

Women's Political Participation and Politics of Disempowerment in Abia State of Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines women's political participation in Abia State of Nigeria with a view to determining the factors that constrain women's equal representation in the political system. Women's political involvement in Abia State has remained increasingly low in spite of decades of struggle to ensure gender equity and women's empowerment. This paper in addition to other known factors, situates the problem on the present trend of designating specific portfolios to women, which was intended to provide the women the opportunity of being represented in the policy making positions and processes in the polity. This in the opinion of the paper undermines, if not completely diminishes women's drive to vie or aspire for other contestable (and even appointable) positions which would advance gender equity. In other words boxing women into one position dooms their chances. It is the view of the paper that there is need for a paradigm shift from the hitherto empowerment agenda to providing level playing ground that would enthrone gender equity. This has become necessary in view of the fact that women participation in politics has a potential of driving more and reasonable resource into community and national development. This study relied on the Chronological Analytic Approach in analysis and adopted the theory of representation as its theoretical guide.

Keywords: Women, Political participation, Politics of disempowerment, Abia State.

Introduction

The first wave of feminism globally which was directed towards ending female disenfranchisement and increasing their rights to property acquisition and determining the fate of a woman in marriage, brought to the fore a new social challenge in form of discrimination among sex. Feminists and advocates have since then sustained the campaign for gender equity as a means to end gender discrimination. However, despite the fact that old predicaments that engender discriminatory acts appear unresolved, new and frightening challenges seem to be emerging especially in societies that evolved through patriarchal structures.

The present Abia State is historically known to be the initiating ground for women activism during the colonial days. The Aba women riot of 1929 was significant because it questioned the rationale behind colonial socio-economic policies and indeed aided the men to erect power structures to resist unwanted and indiscriminate imposition of taxes by the colonial lords. Such was known of Abeokuta women, Aba women riot of 1929 which aimed at addressing injustices; achieve just, equal and fair society. However, such collectivism among Aba women (and women in general) appears to have petered away with the end of colonialism. This exposes women to vulnerability as practices against women in cultural, political and socio-economic context assumed worrisome dimensions. Though, this could be attributed more to male chauvinism, and in some cases, successful women in the society tend to perpetuate heinous practices against the women folk.

Contemporarily, there seems to be a global effort towards addressing gender related issues with particular reference to women empowerment. These efforts were basically targeted on ending discrimination against women and to ensure that women are empowered to compete favourably in all facets of nation building. These concerns led to the convocation of the Conference on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Affirmative Action Initiatives of the United Nations that came to limelight after the UN World Women Conference in Beijing, China in 1995.

However, the emergence of these frameworks seems not to have addressed numerous challenges confronting women in spite of the fact that many Nations of the world are signatories to these frameworks. Many third world or developing societies seem to be far from realizing the objectives imbedded in these protocols. For instance looking at the positions occupied by women in Abia State of Nigeria, as regards to administration and politics, it appears glaringly that the present focus on empowerment have not helped to achieve the needed gender equity that can empower the women in general.

There is no gainsaying the fact that there were tendencies that Nigeria and indeed Abia State could have achieved economic and political transformation and sustainable development if women who in any case constitute more than 49% population of Nigeria and 48% population of Abia State (2006 census figures, see <http://www.nigeriamasterweb.net/>) are able to participate favourably in the policy process. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to examine women political participation in Abia State with a view to ascertaining the extent women's involvement in the Abia politics in the aftermath of this struggle and in the present renewed agitations for equity among genders. In doing this, the paper would be structured into three parts. First section would look at the conceptual and theoretical discourses, followed by the problematic analysis of women participation and involvement in Abia politics and the last would be the conclusion and recommendation.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

