Women Participation in Leadership Positions: A Beacon of Social Change in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination of women against elective and appointive policy making positions at Federal, State and Local levels is still prevalent. The work is taking a critical look at the role of women in leadership positions in Nigeria with specific aim of shading light on the fact that women are agents of social change. It is observed that notwithstanding the cultural barriers and discrimination against womenfolk, they are naturally endowed to become indispensable tool for nation's building. Therefore, if given the opportunity to participate in the general governance structure, our economy can eventually surmount the apparent developmental hurdles and can create positive impact in society.
Keywords: *Leadership Position, Nation Building, Decision-making, Discrimination*

INTRODUCTION

Since the stone ages women were seen as inferior, anatomically weak, and even subordinate. These characters were not peculiar in Nigeria only but also in the world at large. In advanced countries of Europe and America, however, women were rightly place before now, but in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, the concept and process of empowering women started only recently. Empowerment of women involves many things: economic opportunity, social equality and personal rights. Women are deprived of these human rights, often as a matter of tradition. In local areas, women were generally not seen to have any meaningful sources of income; as a result, they were relegated mainly to household duties and cheap labour. Without the earning capacity, their voices were silenced. Even in matters of sex and child bearing, women often did not know their sexual right or have the ability to oppose the wishes of their husbands. Mma (2010) posits that during the colonial times, Nigerian women were denied the franchise and very few of them were offered any political or administrative appointments. She further opines that it was only during the 1950s that three women (Chief (Mrs.) Olufunmilaya Ransome – Kuti (the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs), Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo and Chief (Mrs.) Janet Mokelu (both of the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs) were appointed into the House of Chiefs. It was also only in the 1950s that women in Southern Nigeria were

given the franchise. The women's wings of political parties were formed but they possessed very little functional relevance. Women of Nigeria especially, the South East have been protesting their marginalization since pre-independence era. The Aba Women's Riot or what came to be known as "Women's War" was a reflection of the tenacity of women in the South East. The early stages of nationalist revolt against entrenched British rule took the form of localized skirmishes like the Aba women's riots, provoked by specific grievances. By that time, women were already mobilizing to claim their rights.

The Aba Women's Riot of 1929 was carried out to protest against the oppressive taxation system of the then colonial government and it was led by women of the South East (Mma, 2010). According to Jasprit (2006), Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equity in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, were fundamental for the achievement of equity, development and peace. Progress for women is inseparable from the social and political progress of every society. When women are oppressed, denied freedom, and held back from an opportunity, then an entire society suffers, not just its female folk. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees equality between the sexes and in spite of rising interests among women; politics is yet virtually an exclusive affair of men. Women in the South East Nigeria have continued to experience political exclusion (Mma, 2010). Very few educated women participate in politics because of society's negative perception of women. The role of women in South Eastern Nigeria's post 1960 politics according to Mma (2010), has not been reflected sufficiently in terms of appointments to policy making positions. In spite of massive support given to various political parties by women, women's organizations, market women movements, etc., until recently, very few women benefited from political appointments. Therefore, the discrimination of women against elective and appointive policy making positions at Federal, State and Local levels is still prevalent.

According to Jasprit (2006), democracy must in essence mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all. The concept of local government can be explained in the words thus: that the government is the best which governs the least. In this kind of system, every person is the subject and object of the action. It can be said that every decision taken affects the whole social structure. In every country's parliamentary democracy, men had in the past played a leading role in every decision affecting the development of the society or the people. It is evidently true that our society is a male-dominated society and women are treated as household commodity, anatomically weak and subordinate, who can look after

the family affairs but in recent times to some extent they are being treated with fairness. Biologically, males and females have different physical structure but in rural economy females play a greater role besides looking after family affairs. Over the years the rise of a few women to prominent positions till now presumed to be the exclusive preserve of men, is evident of the changing tide of history in favour of the womenfolk. Thus, in essence, good governance has always been characterized by the level of women's representation in policy making both at the State, Local or National levels. Unless and until women are allowed to make a mark in this brave new world by way of involving them in policy-making process, etc. the much talked about empowerment of women in all forums, would become a will-of-the-wisp, or a high sounding nothingness. Hence, women will gain more advantage when men respect and accept the contributions of women in matters of national interest.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN NIGERIA

Nigerian women were marginalized in decision making and leadership in a variety of processes that begin from infancy. In contrast to boys, girls were encouraged to play passive roles and are given little opportunity to make decisions or develop leadership skills outside the family context. Instead, they were taught to accept the inferior role that society including parents, teachers and brothers ascribed to them. As a result, women lacked the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in the public sphere.

Nonetheless, such practice or scenario has somewhat been a thing of the past. In the words of Das (2001), all human being are born free and equal in dignity and rights. These are the guarantees in Article I of Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1945 and form the corner stone of all fundamental rights provisions in every Democratic Constitution and Declaration. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and programmes aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. The role of women in leadership positions, Nzekwe (2011), posits, has generated heated debates for over two decades now.

