

Igbo Women and Political Development in Nigeria: Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This work is an historical exploration of Igbo women in political development and in key governance positions in Nigeria. This is in view of the fact that the role of women in our society is no longer new in developmental discourse. In this work, we examine the concepts of politics and governance, the theoretical position of women and their relevance in politics. A critical analysis of Igbo women in the pre-independence era is also discussed. Furthermore, an assessment of the degree of Igbo women in nationalist struggle and their involvement in governance in post independence Nigeria are also explored. It is accepted that for development of any kind to be successful, women who make up a large proportion of the population should not be left out. There is the belief that as many men and women who have the potentials and rights should be encouraged to contribute meaningfully to the development of our society. Therefore, everything must be done to nurture democracy as it gives room for engaging stakeholders to uplift the political status of women.

Keywords: *women, Igbo women, governance and politics*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, evidence abound which underline the fact that Igbo women have for long been playing pivotal roles in the political life of Nigeria (Adenuga, 2000). Recapping that the contributions, exploits and impacts of many great Igbo women of yesteryears in shaping Nigeria politics is not quite simple a task. But suffice it to recall that political enlightenment played crucial roles in redeeming the image of Igbo women in the contest in Nigerian politics. Despite the glorious past, an overwhelming majority of Igbo women are playing periphery politics in Nigeria. The realization of periphery position has attracted the attention of national, continental and international organizations in an attempt to realign women into the cockpit of Nigerian politics. Without doubt, politics is still male dominated and very few women are into it. This situation is manifested even in studies on women politics in Nigeria. Drawing from the strength of history, it is observed that men's partisan role has received considerable attention, than women (Hirschman, 1991). This definitely calls for more intensive studies into the political participation of Igbo women, especially with the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria. It is against this background that we definitely cannot but draw from the strength of history, while examining the history of Igbo women participation in governance. Specifically, the purpose of this

study is to examine the concepts of politics and governance, the theoretical position of women and their relevance in politics. After which a critical analysis of Igbo women in the pre-independence era will be discussed. Furthermore, an assessment of the degree of Igbo women in nationalist struggle and their involvement in governance in post independence Nigeria will be made. Finally, opportunities, obstacles and prospects for Igbo women in governance and politics will then be highlighted.

Theoretical Position on Igbo Women Participation in Politics

Politics has variously been defined as the authoritative allocation of values (Easton, 1959) and who gets what, when and how (Lasswell, 1958). These two definitions need clarifications on certain key words. They are authority, governance, allocation, values, access, time and means. People equate politics with authority to act on behalf of individuals, groups, communities and nations (Ufomba, 2007). Authority therefore, is the right or mandate bestowed on an individual or a group to act, to make choice; exercise governmental power to make on behalf of others (Omotayin, 2002). It also involves influence of behaviour. Allocation involves sharing, contribution of goods, positions and services in society. Values in this context refer to opportunities and resources. Means refers to channels, institutions, foods and instruments available for exercising the said authority.

Conceptually, governance is seen as the process of steering State and society towards the realization of collective's goals. It points to the dynamic, but problematic and often times contradictory relationship between the State and society (Pierre and Guy, 2000; Balogun, 1999; Hyden and Brantton, 1999). Governance can be more appropriately defined as a process referring to the manner in which power is exercised in the management of the affairs of a nation, and its relation with other nations. In other words, governance is the way in which public power and authority is formed and used to control and manage society's resources. Therefore, governance can either be classified as good or bad. From the foregoing analysis, we can say confidently that politics is about the making of decisions. In Nigeria, those who make decisions in political arena are overwhelmingly male.

Scholars have studied the participation and the way decision-makers allocate values and resources (Adimora, 2002; Okanybai, 2006 and Omotala 2003). And through this we derive theories of representation. Decision-making and participation were predicted on the motivations and behaviours of political men and women. This study is interested in dissecting Igbo women participation in governance in Nigeria. Without doubt, western political philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have preconceived ideas of the proper place of women in the society (Edozie, 2006). The realm of rational proof was for a long time dominated by men to the exclusion of women (Uwama, 2006). Remarkably, Pythagoras, Thales and Euclid among others were men. Even the main thinkers of the enlightenment era such as Rousseau, Gibbon, Voltaire, Goethe among others were men (Adeney,

