

ETHICO-RELIGIOUS RE-ORIENTATION OF NIGERIAN WOMEN FOR THE SUSTENANCE OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Most Nigerians are not sufficiently aware of the extent to which the Nigerian woman has been displaced, dislodged, disoriented and marginalized since the colonial days. A thorough examination of any African Society will reveal overwhelming evidence of the contribution which women have made in the past. In spite of the enormous contributions of women to the development of different African communities, the Nigerian woman has constantly been made to play a second fiddle in the scheme of things. So much has been written on the dismal failure of Nigerian women generally in politics, particularly during the first, second and the ill fated third republic. Most oral traditions, surviving religious cult and extinct political institutions all attest to the significant position women occupied in the social, economic and political evolution of the different African Communities. Even the two tenures of eight years of Obasanjo's civilian regime of 1999-2007 saw very few women at both the executive and legislative arms of government; this was indeed unfair to womanhood and an act of marginalization and exploitation that should be corrected. This paper is therefore designed, to examine the evolutionary trend of development with special emphasis on the educational barrier and self antagonistic attitudes of women, unethical conduct and uncomplimentary remarks as well as religious constraints and improper orientation as factors militating against women's participation in Nigerian politics, with some remedial strategies/ recommendations that will correct these anomalies.

Introduction

Most Nigerians are not sufficiently aware of the extent to which the Nigerian woman has been displaced, dislodged, disoriented and marginalized since the colonial days. A thorough examination of any African society will reveal overwhelming evidence of the contributions which women have made in the past. Most oral traditions, surviving religious cult and extinct political institutions all attest to the significant position women occupied in the social, economic and political evolutions of the different African communities. It is in line with this development that Bolanle (1992) posited that, so great was the worth of women's contributions to the society that a lot of communities found it justifiable to reckon genealogies along maternal line (matrilineal family system).

In spite of the enormous contributions of women to the development of different African communities, the Nigerian woman has constantly been made to play second fiddle in the scheme of things. So much has been written on the dismal failure of Nigerian women generally in politics, particularly during the First, Second and the ill fated Third Republics. Some writers have described the time, energy and money expended in the support of women and their aspirations as a total waste. Oganwu (1996) observed that if we look closely at record while we go down memory lane of the political history of Nigeria, it will be foolhardy to say that women have been successful in politics. No doubt Mrs Fumitayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, amazons of our early steps, fought for and gained some respect for women in spite of all odds. Oganwu (1996) again observed that the first republic offered women very little politically. There

were two female senators then: Wuraola Esan and Beatrice Kwango. These senators were nominated by their parties rather than being elected.

In the Second Republic, Chief Franca Afegbua was elected the only female Senator out of 91. In the ill-fated Third Republic, the country had three women Deputy Governors, Hajiya Ojikutu of Lagos State, Pamela Sadauku of Kaduna State and Mrs Ekpenyong of Cross River State. Even the two tenures of the eight years of Obasanjo's civilian regime of 1999-2007 saw very few women at both the executive and legislative arms of government; this was indeed unfair to womanhood and an act of marginalization and exploitation that should be corrected.

The questions to be resolved in this paper are as follows: Are women really marginalized in Nigerian politics? To what extent are women marginalized in Nigeria? What could be responsible for this act of marginalization and non-political empowerment of women in Nigeria? Can anything be done to correct these anomalies in the political landscape of Nigeria? With critical examination of the ongoing in the Fourth Republic Nigerian politics, can one foresee any light at the end of the tunnel?

Understanding Politics and Political Empowerment in Nigeria

Aristotle, a foremost philosopher, described human being as a political animal at all times. In other words, if that description is anything to go by, both men and women are political animals. But it sounds paradoxical if only men are politically empowered to the detriment of women in Nigeria. Defining politics, Ikenga-Metuh (1986) posited that, it is an act of governance, administration and control of power and authority. While Eregha and Isitoah (1999) mentioned that political empowerment is the process of conferring political power, authority, will and license on individual or group of persons to initiate and implement policies that will influence the lives of the masses positively. This conferment of political will, license and authority is not limited to men alone but also women. But in Nigeria, reverse is the case as happening events in Nigeria attest to this.

