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## Gender Issues and Democracy: The Nigeria Experience

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### Abstract

Gender discrimination has become a preponderant phenomenon all over the world, with particular reference to Nigeria as a nation. There was a time in Nigeria when women were campaigning for a chance to vote and eventually, there come the universal adult suffrage that permits every adult irrespective of sex, tribe or creed to vote and be voted for in any election. In spite of this clause, women were and are still relegated to background in all aspects of life; be it political, economic, socio-cultural and even technological training for development. Hardly are women heard in decision making process but they are always being used as instrument of voting in the political palace and child bearing and rearing in socio-cultural milieu. This situation, happening in a country that advocates 'free and democratic' society, deserves thorough examination. This paper, therefore, examines gender issues and democracy from Nigeria experience.

**Keywords:** Gender, Democracy, Gender issues, Education, Politics

### Introduction

The moment, a child at birth is identified as a 'boy' or a 'girl', brings along with it discriminatory tendencies of sexism, especially in Nigeria. While a baby girl is referred to merely as a 'baby girl', a baby boy is given an added or superior epithet as 'bouncing baby boy'. The only time there seems to be much celebration in the case of a baby girl is within the specific contextual situation of a couple who had remained childless for a long period or that of a couple who have had a series of male children without a female one, thus lacking completeness.

The girl-child would only grow up to observe certain privileges that are reserved for the male child such that even when the girl is older, the younger male child is treated as if he was older. This is only the beginning of sexual discrimination in most African cultures. This is because most African societies, according to Abuya (2002), are patrilinear and patriarchal. In Nigeria, for example, the male parent is the head of the home and the child bears his name as his own

surname. The male children in Nigeria inherit the father's property at death while the female children get nothing since they are going to belong to another family at the time of conjugal union. A woman has no name of her own except her husband's. A woman has no voice of her own except that of her husband. When she is young, she is under her father, when she gets married, she is under her husband. Even when she is widowed, she is likely to be taken over by male member of the family that is younger to her husband; or rather she may be expected to be taken care of by her first son. If she has no son, it is her ill-luck and she is left to suffer with her female children or at the mercy of her brothers, if only they have the wherewithal to take care of her. Or still she would be forced to remarry legally and legitimately, thus the vicious cycle continues.

The whole subjugated position of a woman in the typical Nigerian society definitely has an impact on her political life. Can a woman really have an equal voice with a man in Nigerian society? Can a woman have equal opportunities with a man to an extent of having the same elective and appointive office? Can issues concerning women be fairly treated in the halls of government? If there is more preponderance towards the negative portion of our scale of measurement, then can we genuinely say we have a democracy? In fact, what is democracy itself? What is gender and what constitute gender issues? How do these issues interplay with democracy, especially in the Nigerian setting? This paper is out to provide answers to some of these questions.

### **Gender as a Concept**

The Hornby (2005) defines gender in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as 'the fact of being male or female'. But this is more than just physical differences. It includes the totality of what makes a man, man, and what makes a woman, woman. Thus, it includes psychological orientation and physiological differentiation. Gender may be referred to a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined not only by biological traits but by the social, political and economic context. Gender can equally be seen as the process by which individuals, who are born into biological categories of male and female, become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally defined attribute of masculinity and femininity. This is the fact of being male and female. The pursuit of equal rights for women through international law has been a slow process. The principle that everyone is entitled to rights 'without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex...' was given voice in *Article 2* of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, the declaration was non-binding and it took over 30 years for the international community to create a robust legal framework against gender injustice. The Convention to eliminate all forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979. This has been described as a bill of right for women; it spells out the area in which women experience discrimination and commits countries to amend their laws, construct national gender policies and create institutions to deliver them. The process of this follows the popular slogans of 'Women empowerment', 'Women liberation', 'Women equalization', etc. in different parts of the globe. A more recent positive development for women's right in full participation in governance was the 2011 launch of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the empowerment of Women to be

known as UN Women. This new body merges the four UN agencies previously engaged in gender issues, elevating the seniority of input on women's issue within the UN decision-making process. The existence of women in a society throws up several issues which we refer to in this paper as gender issues. However, when 'gender issues' as a term is used, it often connotes issues bordering on women since the society has long been seen as man's world.