At the international level, the United Nations Conferences on women have advocated the need to increase the number of women in decision-making positions to ensure that women's interests are represented and because of groaning evidence that women's involvement improves the way in which leadership and decision-making is practiced. According to Oranusi (2009), the acquisition of western education has influenced men's attitude towards females as well as female's attitude towards their endowed potential. It has made them more confident in themselves; such confidence he posits, influences their output, be it in school, business, and place of work, in the home or social organizations. However, Mma (2010), in her humble submission posits that

women are gradually being appointed into the traditional ruling councils in some parts of Igbo land to give women the opportunity and forum where they can express their interests. In Ugwogo Nike, for instance, in the newly created Iyiukwu Local Government Area of Enugu, there is emergence of new roles played by the women. Over 24 women have been appointed members of the Traditional Ruling Council. This now trend is creeping into Anambra State and other States. In Imo State, the outcome of the CIRDDOC/LDI project was the opening up of the traditional structures to women in the State. The last twenty years have seen a steady but modest increase in the number and proportion of women candidates and councilors in local governments in the United Kingdom, yet there remains a large gender imbalance in the makeup of most local councils, with well under one-third of councilors being women.

In Nigeria, while women are under-represented in political positions in higher levels of government, they would have clearly had more success at gaining access to local level decision making positions. This is so because participation in local government is easier for women to combine with other family responsibilities (Nzekwe, 2011). However, the rise of a few women to prominent positions hitherto thought to be solely meant for men by the appointment of Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Minister of Finance and Prof. Dora Akunyili, former Director-General of National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili, former Special Assistant to the President and later the Minister of Education, the present Minister for Education Prof. Ruggyatu Rufai, etc. are indication that women are climbing the political ladder so rapidly.

According to Okonkwo and Nwokolo (2009), women as agents of social and economic upliftment of any given society are evidence in their contributions at home and their immediate environment. In spite of harsh cultural practices and discrimination against women, their natural capacity and endowment made them an indispensable tool for nation building. In our contemporary society, where men dominate the political, economic and social spheres, Okonkwo and Nwokolo (2009) posit that women still raise their heads and make their marks in the scheme of things. According to Marilyn (2011), given the Nigeria Cultural environment which gender stereotyping is rife, management appointment is most likely to be skewed in favour of men known for their dominance in different spheres of life. However, she posits that this was not so in the State Security Service where the training curriculum is the same for both sexes. In appointments women are given appreciable consideration with the men. Of the 36 States, women are holding leadership positions in at least fifteen and across the local government areas women are appointed security chiefs. At the national headquarters with seventeen

Directorates, women are the highest decision making body. The successes have been enormous. There are work place conflicts which arise from gender discrimination (Marilyn, 2011). Thus, without the input in decision making, women's concerns are not prioritized, and nothing is apportioned to them. And in the absence of any measurable resource allocated, and even political platform, women have less chance of acting as agents of social and economic transformation.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP, A BEACON FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

When gender is mentioned, most people feel threatened and see it as means of competition between men and women for dominance, thereby making the male counterpart to feel uneasy about his position being taken by a woman. Gender mainstreaming is equality given or assigned to both men and women without discrimination. In order words, there should be room for favourable competition between both sexes and not favouring one at the detriment of the other (Ringim, 2011). In the words of Oluyemi-Kusa (2003) cited in Dayo (2011), men tend to go into negotiations expecting one side to win and another to loose (whereas) women look for points of community and are less afraid to compromise. This admirable trait *of talk-to-finish* rather than *fight-to-finish* distinguishes the female gender.

In many instances, when talks break down on the big issues and the men walk out, the women are left at the table, for women, the soft issues around which there is commonality and a shared vision are also important, as they enable the dialogue to continue and trust to be restored. In this way, they pave the way for the men to return and discuss the comprehensive peace agreement. According to Nzekwe (2011), women are a strong force in development. They have arisen as a conscious social force and their involvement in the pursuit for development is yet to be fully analyzed. Every nation, developed or developing, has recorded the involvement of its womenfolk in its development as a nation.

However, Okonkwo and Nwokolo (2009), posit that women as agents of social and economic upliftment of any given society are evidenced in their contributions at home and their immediate environment. In spite of harsh cultural practices and discrimination against women, their natural capacity and endowment made them an indispensable tool for national building. In our contemporary society where men dominate the political, economic and social spheres, women still raise their heads and make their marks in the scheme of things. One of such examples is Professor Dora Akunyili, doubling as the former Director General of National Agency for Food Drug and Administrative Council (NAFDAC) and Information Minister, she has indeed made a loud statement that women when given the opportunity can actually surmount hurdles and

create positive effect on society. Dayo (2011) opines that ultimately, for women, working from the outside is not enough. It is important to have women in politics, in decision-making processes and in leadership positions. To break the cycle of violence and the oppression against women, it is essential for more women to work and make the changes from within formal government structures. Underlying much of the discussion on leadership were arguments that were put forth effectively in the Beijing Platform for Action. It is when women are actively engaged in politics and/or in every active NGOs, that they can positively implement progressive pro-women policies. A very important one is *affirmative action*, such as:

*   Domesticate CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), in accordance with Nigeria's international obligations.

