WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PARTY POLITICS IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines women participation in party politics in Nigeria. Party politics in a large number of cases, is the launching pad into political positions in most Democracies. Observations from past and present practices reveal that women participation in party politics in Nigeria has been marginal, especially when marched against their numerical strength. Historically, women have held powerful political positions as exemplified by the lives of Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Queen Amina of Zaria, Margaret Ekpo of Calabar and Funmilayo Kuti. However, there is need to move from history and improve as well as increase women participation so as to ensure equitable power sharing among the genders in the Nigerian polity. The events leading to the total rejection of an only female presidential candidate, Sarah Jubril, in the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) calls for positive actions to avoid similar challenges in the future. Systematic and integrated campaigns in both rural and urban centres need to be intensified to play down gender stereotypes of public roles for women.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria, Women, Participation, Party-Politics, Challenges

INTRODUCTION
This Chapter takes a general and critical look at the issue of women participation in party politics in Nigeria. It lays emphasis on the fact that party politics is so central and vital to citizens’ access to participation in governance in any democratic dispensation. But most specifically, women’s marginal political participation in the affairs of the land has obvious negative effect on the socio-political system they live in.

THE WOMEN QUESTION TODAY:
The question many people ask or will likely ask is why have the issues of women become so pronounced in both political and academic fora today? The immediate response is that, there has been an awakened consciousness that women worldwide suffer all kinds and forms of discrimination. This, it has been argued, can only be fought if a worldwide and collective approach to the problem is evolved (Madunagu, 2003; Aliegba, 2005). The women question has also come up seriously as attempts by proponents of women’s rights have fought and continue to fight to make the women issue as a major agenda for developmental studies. This is why programmes related to women gained their limelight, and brought about the Cairo Programme of Action, which came under the auspices of International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). One of the most critical goals of ICPD was to bring women at last into the mainstream of development through the promotion of their health and education, and encourage their economic contribution, which will ultimately lead them to political participation (Agishi, 2002). We need to note that the struggle for the rights of women started long before the creation of the International Human Rights System. For example, in 1993, the Inter-American Women’s Commission of the Organisation of
American States (OAS) that was born in 1928 adopted a convention on the nationality of women, which was the first legislation on women’s rights (Aliegba, 2005; CENGOS, 2002).

In the United Nation system, women fought for the recognition of sex discrimination in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Committee on the Status of Women (CSW) was created parallel to the Commission on Human Rights itself, at its first meeting in 1946. As a consequence, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, signed in 1979 and entered into force in 1981 (Aliegba, 2005; CENGOS, 2002). Of course, the Berlin Conference of 1995 gave a worldwide collective respect in understanding these women issues for world attention.

Nigeria is a signatory to several International instruments affirming women’s rights and equality with men (World Bank, 1994). Prominent among these international instruments are the convention on the Political Rights of Women, which was adopted as far back as 1952 but ratified by Nigeria in 1980. The convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted in 1979 and ratified by Nigeria in 1985. Furthermore, the Nigerian Constitution enshrines in it the principle of gender equality. In spite of the numerous international and national instruments as well as Constitutional provisions affirming the equality of men and women in all spheres of life, Party Politics inclusive; very few women have participated in the management of Nigeria, public institutions such as Political Parties, Legislative Assemblies and executive councils are depicted as “male clubs”. A peep into what transpired in the past republics including the most recent election (2011) that brought the present government into power still witnessed the marginalisation of women in Party Politics. What lessons can be learnt from these experiences and what is the way forward? To answer these questions will form the main thrust of this chapter.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Women’s participation in party politics can be defined as active roles performed by women. However, perception of womanhood generally affects this role. Thus, perception of womanhood is useful in providing an explanation of the opportunity and structures available to men and women for self-actualization and effective participation in party politics, which ultimately leads to governance, leadership position and decision-making. In discussing the perception of womanhood, one is referring to beliefs, notions and ideas people have about females in terms of what they represent in their relationship to men as well as expectations about appropriate female roles. Generally, perceptions are culturally constructed and are therefore products of the socialization process. Political participation itself is a civic duty of all citizens. Its high level is usually an indicator of the political health of a country, while its non existence, especially for individual citizens, is an indicator of political poverty. It is also one of the surest ways by which one’s private interests can be guaranteed. Simbine’s (2003) classical definition of political participation is relevant here: “those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy.”

