# Women and Leadership in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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**Abstract**

Women are a major stakeholder in the development project of any society. Globally, the issues of women marginalisation and low participation in political leadership and decision making have been attracting a lot of attention from scholars. Although women and men have different biological and physiological make-up, they may share common features with men in terms of educational qualifications, socio-economic status and occupation among others. Yet, they are marginalised in virtually all spheres of public life. In many African countries, such as Nigeria, obnoxious social norms, political exclusion and economic lopsidedness dictate the presence and voice of women in public life. According to 2006 Nigerian population census figure, women constituted 49% of the total population, but there has been a gross gender gap between men and women, especially in political representation, economic management and leadership. This paper, therefore, examines critically some factors that have brought about this wide political and socio-economic disparity. Using both historical and descriptive approaches and guided by patriarchy and liberal feminism theories, the paper argues that the various economic, political, social and systemic practices serve as obstacles to effective participation of women in politics, governance and decision making in Nigeria. The paper concludes that, for there to be greater participation of women in all spheres of Nigerian society, government and other stakeholders should engage in programmes and policies that would empower women politically, socially and economically.

**Keywords:** Women, leadership, governance, marginalization, prospect, politics

**Introduction**

Globalization has led to discourses on development having different perspectives. One of the major recent development discourses puts gender and governance on the fore front of these (Shamim and Kumari, 2002). In this context, the existence of leadership as a universal phenomenon with its uniqueness connected with either the persons involved or the circumstances of their interaction. This arises from the fact that leadership, as defined by leading scholars in the social sciences, is a process (Nduka, 2001). Burns (1979), for instance puts it thus: "Leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilising by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources...in order to realise goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers" (p. 425).

Further analysis of the concept will involve the unravelling of such factors as the connection between leadership and power, personality traits or qualities of individual leaders, leadership roles, styles, and types of leaderships (Nduka, 2001). The factors identified above are found within the conditions/grounds of the two basic types of leadership: the transactional and the reforming (Burns, 1979). It is within this backdrop that we shall endeavour to situate women's participation in leadership in Nigeria. Women are a major stakeholder in the development project of any society.

Aina (2012) avers that, there are sufficient evidences to prove that women are a veritable access in public offices (Aina and Olayode, 2010).    In the military sphere, women play prominent leadership roles, not only in the military exploit of the Amazons of Greek legend, but also in those of the Amazons of South America and Dahomey, in modern times. Similarly, the heroic exploits of Queen Amina in the military and political ascendancy of Zaria in the sixteenth century were paralled by those of Joan of Arc who led her French country men to record notable victories against the invading English forces in 1429. Queen Amina conquered as far as Nupe and Kwararafa, collected tribute from far and wide and ruled for 34 years (Palmer, 1908).

The leadership roles played by both Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Mrs. Margaret Ekpo in the Nigerian pre-independence political struggles of the 1950s are incontrovertible (Sklar, 1963). Mrs Kuti[1] was a strong advocate and campaigner for women's rights across the country. Mrs. Margret Ekpo, on her part, was the only female member of the seven-man committee set up in 1951 to organize a national political organization geared toward achieving self-government within five years. She became the Vice-President of the Eastern House of Chiefs in 1959. Indeed, it may well be that the women who spearheaded the 1929 Aba Women's Riots in South-Eastern Nigeria were the precursors and role models of the two better known female political activists (Nduka, 2001).

Professor (Mrs.) Grace Alele-Williams not only distinguished herself in the field of mathematics

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[1] Mrs. Kuti, for instance a school teacher and, Founder and President of the Nigerian Women's Union, was prominent long before Beijing and similar conferences.

education, but also rose to become the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin-the first female Nigerian academic to be so honoured (Nduka, 2001). Similarly, late Prof. Dora Nkem Akunyili[1] (OFR), who was the former Director of National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control reduced the incidence of fake drugs from about 90% to 68% of drugs in 2001(Akunyili, 2006). Dr. (Mrs.) Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, successfully transformed the Nigerian economic platform when she succeeded in negotiating a debt relief package for Nigeria as the Finance Minister (July, 2003-June, 2006) under the Obasanjo regime and also spearheaded the unpopular fuel subsidy removal policy by the Nigerian government, which led to protests in January 2012 under the Goodluck Jonathan regime (Aina, 2012; McGroarty, 2012). Also, she stressed the need to reduce the country's recurrent expenditure, which is currently 74% of the national budget, and embark on capital projects which could improve the 14% unemployment rate in the country (Osa-Okunbor, 2012).