The literature seems to be inundated with variety of reasons that accounts for women subjugation in societies they (women) are numerically dominant. The kaleidoscope commentary on low women's involvement in the Nigerian politics hinges it on issues of marginalization, male domination, cultural practices, abuse of religion, poverty, economic and social instability (see Folalo and Fwatshak 2008; Shvedova 2002; Arowolo and Aluko 2010; Agbalajobi 2010). For emphasis, participation in the opinion of Luka (2011) entails involvement of citizens in some way with making decisions in political system. Roberts and Edwards (1991) described participation as a term which is usually applied to voluntary rather than coerced activities. They proceeded to explain the term by saying that when participation is used in political context it is "the voluntary activities of an individual in political affairs including inter alia: voting as one of the tenets of democracy, is found to be liberal and unrestrictive (cited in Luka 2011). On the other hand, politics of disempowerment could be seen as a deliberate or unconscious political effort to place a barrier to the actualization of one's political intention or dissuade him or her from participating or aspiring for political positions. By this, politics of disempowerment could mean placing undue political obstacles that would provide undue advantage for one person or group against others.

Indeed, Izugbara and Onuoha (2003) and Ezeigbo, (1996) have explained how oral traditions, surviving religious cults, relics and indigenous political cultures in different parts of the Nigeria support the view that women are major players in the political system in the past. For Ezeigbo (1996), women's active role in politics during the colonial era, significantly contributed to making the Nigerian Nation (cited in Tashi 1999:95).

Issues of cultural and traditional practices seem to have severe implication on the ability, willingness and the involvement of women in socio-political cum administrative endeavours. According to the African leadership Forum, several traditional practices are injurious to women's self esteem and self image which are necessary ingredients for the confidence needed in political participation (cited in Yetunde, 2008:331). The issues of marriage institutions especially the polygamous set up, widowhood, child marriage, female circumcision, exorbitant bride price and rejection of wives by husbands because they could not have children are all identified setbacks that prevent the women from active political responsibilities (Yetunde, 2008:331). Based on this, Enemuo (2008: 230) observed that;

Women become conditioned into accepting social debasements of the type associated with widowhood rites and self-imposed abuses of the type that denies female children good food. Even in urban centres and in civilized circles, the stereotype gender-roles make women overplay their femininity by accepting that they are the weaker sex, over-emphasising the dainty nature of their comportment, viewing the ambition of some members of their sex as ominous and regarding exceptional achievements as untoward competition with men.

There seems to be a consensus opinion that Nigerian women constitute about half of the population of the country and thus should play a vital role in the society. Agbalajobi (2010) examining women's participation and the political process in Nigeria, found out that despite the major roles they play and their population, the society has not given recognition to these and to the fact that they are discriminated against. This is due to some cultural stereotype, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures (Agbalajobi, 2010:1). He further explained that Nigerian women have therefore over the years become target of violence of diverse form based on their positions in promoting transformative politics. In this direction Adeniyi (2003:353) identified violence and other forms of electoral conflicts perpetrated and perpetuated by men and male youths as the major barriers confronting and inhibiting women active participation in Nigerian politics. For Enemuo (2008:232) women are regularly exposed to various forms of physical, psychological, sexual and emotional violence.

Adebowale (2012) in looking at women's attitude towards their socio-economic and political empowerment debunked the argument that women do not like to be empowered or that only the educated supports women empowerment. He rather argues that many women desire empowerment but do not appreciate the labour that attends such empowerment; enduring the tortuous path to empowerment is a daunting challenge for them (Adebowale 2012:238). Thus, Agbalajobi (2009:77) contended that women's aspiration to participate in governance is premised on the following ground; first, that women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Secondly, base on natural justice and the fact that all human beings are equal and women possess the same rights as men to participate in governance and public life, the right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law (Agbalajobi:2009). The right to democratic governance seems to have brought to the fore many other areas of concern. Especially in the 21 century that witnessed the emergence of the issue of gender mainstreaming. Presently, the challenges of the new millennium compel everyone to be concerned about the many women who have been deprived, marginalized and discriminated against over the years, and as a result of which many have not been able to participate actively and effectively in the political terrain, which in effect leads to social injustice (Akande, 2006:167).

