

DEMOCRACY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses women's participation in politics and governance in Nigeria, in order to unravel the dynamics and factors that limit their visibility in the political system. Women's participation in politics in Nigeria has remained a contentious issue, despite many decades of struggle to improve their lot politically. Following an analysis of the ways in which gender relations shapes the lives of Nigerian women, and an extensive review of the trajectories of women's political participation in Nigeria, it is contended in this paper that a conundrum of factors, including contestable notions of citizenship, monetization of politics and poor socio-economic conditions of women, prevailing cultural attitudes towards women in politics, militate against women's advancement. Other factors like corrupt, violent and prebendal electoral officialdom and a state-centered policy of quotas, collude to limit women's political advancement. Noting the role of unfavourable gender relations and state-centered structures and institutions in the political exclusion of women, it is suggested that a core group of women political activists mobilize around a vision of radical transformation and pursue incremental access to political power beginning at the local government level.

Keywords: *Democracy; Elections; Political Participation; Women; Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Since the United Nations 'Decade for Women' (1975-1985), women issues have gained visibility in the international development agenda. Along with other international conferences, such as the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), it promoted transnational political solidarity among women organizations across the world. The principles developed by women organizations during the decade and the conferences facilitated the formulation of new transnational perspectives for political action, new organizational structures and new strategies for advancing women's issues (Desai, 2007), one of which is affirmative action or the allocation of a quota of elective and appointive positions to women in order to redress systemic inequities and promote equity and balance. The resultant shift of political sites and relocation of power brought about new forms of women political self-organizing, significant advancement in women's development advocacy and action and increasing space for women to express themselves within the international political scene. Although the impact of these initiatives varied across regions and countries, nearly all countries of the world had to come to terms with these developments.

In Nigeria, the gains of these efforts include increasing consideration of issues of gender and women's rights in the development agenda and the emergence and intensification of women development advocacy. However, while these efforts have increased momentum and popular glamour for social transformation and gender equality, they are still far from being translated into meaningful improvement in the socio-economic condition of women in the country. This sordid circumstance has been blamed on women's poor participation in political decision making. As Udegbe (1998) cogently argued, "it is only when significant proportion of women hold public offices and are given opportunities to initiate, mould and execute public policy and legislation, can they begin to effectively address the other problems faced by women".

After many years of struggle for suffrage, Nigerian women are still far from gaining significant visibility at any level of the political system¹. Women's under-representation in Nigerian politics stands in contra-position to sustained and increasing advocacy campaign seeking to bolster their participation in politics and decision making. For example, women's share of offices in the 2011 general elections was very marginal despite pro-women campaigns, including those led by the wife of the president, Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan². It is against this background that this paper examines the dynamics of gender and politics, seeking to understand the key factors shaping the persistence of gender inequality in governance in post-colonial Nigeria.

The discussion opens with an overview of conceptual and theoretical works on gender in relation to women and politics. Thereafter, we take a look at the prevailing socio-economic conditions of women in the Nigerian society as a background for understanding their political marginalization. The paper thereafter survey trends in women's participation in politics and decision making in Nigeria from the pre-colonial, through the colonial to the post-colonial periods. Here, women's performance in electoral politics is discussed extensively with reference to relevant data. Next, the paper explores a conundrum of factors challenging women's efforts at realizing greater political representation. Following this, we take a critical look at electoral politics and affirmative action, arguing that these mechanisms have been co-opted by the male-dominated state and transformed into instruments of containment that limit, rather than aid, the realization of women's political ambitions. The paper concludes by suggesting a new politics of empowerment as the way forward for improving women's political standing in Nigeria.

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Gender is "the way members of the two sexes are perceived, evaluated and expected to behave" (Schlegel, 1990: 23). It is more than an identity marker or mechanism for defining societal expectations; gender is a major criterion for the distribution of important resources (Newman, 1999: 450), from life chances to participation in decision making. It establishes patterns of behaviour, through interaction with other

institutions of society, thus constituting an important aspect of social organization (Lorber, 1994; Rilley, 1997). Ferraro (2001) points out that although the concept of gender suggest cultural construction, it is usually not easy to tell the extent to which culture or biology determine differences in behaviour or attitudes between men and women. Biological differences influence (or set broad limits on) social definitions of maleness or femaleness to varying degrees.