In all developing countries, women leaders abound, not just in politics, but also in academia, and private and public sector/organizations (Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011). The foregoing are appropriate clarion calls for action, the rationale of which is the development of leadership and leadership culture in Nigeria.

**Factors Militating against Women in Politics in Nigeria**

In many African countries, such as Nigeria, obnoxious social norms, political exclusion and economic lopsidedness dictate the presence and voice of women in public life. According to the 2006 Nigerian population census figure, women constituted 49% of the total population, yet, there has been a gross gender gap between men and women, especially in political representation, economic management and leadership. Political equality is still obscure in African countries, although some progress has been made. As men have control over assets and have relatively better education, they have a dominant position in terms of political power. For instance, men councillors may not necessarily be highly educated but such positions are not given to women who have the same low educational level with them. Lack of awareness leads to situations where they become dependent on male political positions or political parties. Men's participation in leadership will focus more on issues of men's interest than on women's concerns. In some cases, women are elected into a leadership position in the arm of government without actually participating actual leadership. In Nigeria, a lot of women lack effective power or influence, especially in federal government structure. Many of them do not have the necessary skills to present ideas effectively. Lack of awareness of political participation means inadequate contribution to public affairs and women's empowerment. When women are given the opportunity of participation in leadership, they will recognize these problems and address them to accommodate full participation of women in leadership at all levels of the arms of government.

One of the important reasons why women have not received adequate benefits from years of planning and development is their inadequate representation, non-participation and non-involvement in the preparation and execution of plans for their economic development and social justice through decentralized institutions. Most political parties do not even maintain data on their women membership and few women are granted tickets for elections (Shamim and Kumari, 2002). Since politics is traditionally a male domain and all financial, economic, commercial and political negotiations conducted outside the home are by males, Nigerian women have very limited access to decision-making process, and they have a severe lack of access to and control over financial resources. This effectively reduces women's chance of contesting elections.

The factors and issues of women marginalisation and low participation in political leadership and decision making have been attracting a lot of attention from scholars. Although women and men have different biological and physiological make-up, women may share common features with men in terms of educational qualifications, socio-economic status and occupation, among others. Yet, they are marginalised in virtually all spheres of public life. In emerging democracies, there are several factors that prevent women from participating fully in political leadership and governance in all forms of government and political positions/offices. Some of the factors include but are not limited to the following:

1. Obnoxious socio-cultural practices such as widowhood practices, female genital mutilation (FGM), restrictive religious practices (as observed in the Northern geo-political zone), and purdah system (observed in the northern part of the country). Many of these socio-cultural practices create barriers to women empowerment and gender equality, thereby placing a clearly greater burden on women. The shrouding different exclusions and deprivations faced by women in cultural and traditional beliefs often deprive them access to information, education and wealth-creating assets, such as land, capital (including credit facilities), labour, and entrepreneurial skills (Aina, 2012). These restrictions created by socio-cultural practices can be blamed for the poor participation of women in politics and organisational decision-making processes.

2. Dehumanizing treatment of widows, wife-battering and other subjugating tendencies that can eventually

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[1] Nigeria's past Honourable Minister of Information and Communications, is an internationally renowned pharmacist, pharmacologist, erudite scholar, seasoned administrator, and a visionary leader.

make a woman to lose self-confidence. Such practices keep women 'silent' in the public sphere and also private domain (Aina, 2012).

3. Stereotypical constraints against women in striving to attain political and organisational leadership roles to the top (Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011).

4. Exclusion of girls from obtaining their share of family inheritance (this is common in the South-East of Nigeria). In almost all the states of the federation, women have no right over land and landed property, as they cannot, under customary laws, inherit land/landed property, neither directly from their fathers nor from their husbands (Aina, 2012).

