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Gender Inequality And Participatory Democracy In Nigeria: A Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT

Democracy requires that there should be equal opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making process. This means that men and women must be equal stakeholders in the democratic process. On the contrary, there is asymmetrical relationship between males and females as males occupy higher pedestal in the democratic process, thereby marginalizing women in decision-making process. Often times, this inequality between males and females has been attributed to biological, cultural, economic, political and educational factors. The paper argues that rather than attribute it to the aforementioned factors, the negative attitude of women towards themselves should be held responsible for their low participation in the process of decision-making. The paper therefore suggests that a positive reorientation of women in political process is necessary for their effective political participation.

Key words: *Gender Inequality, Participatory Democracy, Paradigm Shift, Stakeholders, Attitude of Women.*

Introduction

One of the basic ingredients of democracy is that the people including men and women, must participate in the process of decision-making. This participation can be expressed in terms of active involvement in political process, including voting and being voted for. This means that in a democratic society, men and women are expected to participate in the democratic process on an equal pedestal. However, the fact is that women are marginalized in the democratic process, especially, at the gladiatorial level, in many countries. Literature abound on the status of women

participation in political process. Much of the literature attribute the poor state of women participation to biological, cultural, economic, political and educational factors, Granted that these factors may have had some debilitating effects on women participation in the democratic process, current events seem to have de-emphasized these factors which engendered gender inequality and the concomitant negative impact on women participation in decision-making.

Thus, the paper argues that rather than 'over flogging a dead horse' and being bogged down by old tradition, emphasis should be placed on the negative incompatible behavior of women and their selfish expectations from men. This negative behavior of women is being reinforced by their lackadaisical behavior in mobilizing the enormous force at their disposal in order to occupy their rightful position in the scheme of things. The problem is that in spite of the remarkable in road made by women in Nigeria in the educational, political and economic sectors, they are still marginalized in terms of their participation at the gladiatorial level.

It should be recalled that the pre-colonial Nigerian women were actively involved in political mobilization and awareness, and the arbitration of disputes. They were not actively involved at the gladiatorial level. Thus it was evident that Nigerian women in spite of their low level of education and the inhibitive colonial policies and brutal force, mobilized against repressive and unacceptable colonial policies. The 1929 Aba Women riot is a pointer to this effect. The question that seems to be boggling the mind now is; if women as far back as 1929 can mobilize against repressive and unacceptable colonial policy, why can't women, given their improved level of education and awareness, mobilize against their marginalization in the democratic process?

As a way of trying to provide answer to this question, the paper is of the view that cultural, biological, educational, economic and political factors are no longer tenable in justifying gender inequality and the consequent marginalization of women in participating in the decision- making process. In order to make this view clearer, the paper shall look at these factors and analyze them one after the other vis-a-vis the realities on ground.

Debunking the Old Argument

It is not in doubt that Nigeria is a patriarchal and heterogeneous society. The different ethnic formations have incidents of male dominance. For instance, in the Ibo society in Nigeria, the Umunna a political unit made up of adult male take part not only in making decisions but also in policing the society and providing security. Although the enlarged Umunna- children of the same father reflects the ancestral basis of the system (Ndu, 1999), is made up of a group called Umuada - the daughters of the family who are married. They (Umuada) wield appreciable influence on the events at home when necessary. For instance, when there is impasse in terms of the decision to take, the Umuada can impose a give-and -take decision on the Umunna. They (Umuada) can also arbitrate on a seemingly protracted and irresolvable matter which the Umunna cannot handle. Their views and judgments are seen to be fair and justiceable and should be acceptable by all and sundry. Any violation of the decisions and orders of the Umuada will be seen as sacrilegious and a crime against the ancestors. Thus, while the Umunna-the male political unit is in charge of the political goings-on, the female segment of the Umunna - the Umuada can intermittently wade in to resolve any conflict.

The same political arrangement can also be seen in the Ikwerre society occupying the South-South zone (Niger Delta) of Nigeria. The political unit is called 'Nde Nnadi' (although this may not be the general term in all Ikwerre communities but

the composition is the same). It is made up of adult males who take decisions and implement same. The apportioning of land which is a basic economic factor is being decided by the 'Nde Nnadi' under the leadership of the eldest man in the family. The (Nde Nnadi) also police the community and provide security. The women's wing is called Omunwere, Omirinya, Rumurinya as they are variously referred to in Ikwerre. Although there may be other terms referring to the same group of women who are married daughters of the family. They also wield appreciable influence in the family just like the Umuada in Ibo society. For example the corpse of an adult member of the family may not be buried if the 'Omunwere' is not present.

