WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: THE IMPERATIVE OF EMPOWERMENT

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Key Points

1. Even though an increasing number of women are providing leadership for blue chip companies, the majority of women in Nigeria engage only minimally in economic development or politics.

2. Empowering women economically affects the way women perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by the community, giving them the local support necessary to enter into politics.

3. Key efforts to change the level of women’s engagement in Nigerian economic development and elections include the creation of advocacy groups, town hall meetings for women, and skills development centers and cooperatives, particularly in agriculture.

Introduction

“Politics is too serious a business to be left in the hands of politicians.”
– Charles de Gaulle
If Charles de Gaulle were alive, he would offer a revised version of his oft-quoted maxim for Nigeria: “Politics is too serious a business to be left solely in the hands of men.” In Nigeria, politics is presumed to be a man’s turf, where No Woman Needs Apply (NWNA) – an unspoken slogan reminiscent of the discrimination against Irish nationals in 19th century Britain. This unwritten rule is one that only a small percentage of the female population\(^1\) has defied successfully. Democracy presupposes a pluralistic system that is all-inclusive. It is ironic that women are systematically excluded from participating in the process, in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Consider the following telling statistics: during the last Nigerian general elections, held in April 2007, there were a total of 1,200 women aspirants to 1,532 offices. 660 of these women won their primaries. Of the 660 candidates who contested elections for various posts, 93 finally emerged as winners: six deputy governors, nine senators, 27 national representatives, and 52 in various state Houses of Assembly. Even though this represents a significant increase in female participation in the political process, it is still a far cry from the aspirations of women the world over for full participation.\(^2\)

**Female Participation: Then and Now**

Despite being a patriarchal society, Nigeria has a rich history of women breaking out of the mold to participate in politics. Our pre-colonial history is replete with the exploits of Queen Amina of Zaria, who led armies to drive out invaders from Zaria, and Moremi of Ile-Ife, whose sacrifice for her people speaks to selfless leadership that we are so bereft of these days. Our recent past speaks of prominent women leaders like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, a crusader and the scourge of despotic leaders, who led Egba women on a protest against taxation; Margaret Ekpo, a prominent civil rights activist; and Hajia Gambo Sawaba, who championed the cause of the oppressed in northern Nigeria. Iyalode Tinubu of Lagos exemplifies the rich participation of women on the economic scene.

The legacies of these women are at risk of extinction. Even though an increasing number of women are finding their way into boardrooms and providing leadership for blue chip companies, the majority of women in Nigeria offer only minimal participation in economic development or politics. Female participation in decision-making is still a far cry from the Rwandan experience, where the economy rode to recovery on the backs of women.\(^3\) It is instructive to know that in some parts of the country, women were not allowed to participate until 1976,\(^4\) 16 years after Nigeria’s independence from Great Britain. There are nagging fears that the exclusion of women might continue indefinitely.

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\(^1\) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6217719.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6217719.stm). The controversial census conducted in 2006 puts the population of women at 68.3 million .


\(^3\) [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/15/AR2008051504035.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/15/AR2008051504035.html)

Hurdles between Women and Active Participation

Several impediments have been identified as limiting the participation of women on the social, economic, and political fronts. These barriers are cultural, economic, and legal.

Cultural Mores

“Men are the decision makers; women should be cooking in the kitchen while men play politics.” – Comments passed to Dorothy Nyone when she announced her intention to represent the Gokana area for the ruling People’s Democratic Party.\(^5\)

Social conventions, values, and mores combine to maintain the stereotype of women as kitchen dwellers who are only gatecrashers into spheres outside of their matrimonial homes. Women are socialized from birth to see their place as second to that of men. The birth of a male child is warmly received, to the extent that women often feel that their marriage is not secure until they give birth to male children. Cultural practices are often harmful to women. For example, burial rites in the eastern parts of the country ensure that women remain social outcasts: widows are forced to drink the bath water of their dead husbands as part of the mourning process. Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) results from the early marriage of teenage girls in the north. Victims of these cultural practices cannot participate socially as they are viewed as outcasts.