Ukhun (2002) puts it succinctly when he states, 'Gender remains a cardinal element in our humanity, which cannot be wished away with any form of gusto.' Yes, despite the attempt by the gays and the transsexuals, gender remains a natural gift that cannot be short-changed, even by technology.

### **The Concept of Democracy**

Democracy from conceptual clarification is explained as a form or system of government under which people exercise the governing power, either directly or through the representatives that they elect periodically. Thus in practice, members of legislature and other public officers are elected at regular intervals. It is a political system in which the people are the source of authority, and in which the institutions enable the majority to dictate major policy outcomes or decisions. The popular Abraham Lincoln definition of democracy is germane here. He sees democracy as the government of the people by the people and for the people.

In this case, a state is said to be democratic if it provides institutions for the expression and, in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will in basic questions of social direction and policy. The popular will is what the people want the government to do for them. People here does not exclude women, the policy emphasize the participation and involvement of sane people in the state.

From the explanation above, we can see that democracy is much more than a system of government through elected representatives. It also refers to an attitude of a set of people yearning for freedom through equal treatment and equal recognition. And in fact, equality is an important democratic value, though not in an absolute sense as in the Athenian model. Equality, in this sense, must be seen as equality of opportunity in an open competition, creating room for equal participation and recognition in governance. The notion of democracy and democratic process emphasize that every effort by the citizen irrespective of color, sex, religion, etc. must be rewarded equally. Thus, democratic system is built on treating equals equally and unequals unequally. Here, the principle of justice and fairness is ensured.

### **Gender Issues in Nigerian Democratic Experience**

Violence against women is widespread in the world. This is a burning issue of human rights often swept under the carpet as if it does not matter, especially in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. This is not limited to physical violence. There is also sexual, psychological and economic abuses women suffer at home, on the streets, and in the workplace. It is worse in conflict situations or even under peace-keeping situations as women are often raped on a massive scale and later left to bear the child alone and care for the child without any assistance from the 'unknown soldier'

or the state. Thus, such women are left to grind in poverty and the cycle of poverty remains unbroken for generations.

It was Senator Grace Folashade Bent (2012), who once said:

The participation of women in politics in Nigeria is still abysmally low, although I reckoned with efforts by the President to make amends. The little regard for women in our politics is a setback in our quest and desire to consolidate on democracy and forge a stronger nation. No democracy can genuinely thrive when about 85 percent of its women folk are largely left out in critical decision making process. Currently at the National Assembly, there is a gross reduction in the number of women representatives. We really have to start taking steps towards ensuring more women's participation in politics if only to, at least, reduce the tension in the country. I strongly believe that if women were encouraged to be governors, ministers and even president, the level of gangsterism, armed robbery, terrorism, armed militancy and other vices would never have been this high in the country.

The foregoing statement by a former senator and a foremost female politician of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria reveals that the rules of engagement are already skewed against women in Nigeria. Is this really the case? Is it the Nigerian factor responsible or we can see similar trends on the global perspective?

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in the year 2000 set targets for 2015 on the following; eradicating poverty; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV and AIDS and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and providing financing for development.

A critical look at the foregoing would show that all the eight MDGs touch essential aspects of women's well being. In another breath, we would also see that the empowerment of women would go a long way in contributing to the realization of these goals.

While there has been some advocacy on these issues in Nigeria, we have hardly gone beyond mere lip-service and half-hearted measures. How much percentage of the annual budget is devoted to education which is primary for empowerment in a country where we pay lip-service to Universal Basic Education while there is still mass illiteracy and non-functional education, both in structures and in methods as well as in personnel and equipment? The United Nations specifies that 26% of the national budget should be for education. It is ironical that it was only during the military dictatorship of the Late General Sani Abacha that the national budget quota for education reached the double digit consistently for five years. Since the return to civil rule in the Fourth Republic, it has largely remained on the single digit (Okecha, 2002). It has been more of a question of '*Ghana-Must-Go*' bags of money to the politicians both in the legislature and even more, in the executive halls of government.

More than that, how much quota of the national budget is allocated to women issues? Is the Ministry of Women Affairs, not often, an office created to placate women and often to organize

jamborees for globetrotting ‘fat cows of Bashan’ while the poor women at the grassroots, get next to nothing for the entire bargain? What are the operational programs? Is there any monitoring done to make sure the monies meant for various programs really reach those at the grassroots?