5. The traditional role of the women and the girl-child in carrying out household chores, which often leaves them with little or no time for formal education and self-development.

6. Poor access to education and scholarship facilities in various professions: These restrictions also affect women's access to education and professions, which also limits their capacity to compete effectively with their male counterparts in the labour market for lucrative and more fulfilling jobs (Aina, 2012).

7. Patriarchal settings in African family societies: The low status of the Nigerian women is generally reproduced by the culture of male supremacy inherent in local traditions and cultures, including religious idiosyncrasies (Aina, 2012).

8. Crimes and corruption prevalent in emerging democracies do not provide favourable environment for women leaders to play their roles. Women may also be in less powerful positions to challenge corruption when it occurs. Alternatively, they may face gendered forms of corruption, such as the demand for sex in return for particular services or resources.

9. High rate of maternal mortality: The Nigerian health sector is plagued by a number of problems including mal-distribution of health facilities, poor management of the health systems, poor referral systems and the neglect of the rural areas, where a larger proportion of the population resides, especially women and children (Odebiyi and Aina, 1998; Adewuyi, Odebiyi, Aina, and Raimi, 1999; Aina, Adewuyi, et al., 2002). The issue of women's health did not attract much attention both in health policies and in health research until in the recent times, when maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is 545 per 100,000 live births (Aina, 2012). For a long time, health research, especially in the area of maternal and child health in Nigeria, focused more on child health to the neglect of the woman's health. Even when the health of the woman is targeted, it remains at the level of reproductive health, with particular emphasis on family planning.

10. Non-extension of equal rights to all citizens, especially women, because they are seen as second-hand citizens in some parts of the country. In such cases, they are not allowed to participate in anything even at the grassroots levels. Women are made to see that their permanent position which they could occupy fully is in the kitchen.

The above problems often contribute to the ability of many women in emerging democracies to acquire the knowledge and skills which will make them realise their rights and inspire in them the confidence necessary for leadership positions. The situation is made even more difficult by the fact that the girl-child is usually prepared for a second place position right from the home where the focus of her training is on how to be a good wife, a good mother and a good home-maker. Consequently, women are hardly equipped with public leadership tools, especially in the areas of education and social exposure. Emergence into public leadership position by Nigerian women is just as tough in Nigeria as it is in any nation in the same league. The situation, therefore, that will enable women to explore their full potential so as to be able to play leadership roles, and thereby contribute their bits to their countries' socio-economic development and nation building.

**Prospects of Women's Participation in Leadership in Nigeria**
In the pre-colonial and colonial, Nigeria women never enjoyed parity with men in issues of governance; the same is witnessed in the post-colonial era. The history of political transformation in Nigeria is replete with issues of male domination, and women tokenism in participation in public affairs (Aina and Ukeje, 1998; Aina and Olayode, 2012b).

The political system in Nigeria remains male-centric as witnessed under military dictatorship and in the emerging democratic civilian governance structures and practices. The military era provided women with the least opportunity to challenge the structure of gender inequalities, as military promoted female subordinate position in the society through the 'First Lady' syndrome (a process which hindered the 'woman's question' from being addressed within the mainstream development praxis) (Aina, 2012). Under such arrangements, the 'women's question' was treated within the private interests of wives of political leaders (a mentality which is almost difficult to erase even within the party politics and democratic governance).

According to Shamim and Kumari (2002), one of the significant goals set out by the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, in Beijing was adequate representation of women in all decision-making bodies (Beijing Platform for Action 1996). It was suggested that, in any representative body, there should be a 'logical

balance' of men and women to voice the concerns of the society en masse. Good leadership and governance connote being participatory, accountable, predictable, and transparent, which reasonably call for a gender balance in political decision-making. It is accepted that women's insights and values of governance can enhance and enrich the overall decision-making process. It is also typically observed that women at the local level are more sensitive to community issues (Shamim and Kumari, 2002).