Various forms of participation exist, that is, from the highest position to the lowest. Although some people are apathetic to participation in politics, most who take part do so for feelings of power, need to protect economic resources or for symbolic assertions of self worth. According to Simbine (2003) factors affecting participation include traditional and cultural hindrances, lack of education, lack of resources and lack of opportunity. Even though these factors affecting participation apply to both sexes, in Nigeria, a review of women’s participation in party politics reveals that the females seem to be most affected.
WOMEN AND PARTY POLITICS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

Women participation in governance at every level can be taken as an index of the level of democracy since women often constitute half the population of most countries. In liberal democracies, political parties, legislative assemblies and executive councils are vital sources of decision making, among other power centres. Political parties in particular provide the citizens with the opportunity of participating in the management of a country’s affairs and constitute a major platform for selecting and promoting candidates for elections. They also provide avenue for mass mobilization and provision of political leadership for the nation. Political parties also organize and share power in parliament as well as influence the decisions of government and other executive bodies. Since the emergence of indigenous political leadership in 1960, Nigerian women have remained invisible in the party system. Women were greatly under-represented in party membership as well as in decision-making organs. Between 1957-1959, there were four major political parties – Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and Action Group (AG). In the executive bodies of these political parties, women were almost invisible (Olojede, 1999). Olojede further avers that it was only NEPU that had a woman in its National Executive but merely as a Women’s Organizer. Thus, men exclusively dominated the National Executive Councils of other political parties – AG, NCNC and NPC.

A study by Olojede (1999) shows marginal participation of women in the decision-making of the political parties of National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Similarly Simbine (2003) recorded that during the formation of political parties leading to the Fourth Republic, no female featured prominently in the party process. This trend of marginalization was similarly demonstrated in the most recent Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) the ruling party. WLP (2011) reported widely in the print and electronic media the marginalization of Mrs. Sarah Jibril, the only female Presidential aspirant. The single vote cast for this female aspirant in the PDP primaries has many ramifications for women’s future in Party Politics.

With this scenario of under-representation of women in public management, women could not significantly influence the course of public policies. In spite of this, they are bound by the outcomes of the policy process of which they were and are an insignificant part. In a similar way, their peculiar needs and interests could not be adequately projected as they had few advocates in policy institutions. Consequently, several policies and programmes adopted by Federal and State governments to enhance sustainable human development were and are sometimes gender insensitive.

THE WAY FORWARD

Women need to be sensitized to change the negative attitude they exhibit. For example, Helen Gomwalk had a negative attitude towards Sarah Jibril’s political ambition way back in 1992. Newswatch, 1992:10-13 is illustrative:

“If any woman has the ambition of the presidency, I would advise that she should not be in a hurry… If Sarah Jibril feels she is ready for the Presidency, good luck to her.”

While Gomwalk’s statement above may contain some useful caution, given the deep-rooted biases against women occupying top public positions; it has the potential of being interpreted as lack of support for fellow women, which may well serve as discouragement to others. Thus, Sarah’s bold move can and should be regarded as a political campaign for women in all ramifications, which ought to be supported by all women, regardless of the timing. Even though the institutional environment, that is, social, cultural and political is hostile to women politicians, the lack of support from fellow women was and is a de-motivator for aspiring female politicians. This finding corroborates the thesis that female politicians are not
necessarily feminists; neither do they necessarily support feminist ideology or women’s cause and interest. Women politicians must support themselves regardless of differences in political affiliations. Efforts must be made by women associations to campaign intensively across the federation (rural and urban) to break the gender stereotypes of women’s public roles vis-à-vis men. Mass mobilization campaigns must be stepped up towards breaking traditional attitudes and stereotypes of women’s public roles and inequality with men in decision-making. Women Associations through systematic campaigns can create grassroots constituencies for change, which will ultimately empower women for participation in politics. It is through politics that women can influence the adoption and implementation of policies that would guarantee access of women to governance.

An empirical study by Olojede (1999) avers that among 120 top Nigerian women managers revealed that even top professional women are apathetic towards the political process. About 96.7% of the respondents in that study who occupy first three positions in the public and private sectors indicated lack of interest in party politics. This finding shows that gender inequality in political participation of well educated women groups challenge the initial belief that education by itself abolishes gender differences. Few women who ventured into politics in the First and Second Republics were intimidated by unwritten traditions which men foster while women acquiesce. The few women who were bold to enter into the political terrain were used for mass mobilization / campaigns and dumped after party victories. From the 1990s, a new dimension was added to the trivialization of women’s participation in party politics. Mama (1995) revealed that polygamous men now organize their wives from different ethnic origins to mobilize fellow women. Instances can be found in presidential and vice presidential candidates, the late M.K.O. Abiola and Alhaji Baba Gana Kingibe of the SDP who dispatched their different wives to campaign in their states of origin.