Religion: Religion is an accomplice in the stereotyping of women and reinforces the barriers that prevent them from participating politically, economically, and socially. For instance, in the northern part of Nigeria, women are held in Purdah in deference to Islam. Only their husbands have unfettered access to them and their movements are restricted to their quarters. They depend entirely on their husbands and families to meet their needs. The conditions of their lives can only be guessed at, as most households subsist below the poverty line.\(^6\) Religion ensures that a significant number of women are barred from participating in politics, either as voters or as aspirants to elective offices, as well as economic activities.

Women’s Perception of Politics

“Politics is a dirty game”: Politics is perceived as a dirty vocation that is reserved for unrefined people who have little scruples with bending the rules and subverting due process. Nigerians are regaled daily with the details of the unsavory actions of members of the political class. Politicians are adept at manipulating the popular will of the people. Women in politics are seen as similarly corrupt. They are treated as deviants. Contesting for public office as a woman is often considered ‘unladylike’.

The Demands of Politics: Politics is time consuming and demands a great deal of attention. There are caucus meetings, primaries, campaign stumps, and fundraising ad

infinitum. Participation often requires attending evening meetings. For women without a supportive spouse, it is difficult to juggle traditional roles with an interest in politics. Some women in politics pay a costly price for their careers. The tradeoff may be politics for marriage and marital happiness. Female politicians are often perceived to be divorcees and marital failures.

**Violence and Threats:** As an aspirant, Dorothy Nyone had to defy jeers from the chauvinists opposed to her candidacy. The forces of patriarchy in her party ensured that she lost. While her loss was no news, what was telling was the violence that marred the elections. In her words, “A ward chairman was shot dead; all the women and most of the men fled the scene. My husband rushed there and took me home. I was scared; men who were fully prepared for the violence were the only ones who remained behind to hand pick the various winners.”

One of the potential disincentives to participating in politics is the crudeness of Nigerian politics that brook no opposition and resolve dissent by visiting violence on political opponents. The ‘do-or-die’ nature of politics in Nigeria is barely veiled. Threats are made intermittently to warn opponents that when push comes to shove, the side with the monopoly of violence will carry the day. The spate of politically motivated killings has not helped matters. Recently, one of the nine female senators in the national assembly, Senator Gbemisola Saraki, narrowly escaped death at the hands of paid assassins. Such politically motivated attacks are rife. Nigeria’s checkered history has had its fair share of women who have had to pay the ultimate price for venturing into politics. Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Suliat Adeleji, and many others were hapless victims of the sanguinary predilection of Nigerian politics.

**Funding:** One of the frightening bogeys that politics conjures is the figure of a pot-bellied, avuncular male figure that holds court in a political party as a godfather. His role is not mentoring. Rather, the godfather’s role is to provide a robust war chest and clear the path for the selection of the godson or daughter for the contested office. In return, the godfather receives unrestricted access to the corridors of power and inflated contracts that are rarely executed. The election process requires tons of cash to buy votes and compromise consciences. Candidates without deep pockets or wealthy backers cannot actualize their dreams of contesting for public office. Nomination forms to contest for elective offices in most parties are very expensive. According to the Gender Empowerment Index, women in Nigeria earn 0.45 of a full salary, which may partly

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Senator Gbemi Saraki is being tipped to contest for the gubernatorial elections in Kwara state.
10 [http://thenationonlineng.net/web2/articles/17760/1/PDP-throws-Anambra-governorship-race-open/Page1.html](http://thenationonlineng.net/web2/articles/17760/1/PDP-throws-Anambra-governorship-race-open/Page1.html). The ruling PDP sold its nomination forms for the recently held Anambra governorship election for five million naira ($34,000).
explain why they are reluctant to actively participate in politics. On the economic frontier, limited access to credit and finance also scuttles women’s dreams of participation.