To illustrate, women's capacity to conceive and give birth is the basis for the development of cultural attitudes toward women that are maternal, supportive and nurturing. Similarly, men's greater body mass is defined as inherently strong, courageous and aggressive. However, the perception of women as home makers and men as bread winners cannot be justified solely on the basis of these differences in biological characteristics. Biological or sexual characteristics only provide the foundation; the meanings attached to these characteristics are socio-culturally constructed, which becomes the basis of differences and inequality between men and women. In the context of our discussion I argue that the absence of women in politics and governance is premised on the socio-cultural construction of gender.

Gender is also a 'social construct based on a person's assumed power and position within the social structure' (Nelson & Nelson, 2010). For example, politics is built around assumptions of differences in roles between men and women in society. In the Nigerian society, the roles of men and women are defined by local gender norms, which assign to men the responsibility of leadership and decision making while consigning women to the position of subjects and followers. Men are the heads of households and decision makers at the local community level. Male-dominated village councils perform governmental and administrative functions in most local communities in Nigeria. Women occupy a subordinate position both at the household and community levels. At all levels of social life, they are subject to the control of men. Everyday life for the Nigerian woman is shaped by culturally-defined gender roles, such as reproduction, child-rearing and domestic work, which restricts her to the domestic front and constrain her participation in public life.

The social construction of gender has shaped the lives of Nigerian women in various, often profound, ways. In the northern part of the country, religious ideologies have been manipulated to support the "domestication and domesticity of women" (Pittin, 1991), within a context of political and economic crisis. Women's subordinate status in Nigeria is attributed to gender norms, which are rooted in localized cultural beliefs and practices and exemplified in the dichotomy between productive and reproductive labour, and the allocation of reward based on 'productive' labour (Aina, 1999). Feminist scholars agree that the construction of women's roles in terms of biological and social reproduction sustains their marginalization in every sector of the society. According to Afonja (1981), the persistence of the value structure that defines women's task in society as biological and social reproduction and that allocate higher rewards to production roles in the public domain continues to give men an edge over women.

Nigerian women are renowned for their creativity, hard work and productivity. From care-giving at the household level to formal sector employment, Nigerian women have made significant, though often neglected, contributions to the national economy. In recent times, Nigerian women, such as Prof. Dora Akunjili, Mrs. Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela, Mrs. Dieziani Alison Madwueke among others, have registered their presence in the governmental scene, underwriting the popular dictum, "what a man can do a woman can also do". However, the culturally-defined gender norms has perpetuated the subordination of women and limits their sphere of operation. The result of this dynamic has been that women's full participation in national life has been seriously undermined (Okeke, 1999: 38). Thus, the status of women in contemporary Nigeria ranks among the poorest in the world, even as more women are becoming renowned in various sectors of the society.

Women have experienced a lot of marginalization in formal sector employment in Nigeria. Very few women are found in top managerial positions of corporate establishments, both public and private. The bulk of female workers in the formal sector are employed as secretaries, receptionists, nurses, and teachers and in other low wage and low prestige occupations. Their experience in small and medium scale economic activities is equally a sour tale. Petty trading, food vending and hawking have nearly become the preserve of women in this sector of the economy. Their marginality in small scale business is compounded by limited access to credit to augment their capital base and expand their businesses. This in turn is due to high interest rates, collateral demands and other administrative constraints that keeps poor women from accessing credit facilities, particularly from formal lending institutions (Nelson E. & Nelson I., 2010).

The experiences of Nigerian women in the family have been elaborately discussed. Limited access to socio-economic resources and local gender roles has limited the bulk of Nigerian women to domestic servitude. In many communities, the status of women is based on their roles as wives, mothers, nurturers and care-givers. Furthermore, traditional marriage rites such as payment of bride price and the practice of patri-locality in marital residence, places men in positions of control over their wives. Women often have little or no say in decision making regarding their marriage, the number of children to bear, household income, and in the event of a divorce they often have no choice. Most women experience various forms of abuses in the hands of their spouses, including sexual coercion, battery, verbal threats, restriction of movements and economic deprivations (Odujirin, 1993; Illika, 2005). Spousal abuse exposes many of women to sexual health risks, including pregnancy complications and infection with Sexually Transmitted Infections such as HIV/AIDS.

