a Republic, was largely characterized by gender-blind and gender-insensitive development policies. Further to this, and particularly since the wake of the 1980s, the country instituted gender-biased economic policies where women's interests were subsumed within the national interest and gender sensitivity was totally inconsequential and irrelevant to the mostly male policymakers (Ejumudo, 2013). Things however began to improve in the fourth republic, with the established framework of The National Gender Policy, which replaced and reinforced the previous National Policy on Women, to narrow the inequality gap. However, the extent to which this has being successful remains debatable. At best, only very marginal gains could be pointed to have been made.

Makama (2013) observed that representation in the legislative arm of Nigerian government (the National House of Assembly) has witnessed the presence of women yet they remain under-represented when compared to their male counterparts. She stressed further that following two decades of military rule statistics reveal that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while in 2007 they made with only 6% (Makama, 2013).

Constitutionally, there are no existing legal barriers that prevents women from seeking political offices, or standing for election. However, the mere fact that there are no legal restraint on political participation does not in itself nullify the many other hurdles women face—preventing them from actualising their political ambition. The monetary cost of standing for elections and the perception of it as violence prone may have served to an extend weigh down the ambition of many.

It is no wonder why very few, if not absolutely negligible number of women were able to stand or be elected into various posts in the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections held in the country (Makama, 2013). In short, female gubernatorial and Presidential candidates have emerged but none has ever won such exalted political positions. In the wake of Nigeria's twenty years of military rule, when a return to democracy offered a chance for all eligible citizens to participate, women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while in 2007 they made with only 6% (Makama, 2013).

It is also instructive to note that before the 2015 general elections were held, only 25 out of 360 members of the Nigerian House of Representative were women and following the 2015 general elections, that number reduced to 17 out of 360. The current situation raises doubt as to whether things are set to improve with regards to the need for more women participation into Nigeria's mainstream politics. The statistics portrays that in fact, things may be getting worse, and that women are being further pushed to the margins of national politics, and that whatever gains may have being made in 2011 was now suffering retrogression.

Analysing the Causes of Gender Inequality in Nigerian Politics

The disproportionate gender inequality in Nigeria and its debilitating consequences for women and for the country in general cannot be fully grasped unless the causes of gender inequality is fully unpacked. Normally, the Federal Character of the Nigerian state is supposed to establish a legal and political framework that allows for political participation from people coming from all works of life irrespective of gender, religion or ethnic affiliation. Ayoada (1978) describes this federal character as a conditional alliance steeped in considerable tolerance of competing centres of power. Hence, men or women are naturally expected, within a federal system to be able to explore their political ambitions. Susu (2009), buttresses this point by noting that "Federalism as a normative basis for a nation's socio-political structure would seem to be primarily a functional and pragmatic accommodation of the opposing principles of unity and separatism, integration and regional autonomy". Constitutionally also, there are no legal hindrances precluding women from full participation in the country's political landscape. However, this would be a reductive way of perceiving the gender challenges of Nigerian women within the country's political dynamics.

It is important to understand first, the monetary demands of purchasing a party's nomination form to be able to stand for a political position usually comes at a higher cost, and women—given the fact that they do not earn incomes as high as their male counterparts find this situation very challenging. Seeking political office in Nigeria is often a long and tortuous process, where prospective candidates have to pave their way to the polls with huge amounts of bribe, deference to political godfathers (or reprobates), and many other compromises or concessions that may become eventually difficult for the political aspirant to cope with. The fact that Nigeria is also a society where women are likely to end less than men, the financial cost of standing for elections becomes highly stacked against them—leading thus to discouragement.

It is instructive to note, as Elegbede (2012) observed, Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of female entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa with majority of women bogged into casual, low-skilled, low paid informal sector employment. And Nigeria's low investments in sectors like public sector investment to expand paid employment

(for more women) and education has been suggested as one of the structural issues that widens gender inequality (Elegbede, 2012).

Pathways for changing the status-quo becomes bleaker when one takes cognizance the fact that the current political structures are currently designed by men and to work more in men's favour. Therefore, despite how hard most women would work to establish their political relevance, it is difficult to do on the terms already established by men for competing among themselves. For instance, how can the financial requirements necessary to participate in elections be reduced to accommodate women that are low income earners? What sort of reorientation needs to be done to upturn prevalent stereotypes that consider women only fitting for domestic chores and not for running for political offices? How can the society go through a process of mass reorientation to sensitise citizens of the need for a more women inclusive government that will raise awareness of the peculiar challenges facing women in both social, economic and political stratum?

Social stereotypes and perverse notions about women in politics has led to a sort of stigma associated with seeking or holding a political office, and this can be seriously challenging in countries like Nigeria where kinship and community-driven lifestyle forces people to take seriously the perceptions other have of them. Ekpe et al. (2014) noted that female politicians are often perceived to be divorcees and marital failures and this stigma can gravely damage the ambitions of women seeking to join politics but who do not want their communities to have a contrived notion of their personal life or personality.

Also, given the zero-sum ('do or die) nature of Nigerian politics, the use of violence through forms of intimidation and assassination of political opponents have raised the cost of seeking public office, making women more worried about taking part. Top women politicians like Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Suliat Adedeji, who lost to politically motivated assassination are easily recalled as helpless Nigeria's violent brand of politics (Ekpe et al. 2014). These issues have contributed in no small measure in making genuine contenders lose interest in the contesting political offices. Women who are accomplished in their professional life, and whom represent genuine political contenders may easily be discouraged by their families who may be wary of her ending up dead as a result of her political ambitions.