So many women are still dying daily on the birth stools? Can we afford to continue to lose our daughters and sisters, wives and mothers with such reckless abandonment? Are the homes and the communities not the worse for it? So much pain, sorrow and bloody tears! So many children orphaned at tender ages. Many of these are avoidable. Even whenever these issues are brought to the fore in the nation’s political landscape, we seem to throw our hands up in the air as if nothing could be done. And then when the battle for the sharing of the national cake begins, the issues are swept under the carpet again for another day and we are back to square one. Oladejo (2012) takes us to another dimension of the issues militating against the upliftment of women when he said interalia: *‘In some developing countries, women’s inability to own and inherit property hinders their access to collateral to obtain formal credit for business investment.’*

We claim to be operating a democracy that is not serving us. What is the government when basic issues like security, education, health and transportation and power is not within the reach of even those in the middle class, talk less of those at the lower rungs of a society? The truth is that the quality of any human society is measured by the extent to which the weakest members of such society be it children, including the unborn, the senile, and the handicapped, not to be exhaustive, are well taken care of. There is no social security for these in the Nigerian society. Our leaders are well-travelled and they know how things are done in other climes. But they pretend about these in order to continue to smile to the banks. For how long will these continue? The *Boko Haram* insurgency should be a wake-up call that it would no longer be ‘business as usual’. Women must not be contented with assembling to get into offices. That is not enough. Women should rise above emotions and token considerations and rally themselves, while enlisting the support of men of goodwill, to campaign massively for issues that affect them and their children, including the unborn, the handicapped, and the unemployed.

Governance is too important an issue to be left in the hands of the ruling elite. Else, we would only be having a civilian dictatorship. This is democracy where all are equal, whether you are elected to govern or you are a voter. Governance in a democracy is a service in which the mandate comes from the people, both the rich and the poor. After all, all have one vote each. It is for this reason that we must make sure we strengthen our institutions of civil society and monitoring bodies as well as the organized private sector, for the suffrage of each Nigerian to count. Then, those elected and their parties would learn to sit up and deliver the goods, else, at the appointed time, they would be thrown out of power. The people must constitute a virile opposition to ensure that there is enough creative tension in the halls of government that their occupants would be on their toes and be left with no choice than to perform and meet the needs of the masses who voted them into power and not those of their godfathers or ruling elite.

With particular reference to women empowerment, Oladejo (2012) has words for the Nigerian society when he recommends, ‘helping women to balance work with family obligations through

the provision of benefits like affordable child care, tax credits, and maternity leave; and at the individual level, women help each other by serving as role models.'

Helen Lauer (2002) enlightens us on how fighting for the rights of women has the far-reaching consequences for the polity when she states:

It is only in the most trivial, positivistic sense that fighting discrimination against women amounts to defending the basic human rights of the world's majority of people (since women constitute 51% of the world's total population). In a more substantive sense, it is precisely because of their routine experience with disenfranchisement and deprivation that women are ideally situated to govern the public protection of civil rights for innocent citizens in conflict zones, and the resolution of economic crises and civil conflicts and care for the destitute in peacetime. Because of women's biological capacity to bring forth human life and their social responsibility to attend to its most vulnerable stages against intolerable odds, women represent that sector of society best equipped to supervise alleviation of severe stress among the helpless and most disadvantaged whenever a nation is undergoing or recuperating from the crises of war or economic dissolution. Women also excel in diplomacy—their socialized obligation to practice humility, empathy, self-effacement and deference renders them effective facilitators in consensus building and conflict resolution. Therefore, by formally elevating women's culturally ordained roles in public institutional settings outside the home, state administrators signal to their citizens and to the world at large their commitment to the integrity of their political structures and protocols. In practical terms, this means moving women into key administrative and decision making positions alongside men in the formal state apparatus and in the multinational private sector.

The foregoing exhaustive quotation is already being seen in Nigeria to some extent. In the Fourth Republic, with the need to fast-track development even in the midst of a corrupt political landscape, women have been entrusted with key ministries at the Federal level. Very important portfolios like that of Finance, Petroleum Resources, and Education have been largely entrusted to women. Women were only known to be Ministers of Women Affairs in the past or serve as deputy ministers or relatively obscure ministries are entrusted to them. The present Petroleum Minister was even once a Minister of Transport. A very delicate portfolio like the Ministry of Aviation is currently occupied by a woman, and this is the second time such is the case. There was a time the Minister of Finance and her junior Minister of State were both women. When the former Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, President of the World Bank, was moved to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after securing debt relief for the nation and managing the nation's foreign reserves so much that we were able to completely pay off our remaining external debts, the latter—Mrs. Esther Nemadi Usman was raised to become the substantive minister. Today, she has been elected by her people from Kaduna South Senatorial District as a distinguished Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Dr. Okonjo-Iweala has returned again from the World Bank not only as Minister of Finance but also as the Coordinating Minister of the Economic Management Team of the nation under President Goodluck Jonathan.