Women dominate the agricultural sector of Nigeria, accounting for about 72% of the agricultural labour force (IFAD, 2004). The bulk of women are peasant farmers involved in subsistence production of food for household consumption from a rain-fed and labour-intensive agricultural system, which exacts a terrible toll on their physical health. The majority of female farmers cultivate small plots of land not

exceeding one hectare. In many Nigerian societies, local customary practices deny women the right to inherit land and other valuable properties from their parents and spouses. Most women cultivate land belonging to their husband or the extended family, which are headed by men. Limited access to seedlings, fertilizer, farm implements and local gender roles continue to undermine agricultural productivity and further enfeeble poor women's capacity to enhance the livelihood of their families. Female headed household is on the increase in Nigeria, and they are among the poorest (Alarape, 1992; Udoh, 1995). They experience deprivation arising from inability to meet their basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, water, sanitation and health care. This situation has been attributed to the poor socio-economic status of female household heads, lack of formal education and limited access to socio-economic resources such as land for farming and financial capital for income generating activities (Nelson & Nelson, 2010). In many places, poverty has driven an increasing number of women into informal economic activities such as petty trading, food vending and commercial sex work (Nelson and Ukommi, 2011). The foregoing is a description of the socio-economic condition of the average Nigerian woman, which is meant to provide a background for our discussion on women's marginalization in politics. We now turn to women and politics in Nigeria, beginning with a survey of past and present trends.

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Women have played a major role in socio-political developments throughout Africa. However, their contributions have largely been overlooked. As Tamale (2000) has observed, 'male-biased history texts have rarely acknowledged the past contributions of women to political leadership in African societies'. Nevertheless, available historical writings (Staudt, 1989; Agorsah, 1990) support the argument that African women played very crucial roles as political actors long before the colonization of African societies. Although there were still inequalities in social status between men and women, women played very important and wide-ranging social roles, and wielded significant economic and political powers in most societies of Africa. Schmidt (1991) has pointed out that division of labour based on sexual differences in pre-colonial Africa was not bifurcated along productive and reproductive lines as women were fully engaged in both reproductive and productive activities.

Similarly, Okonjo (1976), contrasting the dual-sex political structures found among the traditional societies of West Africa with the single-sex system in much of the north, shows that women were not marginalized in the patriarchal societies of much pre-colonial societies. In Nigeria, oral traditions, surviving religious cults, relics and indigenous political cultures in different parts of the country support the view that women major players in the political system in the past (Izugbara and Onuoha, 2003). Okonjo's (1976) study reveals that among the Igbo of the southeastern part of Nigeria the functions of the Obi (male monarch) were parallel to, and complementary with, those of the Omu (female monarch). She argues that "within this system, each

sex manages its own affairs, and women's interests are represented at all levels" (Okonjo's, 1976). In Yoruba land, women occupied positions of great influence, both by merit and aristocratic connections, and served as priests of local deities, a position which imbued them with considerable spiritual and political powers (Mba, 1982). Similarly, many of the tribal groups that were incorporated by the colonial administrators into the geopolitical entity called Nigeria were founded by women. Among the women who founded communities in Nigerian history were Inkpi of Igalaland, Moremi (Yorubaland in the southwest) and Daura (Hausa of northern Nigeria). Furthermore, Cambausa is said to have been in charge of the Bonny in the 13th century while Queen Amina held the reins of political leadership in Zazzau emirate of the 14th century.

In other places women, such as Omu Okwei, Nana Asma'u and Iyolade Efaunsetan, were notable political figures who advised and supported male leaders. All these suggest that women were not passive subjects in pre-colonial politics, instead they were active participants who made meaningful and enduring contributions just like their male counterparts. Women's marginalization in Nigerian politics began effectively during the colonial period. Colonialism had a decisively negative impact on indigenous political systems, and the gender dimension of politics was certainly not an exception. Izugbara and Onuoha (2003) have posited that:

...it was during the period of colonization that (Europe) infected Africa (including Nigeria) with her overtly male-privileging political ideologies and values. To be sure, European notions of 'activity', 'rulership', 'governance', 'work', 'militancy', 'power' and 'leadership' as male and 'home', 'passivity', 'followership', 'submission', 'idleness' as female gave the colonial politics a patriarchal bearing.