The foundation of political empowerment is anchored on education. As long as government policies on women education have not been strong and motivating enough, this dilemma still remains unresolved. But it should be noted that constitution of Nigeria gives equal rights to every citizen irrespective of sex (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). There is no institutionalized discrimination against the female sex in education or any other sector. Kassim-Oghiator (2005) posited that education makes the individual develop a sense of civic duty, political competence, self-confidence and astuteness. While Onah (1999) describes literacy as a crucial aspect of education, as a building block, a spring board that enables women to become active and informed participants in all areas of development. Therefore, education brings about enlightenment and development of one's potentials. Cookery (1994) stated that education is not only instilling knowledge, but awakening the enormous potentials that lie within each of us, enabling all of us to develop to our fullest potentials.

For politics and political empowerment to be properly understood, it is worthwhile to state that women are greatly discriminated against in seeking political and leadership positions in Nigeria. Emariebe (2005) reacting to this development observed that, sometimes, even when the best candidate is a woman, she will not be taken for any other reason, but because of her sex. Men

simply cannot stand being controlled or being governed by a woman. She added that women have suffered prejudices, which have denied them power control in almost all spheres of human endeavour. Women themselves are now crying for recognition and appointment into political offices like their male counterparts.

Women's rights to freedom from discrimination are violated. For example, in the just concluded political reform conference mid-wifed by ex-president Obasanjo in 2005 in Nigeria, there were quite a number of women but the percentage is nothing to be compared with that of the men. So there has been clamour for the inclusion of more women. There are however, a number of women in various cabinets in the present administration but this number is insignificant when compared with the number of their male counterparts. This discrimination, marginalization, gender inequality and imbalance in Nigeria is a clear case of politics and non-political empowerment of women in Nigeria.

An Assesement of Gender Inequality in Nigerian Politics and Its Effects on Womanhood

Ojo (2005) opined that, as Nigeria begins the 21st century, the world at large is experiencing advanced remarkable changes. These changes are prompting people to do some re-thinking about the human condition, especially that of women. Many have come to realize that the affluence and consolidation the western world is enjoying should be extended to all if the world is truly a global village. This scholar added that some have expressed the view that women in Nigeria should be given the opportunity to participate in the control and the management of their country's economic resources.

There have been demands too for an elimination of all forms of exploitation, oppression and the sub-ordination of women. Women need to fight for their integration into a freer society where they will be equal partners in political, social, cultural and religious spheres of human lives. It is the desire that women must know their rights as citizens of Nigeria, as individuals, as workers and income earners and as wives and partners in the task of nation building (Ojo, 2005). Oganwu (1996) observed that if we look closely at record while we go down memory lane of the political history of Nigeria, it will be foolhardy to say women have been successful in politics. No doubt Mrs Fumilayo Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, fought for and gained some respect for women in spite of all odds.

In the same vein the First Republic offered women very little politically. There were two female senators then Wuruola Esan and Beatrice Kwango. These senators were nominated by their party instead of being elected. Then came the politics of the Second Republic when Chief Franca Afegbua was elected the only woman out of 91, and the ill-fated third republic, the country had three women Deputy Governors, Hajiya Ojikutu of Lagos state, Pamela Sadauku of Kaduna and Mrs Ekpeyong from Cross River State (Oganwu, 1996). Even in the just concluded national reform of 2005/2006 mid-wifed by Ex-President Obasanjo, women were also relegated to the background.

Dawood cited in Oganwu (1992) informed that the military regimes which Nigeria experienced for more than two decades have not accorded women their due recognition in the scheme of things. In the military regime, there was no woman in the provisional ruling council, or councils of states and no woman as Governor/Administrator. In spite of all the strides being made of

recent, it is hoped that the present generation will witness the emergence of Nigerian first female President or female Head of State (Mofe-Damijo, 1990). This however, is unlike Britain where a woman was once at the helm of affairs for eight years. This was the person of Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the iron lady of Britain and Prime Minister. Other women who were at the head of government in their respective nations include former Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel, Late Mrs Indira Gandhi of India whose son by the way could not get anywhere near his mother's track record. Benazir Bhutto provided the answer in a largely Islamic male chauvinistic nation by becoming the Prime Minister of Pakistan, a position she held until lately. Mrs Chamorro who is wheel chair bound wrestled power effortlessly from Nicaragua's Strong man Daniel Ortega. Mrs Kin Campbell, Canada then acting Prime Minister and Tansu Ciller Minister of Turkey and former President Corazon Aquino of the Phillipines performed their duties in their respective countries (Oganwu, 1996). More recently, the electoral victory of Mrs Salem Johnson of Liberia and her subsequent inauguration as the President of that country need much to be desired in women's empowerment in Nigeria.