Arguably, the present empowerment agenda seems incapable of addressing the ever increasing challenges confronting women folk. It is important to note that the provision of conducive environment capable of reawakening women's consciousness to contribute meaningfully and compete favourably to the social, political and economic development may not be realized through empowerment alone. Some practices in politics need to be discarded. For instance, political attitude of demonising hours of political meetings would only compound women's wrong perceptions of politics and as well offers more leverage for male domination. Again, it is assumed that (cultural) women must seek permission from their husband to participate. Also disturbing is the antics of most successful women who appear to be proponent of unjust practices against women. The implication is that it nurtures hatred among women especially the ordinary women on the street, disconnect them from being supportive and places men as preferable alternative. In fact, this disunity has remained a barrier.

However, Luka (2011:30) explained that the underrepresentation of women on the political scene can be reversed by empowering them economically, indeed; increasing the income of women gives them self confidence. According to him:

the link between economic empowerment and quality of lives of women come to the fore as women tend to become more vocal when empowered in making decision on the number of kids they want to have, quality of education for their children, matters of hygiene and the environment to mention a few. Women are also better stewards of economic capital as research has shown that they are more likely than men to plough profit of economic activities into human capital development of children and they are more likely to educate daughters. The implication of this is that more educate women are better suited to participate in decision making process in the society. Women who are empowered economically have less difficulty in playing active roles in politics as they can assert themselves and are unlikely to become pawns in hands of political godfathers with sinister ends in sight (Luka, 2011:30).

In the same view, Atsewuwa (1995: 6) agreed that women are under-represented in decision-making, which

means that decisions on public policies that affect women's lives are still the prerogative of men, who lack the required level of investment to pursue these issues. Following from this, Shvedova (2002:3) observed that "men dominate the political arena; and define the standards for evaluation. The outcome of this dominance and consequent women political under-representation is that it may be grossly difficult if not impossible for few to influence critical decisions that affects women and make fundamental change in the areas that needed attention. Agu (2007:4) posits that the empowerment of women has been recognized as a prerequisite for achieving effective and people – centered development and empowerment strategy. While identifying women empowerment as a precondition for sustainable development, she outlines several criteria and issues that would be addressed if equality through empowerment could be achievable. He explained that there is need to:

- a) increase the access of women to education, not just basic education but at the level that will enable them appropriate the resources in their environment and still contribute effectively to its development;
- b) improve on the quality of their achievement in relevant disciplines;
- c) encourage the women/girls to stay longer in school in order to acquire the necessary skills (retention/persistence); and
- d) accord the girls similar treatment as much as possible in similar circumstance (Agu,2007:5-6).

Chukwuemeka and Eze (2011:226) in a critical appraisal of democratization and women's political space in Nigeria, argues that women marginalization in Nigerian politics is directly related to the issue of poverty. Many development reports and human development index indicate that in most developing nation's women and children are more vulnerable to poverty and misery associated destitution. In Nigeria, poverty seems to have augmented the extent of rivalry and hostility among women, such hostility has reduced drastically their chances of forming a united front that would advance their agitation for a just society. It can be said that the extent of lack and penury among women majorly contributed to low level of participation and subsequently their inability to "man" political and administrative positions in Nigeria.

Arguably, women leaders, activists, women campaigners, sympathisers and scholars have continued to bemoan this insignificant level of gender equity in politics in Nigeria and particularly Abia State with less inward look at the remedies. But clearly seen, it has become also very difficult for women to hold themselves together as a people. The import of this is predisposition and invitation to conflict arising from contestation on who secures a few stipulated offices which implicitly reduces the number of women that succeed in occupying public office. This negates the theory of representation which upholds the equality of all people who are endowed with equal capability to rule. The representative theory banks on the wisdom of the masses and treats their representatives only as their agents or messengers (Guaba, 2005). Thus, representatives are saddled with the duty of translating the judgement of their constituents into concrete policy proposal in lieu of their personal conclusions. Indeed, circumventing democratic practices by preserving offices under the guise of women empowerment erode the spirit of democracy and probably appear diversionary. Women are preoccupied with inward hostility for a slated post rather than collective group effort to advance themselves and empower indigent women among them who are at the receiving end of the prevailing religious, cultural and socio-economic inequalities in the society.