British colonialists transplanted to Nigeria a male-biased political system developed in the metropolis of Europe, which was predicated on a Victorian conception of womanhood. This political system, and associated ideology, was ill-fitted to the Nigerian social structure. The result was that it deepened the fissures of gender inequalities by eroding women's power and autonomy and pushing them to the limits of the social structure. In Igobland for instance, Tamale (2000) shows that the colonialists recognized only the male Obi, and even paid him a monthly stipend, but completely ignored the female Omu. Therefore, we can only agree with Okonjo (1976) that, 'the absence of women from meaningful political representation in independent Nigeria can be viewed as showing the strength of the legacy of single-sex politics that the British colonial masters left behind'.

A deliberate colonial policy attempted to masculinize politics in Nigeria and to distance women from decision making, in accordance with western ideas about 'the "proper" place of men and women in societies' (Staudt, 1981). It was partly in reaction to these discriminatory policies that Nigerian women, mainly of the Igbo and Ibibio extractions, rose against the colonial authorities in the famous 'women's war' or 'Aba women's riot'. These riots witnessed the up-rising of women in defiant

challenge of their systematic oppression through taxation, forced labour and political marginalization. The intensity and momentum of these riots revealed the severity of injustices to which the women were subjected. In challenging their oppression by foreign powers, women were attempting to renegotiate their position in local socio-political structures. Formal independence from colonial rule did not bring any meaningful change in the situation of things, because it was only a change in the composition of the office holders and not in the character of the political system. Attempts were made to accord women full political suffrage, including the right to vote and be voted for. Such gestures were encouraged because it was in the interest of the new national leaders to present themselves as 'enlightened proponents of western democracy and equality' (Geiger, 1990). But this was mere lip service because, 'at independence, (Nigeria) inherited political and ideological structures designed to consolidate male privilege and power, and women's subordination' (Tamale, 2000).

In the first republic, only Beatrice Kwangi and Wurola Esen, won senatorial seats, and Franca Afegbua was the only woman elected out of 91 senators in the second republic election. Also during the second republic, Mrs Phyllis Alheri formed a political party (National Democratic Party), which was denied registration, while Mrs. Bola Ogunbo, the only female vice president aspirant, lost out at the polls. The militarization of the Nigerian state, which lasted for almost three decades, reinforced the image of politics as men's business, and undermined women's visibility in governance. Although military governments declared their commitment to women's issues and encouraged programmes that sought to better their (women's) condition, yet women were markedly excluded from governance. Throughout the period of military rule in Nigeria, only 3 women were appointed ministers of the federation, 11 were appointed commissioners at the state level, 2 were sole administrators of local governments. During the regimes of Generals: Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha for example, no woman was appointed state governor or a member of the ruling council. Military regimes represented the apogee of women's political marginalization in the history in Nigeria (Nelson, 2006).

The absence of women during the military interregnum was also evident during the foiled attempt at a transition to civil rule. For example, during the elections organized in 1992 by President Ibrahim Babangida led military regime, only a woman won a seat in the 90 member Senate, while 12 were elected into the 338 member House of Representatives. This trend continued in the 1998 general elections, were only 3 women were among the 109 member Senate, 12 were elected to the 360 member House of Representatives, 1 was elected deputy governor out of 36, 1 Speaker of State House of Assembly out of 36, and 12 out of the 990 members of state House of Assembly throughout the country.

The 2003 general elections witnessed increase in women's participation in politics all over the country. More women contested for elective positions than at any time in the history of Nigeria. This partly explains the increase in women's share of elective positions at the state and federal level during this period. There were 3 women

senators, 21 House of Representative members, 2 female deputy governors and 2 female speakers of state Houses of Assembly. There was also some improvement in the performance of women in the 2007 general elections. Nine women were elected as Senators, 28 were elected House of Representative members, 42 made it to state Houses of Assembly, and 6 became deputy governors. But while such improvements are noteworthy, they pale before the enormity of challenges still dogging women's success in politics. Indeed, results of the recent (2011) general elections suggest a decline in women's total share of elective positions, thus making women's success a tenuous and transient one.