A look at this national leaders reveals that the Nigerian woman is yet to make any appreciable inroad into the male dominated political scene because of gross misconception of the role in politics and even so. The Nigerian woman is by far more handicapped and may require some time and energy to get to where women in advanced countries have reached. Umukoro (2008) informed that even the two tenures of eight years of Obasanjo's civilian regime of 1999-2007; saw very few women at both the federal executive council as well as the legislative arm of government. This is indeed unfair to womanhood and an act of marginalization and exploitation that should be corrected. Some of these handicaps according to Oganwu (1996) includes child-caring family problem, cultural and religious barriers. Others are financial handicap, political insults, violence, improper education and murky practices that pervade Nigerian politics.

Factors Militating Against Women's Participation in Nigerian Politics

i. Educational Constraints and Self Antagonistic Attitude of Women

In the words of Kassim-Eghiotor (2005), the educated woman can participate in politics and contribute her knowledge to national unity, reconstruction and development. Educated women are better and more caring wives, mothers, neighbours, citizens, community women mobilization and social workers. If education can offer all these to Nigerian women, the need for sustainable education for women should be emphasized. They have little education to show understanding of what party politics is all about. According to the 1963 census in Nigeria, women constitute about fifty-eight percent of the country's total population. In spite of the overwhelming majority, educational data have shown some progressive lag. About ten percent of Nigerian women are literate according to Obassi cited in Oganwu (1996).

Oko (2005) also posited that, societal prejudice against women affects the education of women in Nigeria. Odu cited in Ojo (2005) is of the view that, there is a ridiculous gap in the ratio of men to women among students. Statistically, she claimed that the highest number of female students was enrolled in the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Education, while the students in Faculty of Engineering, Agriculture and Medicine were almost exclusively male. Oganwu (1996) observed other handicaps to women's participation in politics to include self antagonistic attitude of women against themselves. By this, she meant that, even on their own, women are

their greatest enemy. Women run each other down. If a woman embarks on any political voyage, she will never be supported by women.

According to Dogoyaro (1990), the major problem confronting women in politics must be women themselves; women were not fond of leadership of women. Further still, there have been cases where women in public offices not only perpetuated existing discrimination policies and practices against their female folk, but also strengthened other forms of social discrimination. Fascist and dictatorial tendencies had also been observed in some female public figures. These historical occurrences and possibilities ought to be a guide to the women in politics.

ii. Unethical conducts and uncomplimentary remarks

Another Major factor militating against women's participation in politics is the role of money and heavy financial influence and inducement. Oganwu (1996) again observed that the role of money in this dispensation and low financial base of women have not helped matters. This has earned them instant disqualification in this area where even genuine funds for mobilization and other logistics run into millions of naira. This is not only a minus to women but an unethical conduct. More also, no husband would agree to spend such huge amount of money on a wasted venture. For instance, Sarah Jubril said that if she had about 40 million naira, at the 1992 presidential election primaries of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) held in Jos, Plateau State Nigeria, she would have emerged the winner of the election. Recent political activities in Nigeria show that heavy financial influence manifested itself at all level of education from federal, state and down to the local government and ward levels as money was highly used to influence people, recruit thugs and even some state security personnel to influence the electoral victory in favour of the People Democratic Party (PDP) government of the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections (Umukoro, 2008).

In the same vein, a woman in politics will be an object of very uncomplimentary remarks and gossips. Some of such remarks according to Ajai (2006) include bottom power at work, free hot laps for political godfathers etc. Such loose and unguided utterances are likely to scare women and dampen their morale towards political mobilization. It is an aggressive reaction towards such comments that a onetime female Commissioner in Delta State in 1997, Princess Oliviat Agbajoh, in a guest of the week programme in Delta Broadcasting Service remarked, 'if you think it is bottom power that saw women into exalted political offices, try it and utilize your own and see where you will arrive'.

iii. Religious Constraints to Women's Participation in Nigerian Politics

Religiously, according to Haralambos cited in Oganwu (1996), a rather strange cause of the 'inferior' status of the female is traced to the Holy Bible. Original sin in the Garden of Eden was the brain-child of a woman. She tasted the forbidden fruit, tempted Adam, and has been paying for it ever since. In Genesis, the Lord said "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Sociologists would regard the above quotation as a mythological justification for the position of women in the society. This further explains why women cannot participate in politics like men because they are inferior human beings and have been sentenced by tradition and religion.