Monetization of the political process by the state and the political class is another major hindrance to women’s participation in party politics. Under Babangida’s transition programme, the cost of nomination for elective positions was prohibitive. SDP presidential aspirants were to pay a non refundable nomination fee of ₦500,000.00 each while the NRC aspirants were to pay ₦400,000.00 each. Out of the 31 aspirants for the parties’ primaries, only 19 eventually contested and none was a woman. The three female presidential aspirants under SDP; Sarah Jibril, Maria Braimah, and Catherine Wayas could not fulfil the financial requirements of their party (Newswatch, 1992). Apart from official financial requirements for contesting party tickets, unofficial expenses such as establishment of party offices in states of the federation, financial mobilization of voters, and planned campaigns to enhance electoral success represent a major setback for potential female contestants. It has been argued that availability of financial resources is no guarantee to women’s participation in politics, neither is it crucial for electoral success. It has also been said that there are numerous wealthy women with little or no interest in politics. While these arguments may be tenable to some extent, financial capability is still a crucial factor in the successful execution of political campaigns and ultimate electoral success in Nigeria today. In the past, we saw that Suliat Adefeji was a notable female politician in Ibadan through skilful use of her financial resources to gain political recognition. This was done by donations to her party as well as vehicles to drivers’ unions as reported by (Communique, 1996). The lessons here for female participants in party politics is that, they need to solicit for funds from supportive men with the resources as well as female philanthropists. Thus, female aspirants must ensure that their projected plans of action are well articulated to elicit support from potential funders. This chapter does not in any way suggest fund sourcing for purchase of votes by women. Engaging in such anti-democratic practices would foster a negative political culture, which is already an endemic problem in Nigeria politics.
Violent nature of Nigerian politics which was demonstrated in the past and continue to be demonstrated, pose an obstacle to women’s participation in party politics. During the periods of campaigns leading to elections, the political atmosphere is characterized by waves of assassinations, murders, arson, looting and kidnappings. The physical battles which often accompany electoral contests in Nigeria need to be addressed and this can be spearheaded by civil society organizations, NGOs and vibrant and credible female activists. The hope here is that this will enable women participate in party politics and governance generally.

Arising from Mrs. Sarah Jibril’s experience in the recent past; this chapter suggests that politically focussed women NGOs in collaboration with the federal Ministry of Women Affairs need to examine issues emanating from the poor performance of this lone presidential aspirant, including the performance of fellow female aspirants at the primaries of other political parties other than the ruling PDP. This exercise must include the women aspirants themselves, since it is hoped that their experiences would provide a road map towards strategies that could be developed to address the immediate and root causes of poor performance of females at the primaries of political parties.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
By critically looking at the issue of women participation in party politics in Nigeria, it was evident that women’s participation in politics has been constrained. Several factors are identified as major constraints to their participation. These include; discriminatory social practices which frustrate women in their quest for power sharing, lack of support from fellow women, monetization of the political process and the violent nature of Nigerian politics. Women involvement and participation in politics is highly recommended. Their situation needs to be reviewed in order to increase their participation in politics. Women need to be encouraged as part of the process of guaranteeing their rights as human beings and because of the contributions that they can make to the political process. In this light, parties should pursue a policy of affirmative action at least for the next decade of democratic rule, such that, at least 30% of party officers and candidates should be women. Political parties that are genuinely interested in the cause of women should require the states that they control to implement this policy.

Constitutional provisions need to be put in place to ensure women’s maximum participation and involvement in the political process. Apart from the general reference to non-discrimination on the basis of sex, there is nothing in the Nigerian constitution that is aimed at redressing the disparities that exist along gender lines in Nigeria. The Electoral Act and the INEC also need to put in place similar provisions. In particular, if INEC’s role as a registrar of political parties (as currently exists) is to continue, it should include women’s participation as a condition for registration of political parties and the composition of cabinets after elections.

In order to enhance women participation in future party politics leading to change of government, some suggestions are proffered. For instance, it is suggested that politically inclined NGOs, and Women Associations must assist in providing a conducive cultural environment for women’s participation in politics and governance. This can be done through systematic and integrated campaigns in both rural and urban centres to soften gender stereotypes of public roles. The potential roles of women in promoting good governance must be highlighted to elicit support. Alliance must also be forged with civil society associations that strive to re-engineer political values devoid of violence and manipulations. Female politicians must support one another to create a wider political space for women folk. Public policy in favour of women cannot on their own improve women’s status in Nigeria. Therefore, politically focused NGOs as well as gender sensitive political activists need to be vigilant and alive to this responsibility.
REFERENCES