THE LOST HALF? WOMEN'S STRUGGLE IN POST-COLONIAL POLITICS

It is no longer debatable that Nigerian women's representation in politics has been very marginal, except at the level of voting and grassroots mobilization. This situation stoutly contradicts the essential tenets of democracy, which includes a high degree of competitive choice, openness, civil and political liberties and popular participation in decision making. Since democracy entails, among other things, "a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of political leaders through regular and fair elections, such that no major adult (social) group is excluded" (Diamond, 1989), the systematic exclusion of women from politics and governance clearly calls Nigerian democracy into question.

Women's poor representation in Nigerian politics has been attributed to several factors, notable among which are politicized notions of indigeneity and citizenship. Since an individual is eligible to stand for election where he or she is an indigene, women who marry outside their constituencies of birth and wish to contest for an office in their 'conjugal' constituency are often regarded as non-indigenes. A number of female aspirants who are married outside their constituency, particularly those who are married outside their political ward, find it difficult winning either the primaries or the elections proper because of such discriminations.

Anecdotal evidence supports the contention that male aspirants often invoke the issue of constituency to frustrate women and prevent them from winning elections. The problem is particularly vexing because women can neither claim their 'conjugal constituency' nor return to their 'constituency of origin' to contest elections. In the former they are considered strangers incorporated only through marriage; in the latter they are discriminated against because marriage is said to have ended their political affiliation. In this way contestable notions of female citizenship poses a threat to women's political ambitions.

Another factor constraining women's political efficacy is lack of financial resources to fund election, including payment of registration and nomination fees, and funds to finance the kind of elaborate and expensive electioneering campaigns required to mobilize supporters and voters to guarantee success at the polls. The monetization of electoral politics in Nigeria amplifies the generally poor socio-economic conditions of Nigerian women and reduce their chances of success

significantly. Although they are occasionally granted waivers with regards to registration and nomination fees, the lack of ceiling on campaign expenditure compromises whatever chances women might have had, and gives their male counterparts a clear advantage. Furthermore, with enormous financial resources already in the hands of those who control party structures, women's chances are further reduced. Party structures constitute another important barrier to women's full political suffrage. Political parties only pay lip service to women's political ambitions. Many political parties in Nigeria lack a clear policy for women both in their constitutions and party manifestoes. Women often play the role of 'cheer leaders' for male political actors. They are often more active in the so-called 'women's wing' of political parties, where they serve as community mobilizers for male politicians.

Lack of party support is a major reason for the poor performance of women in electoral politics in Nigeria. Similarly, culturally-defined gender roles also constrain women's active participation in electoral politics in Nigeria. As stated earlier, gender roles restrict women sphere of operation to the home. As a matter of fact, most Nigerian women do not attend events outside the home without the consent of their spouse. The bulk of Nigerian women lack the power to make decision about issues that affect their lives. Most of them are economically dependent on their spouses, and this further compromises their ability to participate actively in politics.

The restrictive influence of gender roles on women political aspirations is particularly vicious at the local government level, because politics at this level is closer to the local community where gender norms are rigidly defined and punitively enforced. At this level, patriarchal discourses, such as notions of men honour, kinship and lineage reputation, are often invoked to shame and discredit female political aspirants for transgressing traditional gender boundaries and spurning social control structure. Women's 'incursion' into politics, which is considered the preserve of men, are often violently resisted, because such gestures are interpreted as an attempt to rule or exercise authority over men.

THE FETISHIZATION OF ELECTORAL POLITICS IN NIGERIA: WHITHER WOMEN?

In the view of liberal political theorists, election is a means of consummating representative or democratic government (Agbaye & Adejumbi 2006). It is an enduring democratic practice, which allows people to make choices about who will govern them (Fawole 2005: 150). It facilitates leadership succession, promotes accountability in politics and guarantee the participation of the citizenry in the political process. It putatively bestows the power to constitute or change government on the governed. This is one of the reasons why some theorists regard elections as an essential part of the process of consolidating democracy.

For example, Huntington (1991) has posited a 'two turn-over test' for measuring democratic consolidation in electoral systems. According to this test, a democracy is said to have been consolidated if there is at least two successive turn-over of power from one political party to another via elections. Although this has not

happened in Nigeria, where the People's Democratic Party (PDP) has perpetuated itself in power since the return to democratic rule in 1999, frequent elections is still an important milestone in the journey towards democratic consolidation because periodic elections implies that the political system recognizes the need for the renewal of the mandate of governance and every eligible citizen can both vote and be voted for. Elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments but also as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation (Bratton, 1999).