In both Ibo and Ikwerre societies, the married daughters (i.e Umuada or Omunwere cannot dictate what happens in their father's family. At best they (the married daughters) can complement the efforts of the men in ensuring that there is peace and orderliness in the society. This contradicts sharply with the views of Njaka 1974:93 as cited in (Ndu 1999:49) in his book on Igbo Political Culture. Njaka notes that any adult male or female has a say in the community and shares in the authority and powers within the unit. He goes on to say that the system creates the individual as the most important unit for whom active participation is imperative. (In these societies, individuals and everyone) including women are treated as individuals.

From Njaka's assertion, individualism which is a precipitate of liberalism upholds the freedom of individuals and creates equal opportunity to have access to state resources and decision- making. It is obvious that women in the pre-colonial era, although participated in the democratic process, but not necessarily at the level of occupying influential leadership position that subsumed the position of men. For

instance in the Western region (among the Yorubas) no woman occupied or can occupy the position of Oba or Baale - the village head. These influential decision-making positions were/or are still exclusively for men.

Among the Hausa-Fulani, the males dominated. (Wordu 1999:36) notes that the Kinship system and religious concepts of the Hausa Fulani present vivid evidence of cultural factors affecting the status of women. This is rigidly expressed in Muslim hierarchy concepts of gender with ascendancy of males in all social relationships, including family headship; worships, and occupational roles. Furthermore, (Wordu 1999) noted that the practice of Purdah covers most part of Northern Nigeria and has become an institutionalized mechanism for excluding a large population of Nigerian women from participating effectively in significant social and economic activities and cultural processes. Male dominance is prevalent in all the other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus the view that male and female share in the authority and power, and that women in Nigeria prior to colonialism enjoyed relative equality with men may be misleading.

It has been argued that gender inequality was necessitated by biological, cultural, economic and educational factors. These factors will be analyzed one after the other in order to pinpoint their irrelevance in the current debate on gender inequality in Nigeria (see Okwuosa 1994; Jegede1994; Adereti 2007).

Biological Factor:

It is obvious that the difference between a male and a female is as a result of certain anatomical and physiological features that place them into distinct sexes. This difference in sexes has led to sex division of labour as the males are aggressive and dominant while the females produce and care for children. Anthropologist Tiger and Fox as referenced in Haralambos and Heald, 1980:370 as cited in (Anozie and

Ifeanacho 1999) posit that culture does not explain human behaviour but rather modifies it. The 'biogramer' according to them is more important determinant being nurtured through the biogrammer. The biogrammer is a genetically based programme which predisposes mankind to behave in certain ways. Tiger and Fox added that this predisposition is not the same as instinct since it can be considerably modified by culture but it remains a basic influence on human behaviour.

In support of the biologically determined sex roles, Parker and Parker (cf. Sanderson, 1988:307-308 as cited in (Anozie and Ifeanacho: 1999:15) from their studies concluded that human biology is a significant component of differential behaviour of the sexes. Of note is the fact that Parker and Parker also observed that females who have higher than normal sex hormone and organ developed differently from other females. Thus, Parker and Parker observe that they (females who have higher male sex hormones and organ) exhibit higher levels of aggression and energy expenditure, are more likely to select males rather than females as their companions, show less interest in dull play or other forms of feminine play associated with maternal behaviour, show greater interest in a non-domestic career, and are more frequently described as tomboys.

Talcott Parson, a functionalist also noted that the differences in sex roles have biological foundation. He posits that within the family the role of the women is basically that of socialization of the young. The woman's role according to Talcot Parson is also expressive which means she provides warmth, security and emotional support. This is essential for the stabilization of the young and by extension for the stabilization of adult personality. The bottom-line of this biologically based sex roles is that it creates sex division of labour and therefore gender inequality.

However, biological theorists have been criticized severally on a number of issues. For example Macoby and Jacklin 1974) as cited in (Anozie and Ifeanacho 1999) pointed out that biology based researches seek to find difference while ignoring the similarities between males and females. This is perhaps, why aggression is over stressed. Consequently, no mention is made of variation in characteristics that exists among males and females. Some men tend to be submissive, weak and uncompetitive, and some women are aggressive, strong and competitive. Again, Ann Oakley criticized the biological theorists on the ground that the expressive function of women cannot apply to women engaged in paid employment.