The country is yet to implement its commitment to women's political participation through the 30% affirmative action mandate provided for in the National Women Policy (2000); and which was later increased to 35% in the National Gender Policy (2006). Women's political participation continues to be inhibited by socio-cultural factors that relegate women to the background in leadership discourse and decision making processes. Thus, the wide gender gaps in governance and politics have been blamed for the gross discrimination faced by the Nigerian women irrespective of regional/urban-rural location, ethnic origin, and religion (Aina, 2012).

Before now, women did take part in the political process at the national, regional, and local levels, and their presence was significant. However, in the 1960s, the glaring lack of representation of women's participation started emerging and can be attributed as a factor of the larger socio-cultural and politico-religious dimensions of the Nigerian structural reality. This then meant that, in a democratic set-up where numbers was crucial, women and their issues were always marginalized. The emerging trend of women's poor participation in leadership is a result of the young women being forced out of school to get married early (such cases are found in the Northern Nigeria) and are mostly subsistent farmers or traders by occupation.

Also, the discourse on women's participation in leadership roles must be situated in a global milieu. Women are considered inferior and their participation at all levels of government, discouraged. In fact, some communities consider it a taboo for women to take active roles in governance. Many qualified women are forced to play minor roles in the margins or are frustrated out of governance. This is in spite of several institutional conventions and treaties that encourage woman participation in economics, politics and governance (Ekpe, Alobo and Egbe, 2014).

Notably, corruption drains public resources and takes the much-needed funds away from national economic development or social services, while it disproportionately affects women and the poor who are mostly dependent on these structures. Women may also be in less powerful positions to challenge corruption when it occurs. They may also face gendered forms of corruptions such as the demand for sex in return for particular services or resources (Aina, 2012). A relationship is gradually being established between gender responsive governance and anti-corruption practices in public office (World Bank Development Research Group, 1999). There is the argument that women may be more relationship-oriented, have higher standard of ethical behaviour, and may be more concerned with the common good than men are. Gender differences are attributed to socialization, or to differences in access to networks of corruption, or knowledge of how to engage in corrupt practices, among others (Aina, 2012).

However, some authors have criticized the gender-responsive argument as antidote for corruption. One of such is Anne Marie Goetz (2003), who questions the notion that women in governance will result in lower levels of corruption. According to Goetz (2003), these studies failed to acknowledge the extent to which gender relationship may limit the opportunities for corruption, particularly when corruption functions through all-male networks and in forums from which women are socially excluded. Goetz believes that, as the workplace becomes more feminized and women take the top leadership jobs, it cannot be assumed that women will choose less corrupt behaviour. Evidences from Nigeria also present a paradox of gender and corrupt practices in public office (Aina, 2012). In Nigeria, there are notable women who have transformed their roles as leaders. Yet, other women have been found to be guilty of corrupt practices like their male counterparts. Examples are found in the scenarios that took the first Nigerian Female Speaker of the House of Representative (Mrs. Patricia Etteh) out of office; and Adenike Grange, the first female Nigerian Minister of Health in 2007 (Aina, 2012). These two cases do not merely point to women's culpability for corrupt practices, but also that they are viewed as the by-product of the system which brought such women to power. It is, therefore, argued that the few token women who have served in political offices are often reflection of the male oligarchy that brought them to power (Aina and Olayode, 2010).

On the whole, governance in most African nations bear a masculine face, with women merely serving as stooges, and often manipulated by men. Women would need concerted exposure and training to understand fully the rules of the game, and the undertones of governance. Integrating more women into public office as a potential anti-corruption remedy without addressing the collectivist culture, and the inherent masculine manipulations existing in the public sphere, may prove futile, as women may succumb to the social ethics of their godfathers at the expense of public sector ethos, as in the case of Patricia Etteh (Aina, 2012). There are some factors which are likely to help women to participate in politics. These are discussed below.