The incumbent President has fulfilled his campaign-promise of reserving a 35% quota of appointive positions to women in the Federal cabinet. This has largely compensated for the depleting number of women elected to revered seats in the two halls of the National Assembly. However, it must be noted that this did not come on a platter of gold. The women during the campaign rallies had massively mobilized and literarily ambushed the President forcing him to concede such grounds to them in his public speeches during the rallies. But the women did not rely on pre-election podium promises alone. They were smart enough to know from hindsight that such campaign promises are largely left unfulfilled after election season is over. Immediately after the elections, they began to mount subtle pressure by first sending a massive representation to the First Lady—Mrs. Patience Jonathan, that she should prevail on her husband to keep her word. Ogundipe (2002) has this word:

Patriarchal society is not alarmed or scared as long as it is that male dominant society that will decide what women want, what women need, what women should be. As long as women look outside of themselves to be empowered, they never will be. It is not in the nature of power to give itself away to the powerless. The powerless must fight to acquire power.

Apart from the ministries already mentioned above and the traditional portfolio of Women Affairs, the first Minister of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a woman. The Minister of Water Resources, and the Minister of State for Defence, for the first time, is a woman—Erelu Olusola Obada. In the same vein, the 2011 election in Nigeria has brought more women into limelight among who are the deputy governors of Ekiti, Osun, Lagos states. The present Minister of Information took over from a very prominent woman—Professor Dora Akunyili, who became minister after a renowned fight against fake drug peddlers as Director-General of the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). She left the PDP dominated government to return to her home base to contest election for the Senate under the aegis of the All Peoples Grand Alliance and she lost by a very narrow margin to a renowned grassroots politician—Dr. Chris Ngige. These women have literally distinguished themselves in the offices they held that they can stand at par with the male counterparts, or even sometimes, tower above them. This is a far cry from the first, second and third republics.

Lauer (2002) takes on a historical tour:

In politics, it can be said that women are universally disadvantaged, and not only in Nigeria. How many women, the worldwide, are presidents, prime ministers, senators, legislators, governors, even in developed countries? Very few, however, in Nigeria, the situation is, if anything, worse. Since independence in 1960, two women senators were nominated (*sic*) in the First Republic. During the Second Republic, one female senator and two members of House of Representatives, and two female members of the Federal Executive Council constituted all the women representation. The Third Republic which was aborted had a token election of one female in the 91-members Senate and 13 females into the 589-members House of Representatives and 2 female deputy governors.



No woman has won election as a Governor, Vice Preside or President. A woman, Mrs. Patricia Etteh, was the first woman to become the Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives, though she was eventually impeached in controversial circumstances. Plateau State in the north-central geo-political zone also had a female deputy governor in the person of Mrs. Paulin Tallen, until she lost in the last election against her boss, the incumbent Governor Jonah Jang. It was generally considered an unwise political maneuver. She was a Minister of Science and Technology in the early years of the current Fourth Republic. At the same level, women have also held the sway, in a few cases, as Speakers of Houses of Assembly. The future holds promise as more women are being appointed as Commissioners and Heads of Parastatals and they are proving their mettle as they will not want to be seen as inferior members of the cabinet. Women are also doing very well in the private sector. They are becoming heads of banks, the stock exchange and some companies. But it is still largely a man's world.

On the global level presently, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel is a woman; the Presidents of Liberia and Malawi, not to be exhaustive, are women. They are proving their mettle. Poland once had a female President in the person of Mrs. Mercy McAlese. Why cannot Nigeria produce a President or even a single governor that is female? Virginia Etiaba was Governor for a brief spell when the incumbent was abducted. She was only elected deputy governor. Why have all these female deputies not been able to succeed their bosses, even after serving together two terms of office?