It is also worth noting however, that women themselves have not always being very supportive of the political ambitions of fellow women. In the 2015 elections for example where a woman contested for the position of Taraba State governor (Hajia Aisha Jummai Alhassan), she could have stood a better chance of winning if the women in the state tried to vote exclusively for her—and thus, for the first time rebalance the status quo. The same could be said of the Presidential candidate of the KOWA Party – Prof Remi Sonaiya who enjoyed very poor support from her fellow women. To be clear,

this is not to suggest that the voting into office for women should be exclusively be dictated on gender grounds, but for a group of people who feel relegated to the fringes of political life, voting a fellow woman who fully grasps their challenges would have been a tempting prospect.

Addressing Gender Inequality through a Quota System Approach

Having historicised the various manifestation of gender inequality in Nigerian politics as well as analysing their underlying causes, the section of the paper attempts to present a problem-solving framework that'll rebalance the ratio of gender participation in Nigeria. This rebalancing approach is the quota system, otherwise known as affirmative action or positive discrimination. Agbalajobi (2010) defined affirmative action as a measure that is design to supplement non-discriminatory practices. It is normally a policy framework instituted to enhancing equal opportunity for individuals and the improvement, in the situation of marginalized groups.

Where the constitution does not place any constrain on participation of women, these sorts of policy framework enhances women's participation by providing a legal ratio that ensures mandatory participation. Unlike the constitutions of some African countries, notably South Africa and Uganda, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria takes no cognizance of the disadvantaged position of women and has no provision for gender equality (Agbalajobi, 2010), therefore putting in place a specific percentage of women to take part in elections would be in order to close the gap. For instance, all States within the Nigeria Federation has at least three senatorial districts, hence there could be laws that makes it mandatory for a women contestants only to emerge from some of those Senatorial districts. Such policy would enable a sizeable number of women to emerge in Nigeria's lower and upper law making chamber, and from there they can be able to bring to reality certain laws that would be beneficial to the welfare of women across the country. For example, they could institute laws for extended maternal leave for women employees, laws requiring mandatory education for all children until 16 years of age, as girl children could benefit immensely from such practise. The system as a legitimate means of securing this end. In many countries the exclusion of women in politics is as a result of many reasons – financial, cultural, traditional and political. Asserting this fact and the reasons that have made it so implies that quotas should not be seen as discrimination towards men and cannot be branded unconstitutional as most quotas are formulated under neutral basis.

In Uganda for example, such legal framework has been used to rebalance gender-quality in the country's polity. Certain parliamentary seats are reserved for women in the 39 districts, and in Argentina, India, Eriterea, Bangladesh and Iran, a number electoral laws were put in place—granting women specific quotas (Makama, 2013).

The importance using the quota approach to address gender inequality is a framework that had already received global support following the 1979 United Nations General Assembly which adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The convention called for national legislations to ban discrimination, recommends temporary special measures to speed equality in fact between men and women (UNESCO, 1999:6)

The convention explicitly stated that:

Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved (Article IV, CEDAW. UNESCO (1999).

The quota system approach also has in it semblances of what Mazrui (1972) had identified as veritable steps to foster national integration where citizens of both sex are availed opportunity to contribute politically to the wellbeing of the state. One of such steps include (though not exclusively restricted to) the narrowing of the gap between elites and the masses, which inevitably involves giving opportunities to women and the not so affluent classes in the society, in order for them to be able to have political avenues to address the issues that are felt by those within their social groups and by extension the mass interest.

There is no doubt that the quota system approach may raise a number of contentious points, the primary one being that it in itself discriminates against men. Hence questions are bound to be raised about how a framework to rebalance gender inequality may come to advance gender inequality against men? Are we by trying to solve one problem creating another? To these posers, Olayiwola (2012) provides a suitable retort. Noting that, what quota system does is to simply create a constitutional arrangement that would adjust the basic principles without major contradictions. The author notes that in the absence of such quota approach, women in the house of representatives of senate chambers should be afforded a double vote while their male counterparts have one, as this would enable certain laws important to women to be considered.

Furthermore, quota system approach is nothing new to the Nigerian state, as it already applies in the area of education where students in mostly Northern areas of the country are considered educationally disadvantaged compared to their southern counterparts. To this end, the federal government intervened to lower the test scores which is required for them to get into the secondary school and tertiary education.

Nigeria can therefore easily draft a similar policy framework to create space for greater female participation in politics. The essence of such structural adjustment cannot be overstated, because would be able to empower more women if they have their voices in higher numbers around the corridors of politics. This would create both a more gender equitable society as well as improvement in the country's development index.

Conclusion

Gender inequality is a global phenomenon, though one that is direr in underdeveloped countries, of which Nigeria is part of. Constitutionally, there are no legal barriers preventing women to aspire to political offices but economic and social issues like reduced access to education and stereotyped role of women as people marked exclusively for motherhood and raising families has pushed them further to the political margins.

This paper argued that establishing a quota system approach is a veritable tool of closing down the inequality gap that currently exists. This approach is in no way a novel framework but one that has already being instituted by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the sphere of education to allow academically disadvantaged regions to be able to stand a chance to get into school. The same framework could be constituted to offer women mandatory percentages within the law-making body of the country, because by so doing they would have a wider opportunity of realising their political ambitions as well as advance the course of better living for women and other marginalized groups.

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