i.   **Reducing extreme poverty and economic empowerment of women:** This could be done by ensuring equal factors that can aid women's participation in politics. Access of the woman and man to critical resources and reducing extreme poverty among women, including ensuring gender equitable access to

capital and large-scale investment opportunities; removing gender discriminatory practices on access to landed properties; facilitating women's access to improved technology; building women's entrepreneurial skills. Involve women in the execution of empowerment programmes. Government should enhance the business environment through provision of infrastructures and accounting for the value of women's work in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Building the capacity of the women and men in low-poverty groups on investment opportunities, by enlightenment on investment opportunities, providing access to institutional credit facilities, supporting and encouraging the development of small-medium-and large-scale enterprises, and providing extension services for those in poverty group to enhance information.

ii.   **Eliminating employment discriminatory practices against women and addressing labour issues affecting women:** This is achievable by building the human capital of women to allow comparable opportunity in the modern labour market by encouraging equal access to education and skill acquisition for women to increase their participation at the managerial level, and making vocational education and adult literacy programmes available to all. It is necessary to eliminate all discriminatory practices against the employment of women in the public and private sectors of the economy, that is, by eliminating all gender-based discriminatory practices in recruitment, wages and promotion, with particular reference to the private sector. Personnel policies and practices must comply with the principle of equitable representation of both sexes to ensure effective implementation of national and international labour laws, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Equal Treatment for men and women workers. Government should create reward systems for organizations in the public and private sectors of the economy that operate based on gender equity and equality principles.

iii.  **Empowerment of women in politics:** So as to increase the level of women participation in politics, there is the need for sensitization of women to political participation, creating enabling environment for women to participate in politics by economic empowerment and adequate education of women for political participation. It is important to eradicate all discriminatory policies against women, by reviewing the structure and operational guidelines of political parties. Financial support should be provided for women political aspirants. To increase the number of women in elective positions and decision-making processes, there is need for affirmative actions in politics (for example, 30% of political posts to be reserved for women). The existing traditional structures which exclude women from participating in decision-making, should also be reformed. Since the return to democracy in Nigeria in 1999, women have made a lot of impact on the political landscape of the country. They have occupied and continue to occupy high and sensitive positions in both executive, legislative and judiciary arms of government. For instance, under the current democratic dispensation, the first woman Speaker of House of Representative, Hon. Patricia Ette, was produced. The first woman governor, Dame Virgy Etiaba was produced in Anambra State. Also, the current Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) Aloma Mariam Mukhtar is a woman.

iv.   **Constitutional Provisions:** This could be done by ensuring that women and men have equal legal and human rights by eliminating all gender discriminatory clauses in existing laws and legislations including, by persons, organizations and enterprises. It is also achievable through customary laws with gender equality principles through advocacy, sensitization, equal access to the laws, irrespective of wealth and gender. Introducing human rights education into school curricula at all levels and building the capacity of the legislative, the judiciary and other law enforcement agencies to uphold gender justice and gender equality principles are also crucial. The use of quota and proportional representation assists in the promotion of gender balance in public life. Phillips (1995) notes that quotas do not discriminate but compensate women's actual barrier that prevent women from pursuing a political career. Relevant stakeholders, such as Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties should be engaged in introducing quota. Related to the above is the necessary legal framework that guarantees the rights of women especially in achieving the provision of international and domestic instruments for more participation in social, economic and governance processes.

v.    **Greater enrolment of girls into educational institutions**: Over the last three decades, there has been greater enrolment of the girl-child into higher institutions in some parts of Nigeria. For instance, in the eastern part of Nigeria where most male children have gone to the lines commerce and trading even at quite early age, girls have taken over the spaces left by male. As a matter of fact, most boys' secondary schools have been changed into girls' secondary schools or community secondary schools to accommodate high enrolment of girls into the schools. This has been made possible by the changing positive perception of most Nigerian parents on the role of women in the society. Also, there has been greater enrolment of the girl-child in both private and public universities in Nigeria.

vi.   **Inspiration for women who occupied and are occupying positions of authority**: Some of the few

women (Dr. Okonjo-Iwela, Prof Dora Akunyili, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, and Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili and so on) that have occupied political and decision making position since in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era have demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities and outstanding track records of achievement. This will enhance, build women and put women on a good pedestal thus giving a promising signal of high prospects of more roles for Nigerian women in public affairs. These women exhibited exceptional qualities that endeared them to the hearts of most Nigerians, thereby giving credence to that maxim that whatever positive thing a man can do a woman can do even better.