Apart from the above criticisms, it is also evident that in Nigeria, women do most of the things that were hitherto exclusively for men. For instance, most women in Nigeria can and do participate in violent demonstrations. Others also join secret cults, especially in institutions of higher learning. In fact there is a particular cult group-the Brazzier specially for women. Like most other secret cults, aggression is their watch word. Women also join armed robbery gangs and kidnapping groups. These aggression oriented groups/gangs were thought to be exclusively for men based on the postulations of the biological theorists. It is therefore evident that gender inequality based on sex division of labour is no longer tenable.

Cultural Factor:

On the other hand, the criticism of biological factor has led to the consideration of the views of the social theorists on gender inequality as a result of culturally imposed roles on man. According to Haralambos and Heald: 373 as cited in (Anozie and Ifeanacho 1999), the social theorists present a common thesis that human behaviour is largely directed and determined by culture, that is the learned recipe for behaviour shared by members of a society. From this perspective, gender

roles are a product of culture rather than biology. Individuals learn their respective male and female roles. The sexual division of labour is supported and justified by a belief and value system which states that gender roles are normal, natural, right and proper.

The above assertion by the social theorists justifies the claim that gender inequality and the corresponding sex division of labour is the machination of culture of the people. In effect, it is the culture of the people that determines the roles men and women should play. (Oluwadiya 1994). Thus culture is very important in defining the mode of life of the people and the attendant values, tradition and beliefs and fundamental rights of human beings (Serageldin 1992). One of the social theorists Ernestine Fied L argues that biology is universal; if biology determines gender inequality, gender inequality should be universal. But variations exist in gender inequality from one society to another. Therefore, the basis for gender inequality should be sought in the varying cultures of societies (Anozie and Ifeanacho 1999).

In trying to explain the disparities in the different societies in Nigeria as imposed by the culture of the people, (Wordu 1999) analyzed the cultures of such societies as Yako, Yoruba, Nupe, Hausa-Fulani, Ibo and Tiv. In all these societies, (Wordu 1999) noted that there is noticeable male dominance as a result of the role culture imposed on them. For instance, in the Hausa-Fulani society, the practice of Purdah bares women from participating effectively in significant social, political, economic and cultural processes. This denial of participation of women from social, cultural, economic and even political can be found in different forms depending on the values and belief system of the people. In the Ibo society, for example, important leadership and status tittles, such as Ozo, Ichie, ritual symbol of Ikenga and Participation in religious and ritual ceremonies, e.g. Mmanwu are the exclusive

preserve of men's social interaction. However, other social status of women are endowed by virtue of their husbands wealth or position e.g. being a Lolo is not an achieved status, but ascribed through marriage (Wordu 1999).

Granted that different cultures in different societies in Nigeria imposed some restraints on the projection of the women in participating at the gladiatorial level of democratic process, yet there are certain cultural values and expectations which women have been emancipated. For instance, the view that women are to be seen and not be heard as demanded by the culture of some societies appears to have been overtaken by events. Women now occupy leadership positions (not minding the paucity of the number), they also contest elections and are very vocal at the family, community, state and national levels. Again, the cultural expectation that women should behave and dress in a particular way seems to be outmoded. It is no longer uncommon sight to see women in Nigeria wearing trousers, including married women in the local communities.

Furthermore, female circumcision as demanded by certain cultural practices is no longer in vogue. Women are also seen as competent breadwinners of some homes and pillars of community development projects either as individuals or as a group. Most of the traditional religious practices have been swallowed by the ravaging western values and the virulent Christian faith. Where then lies the inhibitive hands of culture on women? Thus, gender inequality as a result of culturally imposed sex roles seems to have frittered away. In other words women are no longer culturally bound. In fact, in the true spirit of the Beijing Conference, they have been 'liberated'. But what matters actually is not just the freedom from cultural restraints but most importantly is what they (women) do with the freedom. It appears it is not yet Uhuru for the women.

Political Factor

There is a widespread claim that the colonial legacy bequeathed to Nigeria has adversely affected the participation of women in politics. The British colonial master patterned the colonial state (Nigeria) alongside patriarchy in their own society. The appointment of comprador elements did not include women. This is majorly because in England during the Victorian days, the woman could not enter into a contract in her own name (Ndu 1999). This means that male dominance which is prevalent in England was adopted by the colonizers in Nigeria. Women were therefore excluded from the political, economic and educational calculations of the colonizers. The colonial policy did not encourage entrepreneurial skills. The males took up wage labour and were confined to the services of the colonizer.