**Poverty**

“In Africa, poverty wears a woman’s face.” - UN’s Economic Commission for Africa

A corollary to funding is the stark poverty that confronts Nigerian women. Under stifling economic conditions, women have less access to education, credit information, skills, loans, and health care – all crucial for attaining financial independence. The combination of all these factors, added to the burdens of child rearing and housekeeping, conspire to keep women off of the social and political scenes. In some cultures in Nigeria, women have no property or inheritance rights. African women are said to own just one percent of the continent’s assets. This makes it difficult for them to access loans, as they do not have collateral.

**What Empowerment Means for Women**

Empowerment is the ability and freedom to actualize long-held dreams. In Nigeria, female empowerment would mean leveling the playing field so that men do not have an advantage in fulfilling their potential, whether in business, politics, or other social platforms. It is opening space for women to have unfettered access to education, skills, and participation in the decision-making process on matters that affect them.

**Linkage between Political, Social, and Economic Empowerment**

The links between the social, economic, and political exclusion of women indicate that by creating an opening in one area, the other areas will become more accessible for women. To address women’s participation on any front, efforts must be made to address the barriers to participation on the other two fronts. In Nigeria, a woman’s social ranking depends on age, lineage, and achievement. Empowering women economically affects the way women perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by the community. Thus, women would have fewer inhibitions about participating on both the economic and political scenes. The elimination of discriminatory laws from the books would ease female participation in business and politics. Women should be able to own properties without the approval of a spouse or father; they should be able to access finance for entrepreneurship without the ridiculous requirement of approval from their spouse.

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12 UN’s Economic Commission for Africa’s report submitted to the eighth African Regional Conference on Women, held in Gambia in November 2009.


14 Afolabi M.M. *Scaling Inclement Hurdles To Women Participation In Nigerian Politics: A Pragmatic Approach.*
**Economic and Political Empowerment**

One of the barriers identified in the exclusion of women from political participation is poverty. With the predominant population of African women living below the poverty line, the pressing needs for most women would be scraping a living together for themselves and their families.

According to the United Nations, three quarters of all economic activity in developing countries is ascribed to men, while women actually perform 53 percent of the work.\(^{15}\) Women make up a large portion of the informal sector in most African economies. Women will face fewer barriers to entering politics if they are empowered economically. Increasing income levels for women can in turn increase confidence. The link between female economic empowerment and quality of life leads to more discussion on women’s issues, such as the number of children per couple, quality of education for children, health and hygiene, and the environment. Women also tend to be better stewards of economic development. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to cycle profits back into human capital development, including female education. Educated women are better suited to participate in decision-making processes in the society. Women who are empowered economically have less difficulty in playing active roles in politics as they can assert themselves and are unlikely to become pawns for existing political interests.

**Female Participation and the Benefits for Nigeria’s Economy**

Research has shown the connection between female political participation and economic empowerment, and its effect on children, the home, and society at large. Empowered women take adequate care of their children, ensure education of their daughters, and help in breaking the vicious cycles of poverty that are so rife in Africa. It is widely reported that the Rwandan economy owes it recovery from coma to the efforts of its women. Women are said to be driving that economy.\(^ {16}\) 50 percent of Rwanda’s parliament composed of women. Nigeria can take its cue from Rwanda by empowering its women. Experts say women make better investment decisions than men. Empowering women with the right skills, adequate funding, and timely information will no doubt ensure national productivity.

**Organizing to Demolish Barriers**

There are four keys areas where Nigerian women can focus in order to tear down the barriers blocking their economic and political empowerment:

**Setting Agendas:** Women can form advocacy groups to articulate and voice concerns about workplace issues, redistributing economic resources, and creating job opportunities for women, among other issues indicative of gender inequality. These groups can also

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\(^{16}\) [http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/2213/76/](http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/2213/76/)
help educate women on the implications of government policies on their businesses and participation in politics. Organizations like Baobab for Women’s Human Rights\(^{17}\) and WIMBIZ\(^{18}\) have played significant roles in this regard. These and many other groups also help by bringing valuable firsthand input and experiences into the legislative process to demolish barriers like patriarchal land and property laws that make it difficult for women to own property. These groups encourage the political class to enact legislation to encourage the participation of women. The infinitesimal percentage of women in legislative bodies still affects the passage of gender-friendly laws in the country.