**Theoretical Framework: Theories of Gender Oppression - Patriarchy and Liberal Feminism theories**
This research is guided by Theories of Gender Oppression - Patriarchy and Liberal Feminism theories. The present state of women's low participation is to several factors such as socio-cultural practices, marginalization in political party, poor access to education, lack of women's empowerment, lack of political funding and so on, has a serious implication for leadership, good governance and development of any country such as Nigeria.

**Patriarchy Approach to Women's low Participation in Leadership in Nigeria**
Theories of gender oppression describe women's situation as the consequence of a direct power relationship between men and women in which men have fundamental and concrete interests in controlling, using, and oppressing women − that is, in the practice of domination. By domination, oppression theories mean any relationship in which one party (individual or collective), the dominant, succeeds in making the other party (individual or collective) the subordinate, an instrument of the dominant's will. Instrumentality, by definition, is understood as involving the denial of the subordinate's independent subjectivity (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1995).

In spite of the international declarations affirming the rights and equality between men and women, of which Nigeria is a signatory, the available literature shows that women still constitute a disproportionately small percentage of those participating in political decision-making and leadership (Kasomo, 2012). Many global conferences, including the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and the World Summit for Social Development (1995) have recognised that, despite the progress made globally in improving the status of women, gender disparities still exist, especially with regard to participation in electoral politics.

Women's situation, for theorists of gender oppression, is centrally that of being dominated and oppressed by men (Ritzer, 2008). This pattern of gender oppression is incorporated in the deepest and most pervasive ways into society's organization, a basic arrangement, and a basic arrangement of domination most commonly called patriarchy, in which society is organized to privilege men in all aspects of social life. Patriarchy is not the unintended and secondary consequence of some other sets of factors − be it biology or socialization or sex roles or the class system. It is a primary power arrangement sustained by strong and deliberate intention. Indeed, to theorists of gender oppression, gender differences and gender inequality are by-products of patriarchy.

In Nigeria, the low participation of women in these positions affects their progress in improving the legal and regulatory framework for promoting gender equality since very few women are influencing the legislative process. The rationale for promoting women's participation in political dispensation is based on equity, quality and development (Kasomo, 2012). Given the nominally higher population of women (49%) in Nigeria, it is only right for them to equally participate in political decisions on matters affecting them.

There are two major variants of gender oppression theory: psychoanalytic feminism and radical feminism. Like all oppression theorists, psychoanalytic theorists see patriarchy as a system, in which men subjugate women, a universally pervasive system durable over time and space, and steadfastly maintained in the face of occasional challenge. Distinctive to psychoanalytic feminism, however, is the view that this system is one that all men, in their individual daily actions, work to create and sustain. Women resist only occasionally but more often either acquiesce in or actively work for their own subordination. This theory then explains women's oppression in terms of men's deep emotional need to control women, a drive arising from ambivalence toward the women who reared them (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2008). Several factors have been identified as generally prevent women from advancing to political spheres in Nigeria. Adhiambo-Oduol (2003) identifies socio-cultural beliefs, attitudes, biases and stereotypes as major barriers. These emphasize the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. They form the integral part of socialisation process in form of gender education and training that men and women are exposed to from childhood (Kasomo, 2012).

Radical feminists see in every institution and in society's most basic stratification arrangements − heterosexuality, class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, and gender − systems of domination and subordination, the most fundamental structure of which is the system of patriarchy. Not only is patriarchy historically the first structure of domination and submission, but it also continues as the most pervasive and enduring system of inequality, the basic societal model of domination (Lerner, 1986). Through participation in patriarchy, men learn

how to hold women in contempt, to see them as non-human, and to control them.

Another formidable barrier is the institutional framework guiding gender division of labour, recruitment, and vertical mobility. Available studies have shown that women are particularly disadvantaged, with their labour often under-valued and under-utilized. Women are more likely to be employed than men, yet their average income is lower (Kasomo, 2012).