In Islamic religion, the Koran stipulates that there is no distinction between man and woman, but in practice, Islamic culture which is embedded in its religion, relegates women to the background, sees them as helpers to men, and they must remain in Purdah. In fact, they are not even encouraged to pursue western education which would assist them in their political career (Oganwu, 1996).

The African Traditional Religion places women at the background. There are taboos which stipulate that women are inferior to men. Among the Utakwa-Unor in Kwale in Delta State, it is unheard of for a woman to shake hands with men in the society. Also, a woman having her monthly period cannot enter the house and cook food for her husband because she is said to be unclean (Edemeh cited in Oganwu, (1996)). These are some of the taboos built to relegate women to the background.

In spite of the religious barrier constraining women's political participation in Nigerian politics, the dawn of the 21st Century should be seen as the age of enlightenment, geared towards a re-orientation about these religious barriers. In line with this thought, Ajai (2006) asserts that the influence of western civilization and education, has demystified the religious and traditional taboos built up against women's participation in politics. He emphasized further that the first generation of women who defied these impediments were not only successful but left their footprint in the sand of time and they were acknowledged for blazing the trail. Such persons include Mrs Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Queen Amina of Zaria among others. Due to the remarkable impact of Margaret Ekpo, the Federal Government was prompted under the Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian regime to immortalize her name by re-naming the former Calabar International Airport as Margaret Ekpo International Airport Calabar in South-South Nigeria after her demise. This therefore implies that any politically minded woman should become more courageous in her political endeavour as religion and traditional taboos should not be excused for getting involved in politics.

iv. Shortage of Women Activists

Finally, it has been observed also that another handicap to women's quest for political power is shortage of women activists. The women equivalent of Gani Fawehimi, Balarabe Musa, Dr. Beko-ransome Kuti, Olusegun Osoba and Adekunle Ajasin are hard to come-by.

Modern Trends in the Status/Positions of Women in Nigeria

Due to the hue and cry that characterized the marginalization of women and the high degree of inequality between the female and the male genders, there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel for gender inequality in Nigeria if the following Analysis and discussions are considered.

Pragmatically, any nation in the world desirous of experiencing development must aim to galvanize both the male and the female segments of her population to work together as partners in progress as is obtained in the western world, which some Asian countries are copying presently (Ojo, 2005). Should the numerical strength and superiority of women in Nigeria according to 1963 census not be nationally utilized advantageously? Anything outside yes, as an answer, is not only shortsighted but self defeating (Oputa, 1990). With this at the back of his mind and guided by the United Nations General Assembly resolution on women as a working tool, a onetime military President of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babagida addressed some certain

issues in order to raise image of women in the country. During his Presidency, Nigeria saw the appointment of the First Female Vice Chancellor of a Federal University, that is the University of Benin in the person of Professor Grace Alele-Williams, the first female member of the Federal Civil Service Commission, and a woman was among the three High Court Judges appointed for the new High Court of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Records also have it for the first time a woman was appointed as a Justice of the Court of Appeal (Ojo, 2005).

On the International scene, four female ambassadors were appointed. At the state level, each state government was directed by the Federal Government to include at least one woman in its cabinet. In recent time, the appointment of female Commissioners in nearly all the States of the Federation since 1999 can attest to this. It should be noted that, these positions before now are exclusively for male. For the first time in the history of Nigeria, the Federal Government spearheaded this action to elevate the position of women (Eboh, 1986). On the political scene, the table has turned in favour of the women as the Third Republic saw an upsurge of female aspirants even to the position of the President. Many women have found themselves in the Houses of Senate and Representative.

This change is in the right direction for Nigerian women. It is widely believed that if Indira Ghadi of India, Goda Meir of Israel, Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Corazon Aquino of Phillipines and Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan all carried their countries along as Heads of State, Nigeria women can also do it . In the same line of thought, Oputa (1996) opined that Nigerian women should be liberated from the shackles of outdated customary practices and prejudices, which hitherto inhibited and prevented them from participating fully and contributing significantly to Nation Building.