2001). Thus, the western political thought was male dominated. The work of Musgrave and Wheeler-Benneto (1972) emphasizes the predicament of a woman who tries to combine both her home and career as well. Hence, after a detailed study of women in Russia, McCauley (1981) concludes that female participation in the development process can be more organized and better planned and would lead to sustainable development. As corroborated by Marx and Engel (1947), most societies through their cultures have relegated women into a lesser position. The men because of their initial advantage of physical strength usually demonstrated in wars, appropriate the material resources of society such as law and order, wealth as well as political power to themselves. This consciousness increases feminist movements which, if properly organized, will become more forceful. Therefore, the theoretical position of this work centres on that stereotype and prejudice about the female. These are sustained because they serve specific function in the maintenance of the status quo. It is envisaged that once the encumbrances on the path of women development is achieved, they too will get to the pinnacle of power.

Igbo Women participation in the Pre-Independence Era Politics in Nigeria

The belief that women are to walk in the shadows of men is still strongly upheld in some quarters. The aphorism, behind every successful man, there is a woman, underlines the insignificance of women. Even before the advent of colonialism in the nineteenth century, Igbo land was a male dominated society with norms and traditions that favoured male supremacy. Some women in this territory later designated Nigeria. Thus, the Igbo tradition too reflects the power of women in governance. Structures of political participation equivalent or parallel to those for men existed for women whereby women's voice were heard and their participation guaranteed from the family to council in the larger society.

Allen (1998) opines that in the society, political power is diffused and leadership was fluid and informal. Community decisions were made and disputes settled in a variety of settings, village wide assemblies, women meetings, age grades, and secret as well as title societies. Among Ndigbo from Delta State, the village and small towns were ruled jointly by the Obi (King) and the Omu (Female King). The Omu is not the wife of the King and is in no way related to him (Okonjo, 1988). The Omu ruled in conjunction with the Obi. From the foregoing, one can say that Igbo women played significant role in pre-colonial politics and were indispensable in palace and community administration. The belief of some Igbo society like Ohafia and Abam in Abia State; Abiriba and Edda in Ebonyi State among others in matrilineal family system further strengthens the positions of women in determining their affairs.

Igbo Women and Nationalist Struggle

Under colonial rule, Igbo women took decisive steps to represent their views which had been greatly marginalized in governance. They organized themselves to confront

the injustice resulting from colonial rule. The famous Aba Women War of 1929 was an offshoot of their protest. During the war, which was a protest against British administration and the colonial order imposition of taxes on women, several women lost their lives (Faseke, 2001). It was in this atmosphere of bitter resentment that the women had the rumor that they too would be taxed. This was further infuriated by the falling prices of palm produce (Isichei, 1983). The ensuing scuffle led to the immortalization of Madam Chiyere Nwanyiriwa and Madam Ikonna Nwanyiuwu Enyia, both of Oloko in present Ikwano Local Government Area of Abia State.

Furthermore, Margaret Ekpo, an illustrious Igbo daughter married to a Calabar man, was among those that attended the pre-independence constitutional conference in Britain. She was later to represent Aba Urban North Constituency at the then Eastern House of Assembly. And in 1953, she was elected the first national secretary of the women's wing of National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) (Plumber, 2000). With the position she fought for, women enfranchisement came into force courtesy of the 1954 Oliver Lyttleton Constitution.

Chief Mrs. Margaret Ekpo's effective participation in politics was further strengthened when in 1961 and 1964/65 she alongside with another veteran Igbo politician, Chief Mrs. Janet Mokelu retained their seats in the Eastern House of Assembly. As corroborated by Ekpo, no woman will be highly respected by her husband and her society, if she has no visible profession. And no woman could contribute effectively to the development of her place without her having a viable occupation (Atteo and Jaja, 2003).

Igbo Women and Governance in Post Independent Nigeria

Contrary to the expectations, the immediate post independent era did not witness much confrontational Igbo women involvement in politics that characterized the pre-independence era. This was as a result of the euphoria of the independence in 1960 (Rix, 1987). In the first republic, the notable Igbo daughters that were in governance positions and corridors of political power were Mrs. Flora Azikiwe, wife of Nigeria's first president, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Mrs. Justina Eze, Chief Mrs. Margaret Ekpo and Chief Mrs. Janet Mokelu. These amazons left indelible footprints on the sand of Nigeria's political history. However, due to the military intervention in Nigeria's politics, nothing much was heard from the Igbo women, except Chief Mrs. Flora Nwapa, a cabinet member during Ukpabi Asika's administration in the then East Central State as well as Chief Mrs. Victoria Akanwa, during the second republic, under the administration of Chief Sam Mbakwe in the old Imo State. However, with the entrenched hegemony of the military, the office of the wife of the president and governor was institutionalized and given more power courtesy of another illustrious Igbo daughter, Mrs. Maryam Babangida in 1987. She institutionalized the office of the first lady and took the issue of women to an unimaginable level. This prompted Ekpo (1991) to remark that Mrs. Maryam Babangida took the institution out of its moribund state and gave it a life of its own.