*   Establish special measures to ensure appropriate laws which protect women are expeditiously promulgated.

*   Support these efforts by regulations and policies that ensure the availability of, and access to positions of leadership for women in Nigeria.

*   Provide for a minimum of 30% of the seats to women in elective and appointive positions in all governmental bodies.

*   Governments and civil societies should take action and strengthen programmes and networking opportunities to promote affirmative action for women to all levels of representation in Nigeria. However, Okonkwo and Nwokolo (2009) are of the view that there is a clear attestation to the fact that women have the capacity and the requisite mental prowess to impact positively on their various communities and the entire nation. Apart from being mothers and wives and taking charge of the domestic sector, women contribute substantially to the production and distribution of goods and services. In the agricultural sector, women farm alongside their husbands and children. The South East women take part in the production of palm oil and palm kernel, participate in local and long distance trade in different parts of Nigeria and are fully involved in the procurement and sale of various food items and related commodities (Mma, 2010).

However, the contribution of women to socio-economic development as producers and workers has been recognized in the formal and informal sectors and appropriate policies relating to employment and to her working condition have been drawn up. Such measures include:

*   Reinterpretation and redefinition of conventional concepts of work wherever necessary, e.g. in the census records, to reflect women's

contribution as producers and workers.

* The important role played by women in electronics, information technology and food processing and agro industry and textiles has been crucial to the development of these sectors.
* They have been given comprehensive support in terms of labour legislation, social security and other support services to participate in various industrial sectors.

As cited in APRM (2008) the levels of progress recorded in support for and empowerment of widows has been enormous. But the level of progress in Kebbi State, which is an Islamic State, is indicative of the Federal government were to take a more assertive stance in planning, coordinating and realizing a national programme of action for increased gender equality. Information obtained in Oby Nwankwo (2008), Women in Power and Decision Making, cited in APRM (2008) indicates the following leadership position as observed in Kebbi State, thus;

* Sent a woman representative to the Federal House of Assembly.
* The Chief Electoral Officer was a woman
* The Commissioner in charge of Women's Affairs was a woman.
* The Chief Judge, a woman.
* Every Local Government had a woman Councilor (21 women in all).
* There were 3 women Special Advisers,
* Targeting 33 percent of posts to be given to women to serve as directors, executive – secretaries of education, pension boards, etc.

Women have a greater sense of social issues and the well being and welfare of their communities. When in such positions, their priorities will centre on the provision of basic amenities like food, shelter, clothing, education, health services, property allocation and community development. According to Nzekwe (2011), they will see to the improvement of the environment within their communities. Since women are the covers of aesthetics, in planning city development, the quality of life, harmony in art and culture and environmental development. They will be decisive on such issues that are often neglected by men such as family issues and violence against women and children. Women are sure of adopting more democratic and transparent approach to governance than men. They will bring about the much desired change from politics of corruption to a more friendly and accommodating polities of openness. When this happens, politics will cease to be a *do – or – die* to a sometimes *you – win* sometimes *you loose* kind of game. Women's style of leadership, Nzekwe (2011) posits is more inclusive, collaborative and consultative, more tolerant of different view points, people – oriented, encourages participation, more assertive, innovative and above all, more conscientious.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Women's contribution to socio-economic development and social policies have been recognized in the formal and informal sectors such as agriculture and allied sectors. The training of women in soil conservation, forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries, etc., have benefited the society at large. The important role played by women in electronics, information technology and food processing and agro-industry and textiles has been crucial to the development of these sectors.

Most importantly, the role of women in promoting peace and security in Nigeria is well documented. The Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria feared that the head-count being carried out by the British was a prelude to women being taxed. The women were unhappy about the over-taxation of their husbands and sons which they felt was pauperizing them and causing economic hardship for the entire community, hence, they professed against the oppressive rule of the colonial government.

It is therefore, expedient for the Federal Government of Nigeria to put into law, some of the lofty policies for gender equality, she signed at various international Declarations. Also, to bring women into the political mainstream government must ensure that the women's reservation bill passed in the National Assembly is implemented by all political parties in the country. Democracy without women's full participation is just a – will – of – the – wisp, a mockery of it. Until women are adequately part and parcel of the decision – making policy, improvement in their social, political and economic well-being would be a far cry.

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