This proletarianization process stifled local production and eventually truncated the economy. Thus entrepreneurship was thrown to the dustbin and the emergent elites who at the dawn of independence wanted to maintain and sustain the newly acquired political power saw the state and its apparatuses as means of amassing wealth. Property relation therefore became male-dominant. Men acting as free agents, acquired property, created freedom for themselves, enhanced their individual autonomy and liberated themselves from certain natural and social constraints (Nwosu 1999). Thus, it follows that in a bid to acquire property, there is the need to acquire state power vice-versa:

Ascendancy to power, becomes a do-or-die affair (Ake 1981). In line with this view, (Nwosu 1999) observes that, the above has obvious implications in understanding politics of gender in Nigeria. The need to control the state is now a hot pursuit among men. It acts as a deterrent to women. It assumes a Hobbesian dimension in which physical coercion becomes the tool of men. Women's

sensibilities repulse a situation where politics become a relation of raw power, where right becomes coextensive with power, and where you are secured to the extent of power under your control which in turn is a function of property. (Nwosu; 1999)

In as much as we agree with (Nwosu 1999) on the fierceness of political competition, it may not be totally acceptable to continue to believe that political violence should continue to hinder women (though not trying to legitimize political violence) from active participation at the gladiatorial level. The argument is that if women in Nigeria as far back as 1929, in spite of the brute force of the colonizers were able to stage a protest, a violent one for that matter against obnoxious and repressive colonial policies, then it will no longer be reasonable to continue to believe that violence can hinder women from active participation in politics. After all, most men cannot withstand the sight of violence let alone participating in violent protest. Besides that, it must be reiterated that some women join violent and aggressive secret cults, armed robbery gangs, kidnapping gangs and other aggression and violence prone groups. The question is why is it that women cannot bring to bear their wealth of experience on violence on the political arena in Nigeria if that would make them participate actively in the gladiatorial level? It simply means that participation of women in politics at the gladiatorial level transcends violent political competition to some other considerations which we shall divulge in the course of our discourse.

Economic Factor:

It is not in doubt that the economic empowerment of men has placed them at vantage position over the women in the political equation of Nigeria. This is

because during the colonial era, the men had the first contact with the colonial masters and took up jobs in the urban centres for the colonial masters who adopted patriarchy in their colony. The existing cultural beliefs that the responsibilities of the woman do not extend beyond the house, the farm and market reinforces male dominance. Women who projected themselves beyond these sectors were suspected to have easy virtue tendencies and were despised in the communities (Anikpo l999). This makes the men as the accredited bread winners and are therefore economically empowered. Considering the impact of economic empowerment in the political calculus of Nigeria, economic empowerment gives fillip to acquisition of state power. It follows that because the men have economic power, they also have access to state power to the exclusion of women.

The paper, therefore, posits here that the economic empowerment monopoly by men is no longer pervasive. Most women are now substantive breadwinners of the family. In fact, given the economic realities in Nigeria, most men no longer marry women who are full time house wives, that is women who are considered to be liabilities. The cultural belief that the responsibilities of women do not exceed the house, the farm and market has been overtaken by modern values. (Nwosu 1999) attested to this when he said that the contemporary Nigerian society is not purely traditional or fully modern; it is a blend of the two. The outcome is not a reflection of any of the two wholly or entirely. It reflects a blend of values derived from the two aspects of the society, with an increasing dominance by the modern over the traditional.

Thus, it is no longer surprising to see women who are heads of corporate organizations. For instance, Prof. Ndi-Onyiuke Okereke, former Director-General Nigeria Stock Exchange Commission, Dr. Violet Arene of NNPC, Mrs. Kuforiji Olubi, Folake Solanke, Tokunbo Awolowo-Dosunmu, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

former Minister of Finance and Vice-President of International Monetary Fund (IMF), Mrs Dieziani Allision - Madueke, former Minister of Petroleum to mention but a few. The point is that economic empowerment is no longer the exclusive preserve of men. Women are also empowered.