It is important to note that for a group (in this circumstance women) to achieve their political interest, the women need to develop a platform that will serve as a strong interest group that is capable of influencing government policies in their favour and resist the temptation of being boxed into one position. There is no gainsaying the fact that women empowerment campaigners have engaged issues that boarder on cultural, economic, social and political subjugation over the years without much progress. As a result, there is need for a paradigm shift; individualism would be jettisoned for collectivism. Specification of office for the women should be de-emphasised to enable wider aspirations. Women should form a common front and fight as one. It is within this context that women could achieve much needed socio-economic and political equity.

Problematizing Women's Political Participation in Abia State

A critical look at administrative positions in Abia State since the return to democracy in 1999 could compel one

to perceive Abia State as “men’s own State”. Women seem to be disregarded, disengaged in the administrative duties in Abia State. As we have earlier noted that out of 17 local government Chairmen in the State in 1999 there was no woman. In the State House of Assembly, there was also no woman among 24 members in the first tenure (1999-2003). At the national level it took the State eight (8) years to elect one female Senator and that was in 2007. Again, political appointments in the State were male dominated. For instance, the appointments made by Orji Uzor Kalu who was the governor from 1999 to 2007 shows that out of nineteen commissioners only two were women. The records as presented in table 1:

Table 1: List and Portfolios of Commissioners in Abia State under Orji Uzor Kalu Administration

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio
1	Barr. Okey Amaechi	M	Commissioner for Justice
2	Ralph Egbu	M	Commissioner for Information, Culture and Tourism
3	Dr. Mrs Ori Obasi	F	Commissioner for Agriculture
4	Mrs Chinedu Brown	F	Commissioner for Women Affairs
5	Max Ndukwe	M	Commissioner for Education
6	Paul Ikonne	M	Commissioner for Works and Transport
7	Richard Hanson	M	Commissioner for Finance
8	Barr. K. C.Ugboaja	M	Commissioner for Land, Survey and Urban Planning
9	Dr. Sam Achaire	M	Commissioner for Health
10	P. C Mba	M	Commissioner for Sports
11	Ezeogo Emeka Onuoha	M	Commissioner for Environment
12	Benjamin Nwankodo	M	Commissioner for Petroleum and Solid Minerals
13	Emeka Okafor	M	Commissioner for Commerce and Industry
14	Donatus Nwakpa	M	Commissioner for Housing
15	F. A. Akatobi	M	Commissioner for Science and Technology
16	Jonny Ukpabi	M	Commissioner for Public Utilities
17	Uche Iheduwa	M	Commissioner for Youths and Development
18	Chibuzo Ogbuagu	M	Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy
19	Nwaogu A. A.	M	Commissioner for Cooperatives and Poverty Reduction

Source: government house printer Umuahia 2000.

Other critical political appointments in the state do not deviate from the tradition of programmed disempowerment. The principal officers of the government were virtually men and three ministerial appointments and few other strategic appointments from the State were also men. The list is represented table below as:

Table 2: Names of Advisers to Governor Orji Uzor Kalu

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio
1	C.C Ubani	M	Economic Matters
2	Emma Omokwe	M	Legislative Matters
3	Chris Osuagwa	M	Political Matters
4	T. A Orji	M	Chief of Staff
5	Chuka Odom	M	Deputy Chief of Staff/ Special Duties

Source: Adapted from Umuahia Ibeku: an online internet access available on <file:///K:/abia%20major%20list.htm>

Table 3: List of the Principal Officers of the State House Assembly By 1999

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio
1	Stanley Ohajuruka	M	Speaker
2	Emeka Stanley	M	Deputy Speaker
3	Osita Igwe	M	Majority Leader
4	Ndukwe Adindu	M	Minority
5	Chima Ochieze	M	Majority Whip
6	Obioma Ekpem	M	Minority Whip
7	S. O Ulekwu	M	Clerk
8	S. O Ekechukwu	N	Sergeant at Arms

Source: Adapted from Umuahia Ibeku: an online internet access available on <file:///K:/abia%20major%20list.htm>