Another factor confronting women's participation in leadership is lack of enough participation and empowerment in decisions that affect their lives in political and social processes. According to Kasomo (2012), Olojede (1990) notes that, since men dominate public decision-making processes, it is the male values that are reflected in the decision-making bodies.

Nigeria's development record and its demographic composition suggest a need for active involvement of women in key decision-making bodies. There is a clear indication that, even though women form the majority votes in Nigeria's last general elections, they are still under-represented in leadership positions. Women's participation in electoral politics since Nigeria's independence in 1960 has been limited to providing support to male politicians. With the new political dispensation in Nigeria, there is a greater need for equal gender participation in acquisition and exercise of political powers.

**Liberal Feminism Approach to Women's Low Participation in Leadership in Nigeria**
The major expression of gender inequality theory is liberal feminism, which argues that women may claim equality with men on the basis of an essential human capacity for reasoned moral agency, that gender inequality is the result of a sexist patterning of the division of labour, and that gender equality can be produced by transforming the division of labour through the repatterning of key institutions − law, work, family, education, and media (Friedan, 1963; Bem, 1993; Lorber, 1994; Rhode, 1997; Pateman, 1999; Schaeffer, 2001).

Historically, the first element in the liberal feminist argument is the claim for gender equality. This claim was first politically articulated in the Declaration of Sentiments drafted as Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, with the express purpose of paralleling and expanding the Declaration of Independence to include women. Women are a major force behind people's participation in the life of society today. Not only do they comprise the majority in terms of population, but they also play a crucial role in society as procreators of posterity as well as producers of goods and services. Although women have made great strides in obtaining a vote and right to be elected to political offices in many countries, they comprise less than 15 percent of the members of parliament, and less than 5 percent of heads of state worldwide. They hold only a fraction of other leadership positions nationally and internationally.

In Nigeria, traditional perceptions of women as inferior to men prevail, as many people uphold cultural practices which enhance the subordination of women. Consequently, men continue to dominate women in political, economic, social, and religious realms. The latter's political endeavours, achievements and roles in society are hardly recognised or acknowledged. This situation has necessitated the clarion call that women should be empowered by giving them due status, rights, and responsibilities to enable them participate actively in decision making at the political level (Kasomo, 2012).

**Implications of Women's Status for Participation in Leadership, Governance and Development**
Women constitute half of Nigeria's population. They are essential and largely unacknowledged contribution to economic life and play a crucial role in all spheres of society. However, the restrictive practices and constraints have not allowed them to take advantage of their numbers and position in order to significantly influence the decision-making processes. As a result, the potential of half of the Nigerian population remains unexplored and the scope of labour, energy, and human resources available for national development is restricted. Nigerian women have been marginalized in the formal political systems owing to traditional beliefs and practices which inhibit their advancement and participation in public life.

In spite of constitutional guarantee of equal access to education for all, nationwide campaigns for the enrolment of all school-age children and programmes for mass adult and non-formal education, women's political empowerment continues to be impeded by traditional obstacles to female education. The choice of the path of educational training made early in life by young girls under the strong influence of families, peer groups and so on often closes many opportunities to women and propels them towards the direction of traditionally socially-approved female careers; this situation has a social implication for national development in Nigeria. This has profound consequences for women's role in politics because it dictates not only their presence, but also the type of role they can actively play. This is the most pervasive type of barrier facing Nigerian women. Better educated women are more likely to be politically active, to be employed, and likely to avoid situation of conflict.

With the population of women exceeding half of national world's population, one would have thought that they would normally dominate the political scene, especially in democratic system of government. But most women are kept in perpetual abject poverty because they render either unremunerated or poorly remunerated services. It is imperative to note that political powerlessness is a product of other improvised condition of

Nigerian women. There is surely no gainsaying the fact that the women folk are more or less absent from the political scene. Solutions should be sought to improve their participation through empowerment process for transformation at family and grassroots level. This has a positive implication for national development as a whole.