Conversely, critiques have pointed out that in most cases elections are mere legitimating rituals, which says very little about civil and political rights and other dimensions of liberal democracy (Diamond, 1996; Karl, 1990). Elections serve more purposes for the state than the democratic function of allowing the mass of people to participate in the choice of leaders; it serves 'the more or less universal purpose of allowing the state to mobilize its people and to build up their support for the state by acting out support and participating in the process of government' (Shively, 2008: 230). Others see election as a tool for controlling the citizenry. They maintain that elections are means for recruiting the political elite or as ceremonial performances that help enforce citizen obedience, induce complicity and socialize the electorate (Golder, 2004).

The conceptual anchorage of elections on popular choice generally gives an impression of equity in the electoral process. In reality however, the concept of 'popular choice' is a façade, and elections are fraught with discriminations. In many African democracies, elections are simply another form of manipulation by political elites foisted upon reluctant incumbent regimes by donor government and financial institutions (Adejumobi, 2000). In most cases, ruling parties continue to alter electoral rules to maintain their hold on power. Opposition parties are often too weak and fractionalized from decades of suppression and intimidation to be electorally competitive.

The implications of the above for women's participation in politics are enormous. For example, 'the electoral process which should ordinarily open up the democratic space to the vast majority of people so that they can control their political destinies is actually deliberately configured to marginalize them' (Fawole, 2005). In most cases, what obtains is 'a version of liberal democracy reduced to the crude simplicity of multi-party elections...(and) voting that never amounts to choosing, freedom which is patently spurious, and political equity which disguises higher unequal power relations' (Ake, 1993).

In post-colonial Nigeria, political power guarantees access to state resources, which are often appropriated by a few for personal and parochial benefits. Electoral politics in Nigeria therefore becomes 'a prebendal enterprise engaged in largely for the crude appropriation of national resources' (Fawole, 2005). The electoral process is manipulated through such illegal and fraudulent practices as election rigging, pre-election ballot stuffing, ballot box disappearance or substitution, destruction of ballot boxes and disruption of voting in opponent's strongholds, intimidation of voters,

bribing of electoral officials, deployment of terror tactics and violence. In addition to these, there is also the disenfranchisement of the larger population, including women, in the formation and running of political parties, and the enactment of rules of electoral contests that are patently elitist and discriminatory. Electoral fraud disenfranchises a cross-section of the population, particularly women who traditionally occupy a marginal position in politics and decision making. Apart from constituting a disincentive for the exercise of their franchise in voting, it also constrains their chances of being elected into political offices. Sweetman (2000) summed up the implications of electoral fetishism for women's participation in politics when he noted that:

Because of the male-bias of parliamentary and bureaucratic institutions, women will not automatically find themselves in leadership positions, as a result of a transition to democracy. While voters often assume that women and men stand an equal chance of attaining a leadership position in democracies, would-be women leaders are in fact much less likely to be elected, since political parties and parliaments have culture systems and procedures that are biased in favour of men. Those women who are elected are often those who play according to the rules of the game, rather than challenging them.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND THE RHETORIC OF EMPOWERMENT

In the last decade, the glamour for women's participation in politics and politics and decision making in Nigeria has revolved around the idea of affirmative action. As a strategy for promoting gender equality, affirmative action leapt into the language of political culture from the global platform for action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference in Beijing, China in 1995. The policy recommends that all states who are signatories to the convention should reserve a quota of all elective and appointive positions for women as a way for redressing injustices perpetrated against them. In a related development, the UN Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in articles 7 and 8, urge state parties to 'adopt concrete steps, including affirmative action, to ensure equality in politics and public offices between men and women'. It is believed that giving women quotas will compensate for past discriminations and guarantee equality between women and men in governance overtime.

Although the idea of affirmative action is quite popular in women political circles in Nigeria, its potential for enhancing the realization of women's vision of social equality is seriously questioned. Among other problems is the fact that affirmative action is a reformist strategy, which is insensitive to class-based interests and the structural or systemic problems underlying women's political marginalization. Affirmative action is mistakenly equated with political representation because it provides women with a certain percentage of positions in political leadership. But as Toyo (2002) observes, this approach refers to equality only for its instrumental value, and not as a basis for transforming political structures and for negotiating more superior and lasting solutions to the fundamental problems of women in society.