A fair assessment of the nation for the past one and a half decades shows that the trend is now changing for the better as we can now talk proudly of women who have served the nation in different capacities. Some of them according to Erhuvwujefe (2008) include Professor Grace Alele Williams, Former Vice Chancellor University of Benin; Professor Jade Sola Akande, Former Vice Chancellor Lagos State University (LASU); Professor Mrs Dora Akunyili, Former Director General of NAFDAC as well as Former Minister for Information and Communication; Dr. Mrs Ngozi Iweala, Former Minister of Finance; Dr. Mrs. Ndidi Okekereke, Director General NSE (Nigeria Stock Exchange); Mrs Grace Ekpighwre, Former Minister of Science and Technology; Mrs Patricia Etteh, Former Speaker Federal House of Representatives; Former Senator Stella Omu representing Delta South Senatorial District; Professor Mrs Grence, Former Minister of Health; and Mrs Oluremi Oyo, Former Senior Adviser to President Obasanjo on Media among others.

At State level especially in Delta State, there are the likes of Chief Judith Enamuotor as Former Commissioner for Information; Mrs Ikem Ukwofu, Former Administrator Delta Broadcasting Service Warri; Dr. (Mrs.) Veronica Ugbuagbu, Former Commissioner for Education; Mrs Orize Esievo, Former Commissioner for Culture and Tourism and now Commissioner for Special Duties (DESOPADEC); Mrs. Elizabeth Uvoh Gardiner, Former Commissioner for Education among others. Also at the Delta State House of Assembly, there are the likes of Hon. Mrs. Omawumi Udoh representing Warri South Constituency I and Mrs Josephine Abeki, Former

Chairman of Patani Local Government Area of Delta State. All these go to show that the tide has changed.

Conclusion

The conclusion that could be drawn is that, while women in Nigeria like other developing countries suffered from undue discrimination, marginalization and exploitation by the men folks through the implementation of their culture and practice of religious beliefs which put men as super-human beings, it should however be noted that the only thing that is permanent in life is change. The dawn of the 21st Century ushered in political revival for women in Nigeria and inspired social and intellectual enlightenment. Although the awareness has been on in an obscure manner but it is being revitalized. The present dispensation has ushered women who like virus, had politics contaminated in their blood stream. This is because the Nigerian women gracefully fought for emancipation in all field of development to compliment the efforts of the early cross bearers of women liberation in Nigeria like Queen Amina of Zaria, Moremi and Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti amongst others. The establishment of organizations like Women in Nigeria (WIN), National Council for Women Societies (NCWS), National Association for Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Women in Media, Association of Women Lawyers and other related ones are designed to project the interest of women in all fields of human endeavour.

It was however observed that this consciousness among women has yielded some positive results as women are now appointed into exalted offices of Deputy Governors, Ministers, Vice Chancellors, Chief Executives and Chairpersons of political and other government agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) having Mrs Farida Waziri as the Chairperson.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will help the Nigerian government, the Senate, the women bodies and other influential individuals in the Nigerian society to correct this gender imbalance in Political empowerment.

- i. Women should endeavour to acquire the requisite educational background that will prepare them for position of political responsibility or other important government assignments.
- ii. The government should increase women access to education. This could be done by formulation of policies that would make primary and secondary education free and compulsory for girls/women by the three tiers of government. Adult education for women should be encouraged and sustained in every part of the country irrespective of creed and religion.
- iii. Women should be allowed the liberty of supporting a political party or candidate of their choice during elections, without incurring the anger of men.
- iv. Government should encourage women in politics by appointing reasonable number of them into the Federal Executive Council, State Cabinet and even Local Government Executive so that they can contribute meaningfully to debates on issues relating to them and the entire nation.

- v. Government should make fund available to the various political parties to support their candidates during the process of election because in most cases women in politics are starved of funds.
 - vi. There is need for enlightenment campaign by organizing workshops, seminars, radio talk in the rural area on the need for women to participate in politics.
 - vii. Society should ensure that those institutional and religious barriers that stand against women's participation in politics are removed.
 - viii. Women in purdah should be allowed to participate in politics.
 - ix. People should be sensitized on the need to discard unethical conduct and uncomplimentary remarks.
 - x. People should be re-oriented about religious and traditional taboos as they are retrogressive and unethical to women participation in politics.
- If the above suggested measures are adopted, most problems militating against women's participation in politics will be eroded.

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