## Discussions

Women in leadership positions, especially in developing countries, have the responsibility and the potential to influence their society through leadership, particularly when they are enabled. Enabled women are empowered to aspire, attain and perform well in leadership positions while still carrying out their roles on the home front. Women are enabled when they are educated, exposed and economically emancipated. Throughout the ages and in all countries, women in leadership positions have impacted positively on the society. The history of mankind is replete with such women. The last century saw the emergence of great women leaders in various spheres of human endeavours, notably were achievers in leadership roles in Nigeria.

Suffice it to say that the present Nigerian government has given more women opportunities to serve as leaders in various capacities than any other previous administration. There are women who blazed the trail in their various professions and continue to excel in their endeavours in areas such as medicine, pharmacy, public administration and other professions. The emergence of democracy in Nigeria is a positive step, not just for Nigeria and Africa, but also for the world as a whole. With an estimated population of 178 million (CIA World Factbook, 2013), Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world and has, from historical times, produced women leaders and achievers. Democratic governance in Nigeria dates back to her independence on October 1, 1960. However, there have been interludes of civil war and intermittent military incursions into governance. These events put Nigeria into the league of emerging democracies when, in fact; she should be a middle-aged democracy. Democracy is supposed to accord equal opportunities, rights and privileges to all persons, irrespective of gender, race, religion, and so on. This, therefore, presupposes that there is a level and fair playing ground for emergence into public leadership positions.

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations that will enhance women's participation in leadership in Nigeria:

1. Favourable government policies to eradicate or reduce poverty rate among women are required.

2. Establishment of a functioning Ministry of Women Affairs will be most helpful to address the issues facing women.

3. Mobilization and re-education of Nigerian men towards women's empowerment. There should be mandatory and supported education for the girl-child and woman at all levels of education.

4 According women full rights to vote and be voted for.

5. Policies that prevent violence, fear and intimidation, especially during elections should be implemented.

6. Provision of favourable environment that will promote the employment of women including professional and technical training should be made.

7. There should be determination on the part of women to assume leadership positions in the public and private sectors. There should be democratic and equitable participation in development process through office holding to give control over the allocation of resources.

8. Acquisition of the right leadership skills, especially qualitative education. There should be eradication of illiteracy through mass adult literacy and schooling for girls.

9. Purposeful and positive role-modelling by women who have broken the mold.

10. Community action-based strategy, some of which are access to productive resources like land, credit and technology, is required.

11. Breaking of negative cultural, religious and other gender barriers to women development is imperative.

12. There should be greater attention to positive family values.

13. Mutual support, teamwork and networking by women nationally and internationally, irrespective of race and religion should be ensured.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that women still remain highly marginalized in all spheres of Nigeria's life. This is more glaring now when the proportion of men to women in politics and decision-making positions is compared. Several factors, which include socio-cultural practices, lack of finance and women empowerment, religious discrimination, lack of political funding, illiteracy and inadequate education, marginalization in political party hierarchy, patriarchy settings, early marriages, and stereotypical constraints among others, have been identified as inhibiting women's low participation in leadership and politics.

There should be the inclusion of gender-sensitive provisions in the constitutions and manifestoes of parties. This will serve the purpose of mainstreaming gender into their activities. There is also an urgent need for

the establishment of a Women's Political Institute where parties and all female aspirants and candidates will be equipped with relevant skills that underpin the positions in government they seek elections for. This will help them to improve their level of education to enable them to cope with the challenges that may encounter as result of political exigency. Women should be very active in fighting against corruption and bribery in elections. They should be at the forefront in calling for electoral reforms to restrict the use of money in elections.

In order to have women participate in leadership and politics, gender equality initiatives should be implemented at all levels of governance. The government needs to work towards changing the political structures which produce gender inequalities. Women gender inequality should be addressed in relation to women's deprivation, socio-economic and political factors. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making positions will provide a balance which more accurately reflects the composition of society, interests and the general good of all citizens. Finally for there to be greater participation of women in all spheres of Nigerian society, government and other stakeholders should engage in programmes and policies that would empower women politically, socially and economically.

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**Competing interests**
The authors declare no competing interests.

**Authors' contributions**
The authors all agree on the manuscript.

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