The fact is that equal representation in political positions does not necessarily mean equal participation in politics and decision making. As the case of Uganda shows, affirmative action merely creates 'descriptive representatives' who symbolically stand for women (Tamale, 2000). Even where women are given such quotas, they often do not participate in political decision making as representatives of the women collective seeking to transform the structures that perpetuate inequality between men and women. Instead, co-opted into a male-biased political system, they tend to dance to the gallery in order to protect their privileged position rather than adopt a radical, non-conformist stance in order to protect the interest of the larger women collective. The political space provided for women through quotas becomes a site for accommodation, which deradicalizes women politicians and subject them to the control and dictates of the male-dominated state. On the implications of the above for the electoral process, Tamale (2000) argues:

...the fact that a predominantly male electoral college appoints the women who fill the mandatory seats significantly impacts on the efficacy of the quota system. Most importantly, it raises questions regarding allegiance, accountability and representation... This is exacerbated by state patronage, which bedevils the post-colonial politics of most African states. Like male politicians, a good number of female politicians ... run for office on account of the opportunities offered in terms of personal wealth and access to state power...

At best, affirmative action produces 'formal', not 'substantive', political participation for women because state patronage inevitably leads to the containment of women's vision of political suffrage and the enfeeblement of their capacity to catalyze action for social change. This dynamic partly explains why the bulk of women who occupy political offices acquiesce to men and consequently fail to influence decision making and the course of governance in favour of the women-folk. In the long run, state patronage through the quota system aids the systematic dilution of a genuine vision of women political empowerment by transforming it into mere glamour for political offices (Izugbara & Onuoha, 2003). Women who occupy such offices become what Tamale (2000) calls 'women in power without power'.

CONCLUSION

The systematic exclusion of women from politics and decision making in Nigeria is a denial of women's right with enormous attendant consequences for national development. Women constitute roughly half of the total population of Nigeria, and their under-representation in the political system translates into the exclusion of their critical contribution to policy making and implementation, particularly in tailoring development goals to the needs and concerns of the most disempowered groups in the society (women, children and the elderly). Consequently, when governments eloquently stress their commitment to empower women politically, the normal reaction is one of positive glee among women. This explains the widespread glamour for

quotas and other concessions by women, particularly in the current political dispensation². Empowerment is a new language of political discourse, which on its face value respond to the long-standing demands of women for increased political representation. In practice, however, it has been given a restricted meaning and has been oriented to serve the interests of the male-dominated state. It is nearly impossible to achieve sustainable women's political empowerment under the existing political arrangements. When it is mediated by state-centered institutions and processes it has serious political implications. Among other things, it tends to co-opt women groups, curb their struggling power and capacity to carry on an autonomous campaign. To attain the goal of empowerment, existing structural constraints on women's capacity to participate meaningfully in politics must be removed. Women must mobilize outside the framework of neoliberal, state-centered politics and seek incremental access to strategic political positions, beginning at the local government level. This cannot be achieved through fragmented and sectional struggles. Therefore, women groups must unite under the leadership of visionary activists, and they must collaborate and network in order to share experiences and harmonize action plan for fast-tracking social transformation and gender equality in political decision making.

NOTES

- 1 The problem of women's poor participation in politics and governance is not unique to Nigeria. As at 2002, women's representation in legislatures around the world remained very low, ranging from 4.6 percent among the Arab countries to 16.8 on average among the European countries. In Africa, women occupied only 12.8 percent of seats in parliaments, confirming the fact of women's invisibility in post-colonial African politics.
- 2 During the build up to the 2011 general elections, women movements under the aegis of Women for Change Initiatives (WCI), led by the wife of the president, Dame Patience Jonathan, convened many national rallies to mobilize support and to glamour for the 30 percent quota guaranteed them by the affirmative action policy. However, not a single woman voted for Mrs. Sarah Jubril, who supposedly represented the women-folk at the presidential election, during the PDP primaries. This contradiction raises serious questions about the sincerity of contemporary women struggle for political empowerment. It also shows how sectionalism and class-based interests is undermining the prowess of women political movements in Nigeria. The male-dominated political groups can easily exploit these weaknesses to their advantage.

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