Educational Factor

Education is very important in the life of man (men and women inclusive). Apart from the fact that it extricates man from idiosyncrasies, it also equips man for political, economic and social development. It inculcates values that are necessary for self and collective actualization of man. However, as important as education is in the lives of men and women, it is claimed that education is skewed to the advantage of men. That is more men are educated to the exclusion of women in Nigeria. And because education is a sine- qua-non for economic empowerment and by extension political participation at the gladiatorial level, more men dominate the process of decision making. The colonial educational policy was not in favour of women as little effort was made to encourage the girl- child to go to school. The colonizers established more boys' schools than that of girls (Ndu 1999).

(Nwosu 1999) and (Omoregie and Abraham 2009:3-6) in various statistical analyses of gender balance in educational enrolment in Nigeria confirms male dominance. Be that as it may, in spite of the disparity, it is a considered view that compared to the colonial era in Nigeria, more women have acquired western education in Nigeria to the point that they can now constitute a force to be reckoned with. To corroborate this point is the fact that co-educational and girls institutions are seen everywhere in Nigeria. Again is the fact that there are highly educated women in Nigeria. e.g. The former Vice Chancellor of University of Benin, Prof Grace- Alele-Williams,

Prof Bene Willy Abbey, former Deputy Vice Chancellor research, University of Port Harcourt, Prof Felicia Ekejiuba- the Regional Programme Adviser of the United Nations Development Fund (UNIFEM), Mrs. Matilda Nnodim, former Registrar, University of Port Harcourt, Justice Mary Odili, Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The list is endless. From the foregoing, it is no more fashionable to continue to blame the poor participation of women in politics at the gladiatorial level on the paucity or lack of educated women.

Implications on Participatory Democracy

It has been stated categorically why the 'old factors' should not continue to be held responsible for gender inequality and the subsequent marginalization and exclusion of women from participating at the gladiatorial level. What then is responsible for the marginalization of women in politics? Two factors are responsible for the low participation of women in politics at the gladiatorial level in Nigeria. First is the natural instinct in women which appears to be selfish as they always look up to the men for survival. For instance, an informal relationship between a boy and a girl places the boy on a tight corner as he is bound to provide the needs of the girl.

Most women prefer hiding under the canopy of the men. What is wrong if in a relationship or even in marriage the women also provide for the men? Instead of striving to be the Governor, President, Chairman of Local Governments etc, women prefer to be first ladies (Nwaorgu 1999), this makes them to be second fiddlers. (Anozie and Ifeanacho 1999) observed that women demand to be given a chance in songs and speeches. They fail to appreciate the necessity for a broad—based struggle. Neo-patrimonialism permeates their thought patterns to the extent that when they make achievement, they express gratitude to males for giving them the opportunity. First ladyism is part of those neo patrimonialism.

Another point to be noted is the nonchalant attitude of women coupled with petty jealousy and seemingly incompatibility that exist among women in Nigeria. This fact has obviously led to the ineffectiveness of women to mobilize their fellow women to take up their rightful position in the 'gladiatorial activities in Nigeria. There are many organizations that should rise to the clarion call. The National Council of Women Society (NCWS), the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), the National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) etc. appear to be toothless bulldogs. It is surprising to note that in 1929 women rose up to challenge an existing order imposed by the colonizers and it is obvious that most of them did not have primary education, whereas now that we have plethora of highly educated women, yet they cannot challenge an existing order excluding them from the mainstream of decision- making even when the 1979 constitution prohibits discrimination on the ground of gender.

The dismal poll result of the only female Presidential aspirant on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Mrs. Sarah Jubril (she voted for herself and had only one vote) at the presidential primary election, even when women were delegates at the convention is a pointer. The effect is that most women continue to subsume themselves under men as they feel that they can get anything they want through men even with their education and economic empowerment. This negative attitude of mind of women would continue to reinforce gender inequality and women would continue to play the second fiddle in politics especially at the gladiatorial level.

Concluding Remarks:

We have been able to argue that gender inequality and the subsequent low level of participation of women in politics at the gladiatorial level can no longer be

attributed to biological, cultural, political, economical and educational factors. Instead the selfish motive and nonchalant and petty jealousy of women have continuously relegated them to the background. It is not in doubt that women in Nigeria have all it takes to be President of Nigeria and Governors of the states in Nigeria. But their negative attitudes of mind have robbed them of their rightful positions.

There is therefore the need for women to be rebranded and have a positive attitude of mind that will enhance their effective participation in the democratic process, especially at the gladiatorial level.

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