Ogundipe (2002) explains:

Women working with men through their relations, connections, cash or kind, have no power. This is a mixed grill of influence peddling, manipulation, prostitution, and blackmail, sometimes. This is not political power. It is resorted to by women precisely because they lack power that comes with authority. Direct modes of exercising political power is what women in Nigeria should be seeking. To acquire this power, women should be educated, be economically strong, be visible, belong to power elite, be accepted as an authority figure, be able to be nominated and win elections. In Nigeria, market women organizations are active at election time. They campaign for endorse, finance, and generally participate in the political process but hardly ever think of supporting women candidates or believing in their own political strength. So, only a few outstanding women participate in politics.

In other words, women are their own enemies. For instance, female genital mutilation is carried out by women themselves. So also are obnoxious widowhood rites. But there are no rites for widowers. If women decide against these in a community, men would not be able to carry it out (Albert, 2002). It is because women acquiesce in the name of culture that these take place. And until these stop at the cultural level, women would continue to be underdogs even at the front stage of political activities. Again Ogundipe (2002) asserted:

Women cannot take their rightful place in the power structure of Nigeria until the cultural attitudes and socialization practices are overcome by women themselves. The inferiorisation and demonization of women that they lack the will and self-esteem to actually seek and gain power

must be overcome by a broader informal and formal education system. Educational levels of women must improve. Illiteracy, the bane of the majority of women, must be battled. Harmful traditional practices militating against women having the time and space to do politics must be stopped.

From the above, it is evidenced that for Nigerian women to be relevant in political operations of the country, a lot still need to be done especially in the area of education and socio-cultural empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

The struggle for women liberalization was not peculiar to Nigeria alone. It was there at some time or the other in other parts of Africa and even Asia or Europe or America. At some time, it was as if the understanding that women were inferior to men gained currency and it was only after the passage of time with some women breaking new grounds in various fields of Endeavour and even sometimes, doing better than men in education, science, politics, etc. When the opportunity arises, men began to acknowledge them and they themselves began to gain some self-esteem and become assertive.

Today, women are not only voting but they are getting elected as councilors, chairmen and deputies of local government area councils, legislators at the state and federal assemblies, as well as deputy governors in Nigeria. In some countries of the world, women have become elected Governors and even Presidents or Prime Ministers. It may be considered as a token, at present, but a long road has been travelled and there is still much more distance to cover. And it is good that we appreciate the enormity of efforts women have been making in this regard in order to realize some truths.

The truth of history is that no one just gives you your place in society by simple fiat. The fact is that you have to demand it and keep demanding it and insist on your own grounds until you get it. A lot of efforts would go into it as well as resources. Sometimes, lives are even lost in such struggle. Power is never conceded on a platter of gold. You struggle and tussle for power. If you want peace, work for justice. Sometimes, if you want peace, you have to prepare to endure a lot of trouble.

This was the fact in climes like America of yore where there was discrimination on account of race. This was the fact with regards to the era of slave trade. This was the fact in colonial times when Africa and some countries of Asia hungered for independence. Even the fall of apartheid in South Africa did not come without a lot of struggle. This is also the fact today with regards to gender issues in Nigeria. Women, in tandem with men of goodwill, must keep up the struggle for a Nigeria where everyone is respected and treated with equity and fairness.

There should be a level playing ground for all to have a sense of belonging and not feel him or her or a certain constituency is short-changed. This is the beauty of a true democracy. Nigeria is not yet there. We deceive ourselves if we think Nigeria has got there. But the country has started

taking some steps in the right direction. Any inequality against a certain section of the Nigerian community should be seen as injustice against all. Women may be affected today, but if the equation is not balanced, it will give the room for injustice against youths or even the unborn, or injustice against a certain tribe or the minorities or injustice on account of creed. It is in this wider perspective that Nigeria should develop our democracy in order that we develop our nation on the hallmarks of equity, fairness and justice.

Equally important is the fact that women rather than expecting men to concede quotas to them or be paternalistic with regards to issues that concern them, they should go inwards to see how they can mobilize themselves for functional education, empowerment and advocacy. More than that, they should eschew being the architects of their own downfall in working against themselves. They can rally round to support one another for elective or appointive positions but they must also be protagonists of issues that directly affect them as well as endangered species of humanity like children, including the unborn, also unemployed youths, the handicapped, and the aged. All these become necessary because women, by nature, are virtuous and care givers.

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