She turned it into an intensive supportive mechanism for governance. With the entrenchment of democracy in the forth republic, many notable Igbo daughters ventured into partisan politics. They include Senator Mrs. Nkechi Nwogu, Ms Linda Chuba Ikeazu, Dr. Mrs. Ada Okwuonu, the incumbent Deputy Governor of Imo State, Elder Chief Mrs. Eunice Uzo Kalu, President and Founder, Realty Organization Worldwide and our own indefatigable Emperess of Abia State “White House” and Winnie Mandela of Nigeria politics, Her Excellency, Chief Mrs. Mercy Odochi Orji, among others. Women should prove to all that they are in politics to contribute their quota and work to realize their political goals; noting that since politics demand that players be vocal and capable of expressing themselves in public, majority of the womenfolk finds themselves excluded from the game. The time has come for a change of attitude toward women participation in decision making. This will be achievable through proper and effective political enlightenment programmes at the grassroots levels. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the administration of Goodluck Jonathan has been the only Nigerian administration that has been liberal in terms of inclusion of women in decision making positions. A typical case in point is the appointment of Dr Ngozi Okonjo Iwela as Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the federation against strong protest by the male folk. More of such abound.

Obstacles and Opportunities for Igbo Women in Governance

The single most important opportunity for Igbo women to participate in politics in Nigeria remains under a democratic set up. Without doubt, colonialism and military rule in Nigeria worked against women active participation in politics. The awareness created by the circumstance of democracy would not have been possible for women, if Nigeria is under an undemocratic setting. The opening up of the political space through the formation of more political parties creates the rooms for women participation in politics and to contest elections.

Although democracy offers opportunities for women participation in governance, there are still serious encumbrances, which impede active participations. These hindrances are circumscribed by historical distortions which society had undergone. For the Igbo women, such obstacles include the patriarchal nature of the society or what has been regarded as the masculine model of politics, constitutional and legal impediments, and lack of political party support, socio-economic consideration, traditional beliefs and practices. Though some of these concerns are self-exemplary, a few may require some clarifications.

Patriarchal Nature of the Igbo Nation/Masculine Model of Politics in Nigeria: In every part of the Igbo nation, men are superior to women. As such lineage is traced to the man. Rulership from this perspective is also seen as a male affair. This gives impetus to what has been termed masculine model of politics. In this system, men dominate the political arena; formulate the rules of the political game and the standards for evaluation.

Constitutional Constraints: The Nigeria's constitution continues to act as an impediment, not only to Igbo women participation in politics, but women in general. A married woman is faced with the problem of constituency especially if she is married outside her locality or State of origin. The women cannot claim the same State of origin with her husband. Often times when she goes back to her original State, she is looked upon as an outsider.

Lack of Political Party Support: Political party chieftains usually play down support for women in elective and appointment positions. Most parties have no clear cut policy for women either in their constitution or party manifestos. Women continue to play "cheer leaders" role male political actors.

Socio-Economic considerations: Money is central to the determination of any electoral victory, not only in Igbo nation, but in the macro Nigerian political firmament. In the election of 2003, it was obvious this was evident. Though there were waivers for female candidates not to pay the nomination fees during the party primaries, it still did not put a ceiling of what any candidate could spend on the campaign.

CONCLUSION

The prospects of Igbo women participation in politics remain very bright, especially in a democratic setting. Therefore, everything must be done to nurture democracy as it gives room for engaging stakeholders to uplift the political status of women. The process must start with a review of the 1999 constitution to make it gender-sensitive. The socio-economic rights of the citizens must be fully and adequately addressed. And since women remain a marginalized and disadvantaged group, the affirmative action clause should be well entrenched in the constitution in such a way that it will give leverage for more women to come into the cockpit of decision-making positions in Nigeria.

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