**Mobilizing and Networking:** Regular town hall meetings for women can be convened to discuss issues that collectively affect women. The broadcast media can also be exploited to collate and publish issues that affect women. This is especially effective in rural areas where community radio stations are partners in communicating change. Businesses run by women can form coalitions to formulate policy positions and speak with a common voice before government. These groups can also interact with thought leaders and think tanks to analyze the potential impact of proposed legislation on women’s role in business and politics.

**Spreading the Word:** Periodic publication of Institute of Economic Development (IED) materials that highlight specific issues can help to galvanize broad support across social lines. These publications should be targeted at a broader audience, including young people. They should highlight the predicament of other demographics, like unemployed youth, widows, the aged, and persons living with HIV/AIDS. Quick wins by women should be celebrated. One such win is the recent nullification by a high court of the requirement of spousal approval in the form of a letter of consent before the issuance of an international passport to a married Nigerian woman.\(^{19}\) Young people can help spread reports of these quick wins via new media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. These social networking avenues present the opportunity to rally young people around the cause of gender equality and mobilize public opinion in favor of opening space for women’s participation.

**Skills and Information**

Skills acquisition centers should be established in rural areas for women to learn how to use modern agricultural tools, as the majority of the female Nigerian population is involved in agriculture. Women can form agricultural worker collectives where they can

\(^{17}\) [http://www.baobabwomen.org/](http://www.baobabwomen.org/). BAOBAB For Women’s Human Rights is a not for profit, non-governmental women’s human rights organization, which focuses on women’s legal rights issues under the three systems of law - customary, statutory, and religious laws in Nigeria.

\(^{18}\) [http://www.wimbiz.org/about.php](http://www.wimbiz.org/about.php) Women in Management and Business (WIMBIZ) is a non-profit organization based in Nigeria that strives to “be a catalyst that elevates the profile and influence of women in management and business.”

\(^{19}\) [http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=4414](http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=4414). In a suit brought against the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) by Dr. Priye Iyalla-Amadi, a federal high court ruled that it was a violation of the rights of Nigerian women to require them to produce a letter of consent from husbands as a condition for issuance of international passport.
pool resources together to collectively acquire land and modern tools for farming. Collectives make it easier for women to access funding and training. Women can also build capacities in information technology and how it can be exploited for financial independence. They can participate in training opportunities, such as Goldman Sachs Women’s Enterprise & Leadership Programs. Young people can play important roles in knowledge transfer to disadvantaged women. They can volunteer during holidays to teach basic skills in modern agricultural practices, information technology, and business management. Young professionals can also volunteer to provide pro bono financial advisory services to women.

Conclusion

The exclusion of women from the economy and political arena is an affront to the spirit and values of democratic governance and free market economy. In fact, our society is worse off without educated and active women, because they are responsible for shaping the next generation. The onus is on young people to take the center stage in overturning barriers to women’s empowerment. Women have nothing to lose by their participation in the social, economic, and policy arenas; the incentives to gain are limitless.

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The author, Adedotun Eyinade, earned a Bachelor of science degree in Microbiology at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-ife, Nigeria. His interests include new media, women rights, democracy, public speaking, literature and the environment. He divides his time between a 9-5 job as a management consultant with a professional services firm and volunteering for a progressive political movement in Nigeria. Eyinade aspires to write non-fiction professionally. He co-founded an online book club, pulpfactionclub.com. He lives and works in Lagos.

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20 http://nigeria.smetoolkit.org/nigeria/en/content/en/3759/Women's-Enterprise-Leadership-Program. The Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Initiative was aimed at empowering 10,000 women in developing and emerging economies. In Nigeria, the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Initiative has trained over 100 women under this scholarship, which includes a Certificate in Entrepreneurial Management (CEM) and follow-up services, such as business advice, consulting clinics, and mentoring.
References


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