Table 4: List of Senators from Abia State Between 1999 to 2011

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio and Year
1	John Nwanna	M	Senator 1999-2003
2	Adolphus Wabara	M	Senator 1999-2003
3	Ike Nwachukwu	M	Senator 1999-2003
4	Chris Adighije	M	Senator 2003-2007
5	Adolphus Wabara	M	Senator 2003-2007
6	Uche Chukwumerije	M	Senator 2003-2007
7	Nkechi Nwaogu	F	Senator 2007-2011
8	Enyinnaya Abribe	M	Senator 2007-2011
9	Uche Chukwumerije	M	Senator 2007-2011

Source: compiled by the researchers

Table 5: List of the Members of the House of Representatives from 1999-2011

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio	Year
1	Iheanacho Obioma	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
2	Njoku Nnamdi	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
3	Uchechukwu Maduako	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
4	Arukwe Ohuabunwa	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
5	Eze A Enwereuzor	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
6	Macebuh Chinonyerem	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
7	Nwakanwa Chimaobi	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
8	Clifford Ohiagu	M	House of Representatives	1999-2003
9	Nkechi Nwaogu	F	House of Representatives	2003-2007
10	Atuma Emeka	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
11	Mba Ajah	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
12	Uchechukwu Maduako	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
13	Arukwe Ohuabunwa	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
14	Nnnanna Uzor Kalu	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
15	Macebuh Chinonyerem	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
16	Anayo Ozurumba	M	House of Representatives	2003-2007
17	Stanley Ohajuruka	M	House of Representatives	2007-2011
18	Nnenna Ukeje	F	House of Representatives	2007-2011
19	Nkiru Onyejiocha	F	House of Representatives	2007-2011
20	Chinwe Ubani	F	House of Representatives	2007-2011

21	Chineye Ike	F	House of Representatives	2007-2011
22	Nduma Kanu	M	House of Representatives	2007-2011
23	Uzor Kalu	M	House of Representatives	2007-2011
24	Uzoma Abonta	M	House of Representatives	2007-2011

Source: compiled by the researchers

Table 6: Names of Strategic Federal Appointment from Abia State under Uzor Kalu's Leadership

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio
1	Ojo Maduekwe	M	Minister
2	Vincent Ogbulafor	M	Minister
3	Onyema Ugochukwu	M	NDDC Chairman
4	Engr. Emeka Ebila	M	Executive Secretary INEC

Source: Adapted from Umuahia Ibeku: an online internet access available on <file:///K:/abia%20major%20list.htm>

Indeed, these strings of encouraging low participation or rather women under representation in the areas of leadership positions in Abia State continue even in the present dispensation. The appointments in the Theodor Orji led administration in Abia State also reflected same character of conscious disengagement of women in the policy process. Presently only two women were appointed. The list of the commissioners is as follows:

Table 7: Names of the Commissioners in Abia State under the Administration of Theodore Orji

No	Names	Sex	Portfolio
1	Don .A. Ubani	M	Commissioner for Petroleum
2	Ike Onyenwaku	M	Commissioner for Agriculture
3	Dr. Mrs O. M. Philips	F	Commissioner for Education
4	Vitalis Nwankwo	M	Commissioner for Public Utilities
5	Donatus Okorie	M	Commissioner for Urban Renewal
6	Mrs Joy .U. Alozie	F	Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development
7	Mgbeahuru K. O.	M	Commissioner for Works
8	Orji J. O.	M	Commissioner for Housing
9	Engr. Solomon Araelu	M	Commissioner for Rural Development and Poverty Reduction
10	Solomon Ogunji	M	Commissioner for Environment
11	Barr. Charles Nwafor	M	Commissioner for Science and Technology
12	Barr. O. M. Ochiobi	M	Commissioner for Sports
13	Barr. Henry Balogu	M	Commissioner for Culture and Tourism
14	Barr. Akujiobi Nkoro	M	Commissioner for Youths
15	Barr. Umeh Kalu	M	Commissioner for Justice
16	Engr. Emma Nwabuko	M	Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs
17	Sampson Orji	M	Commissioner for Commerce and Industry
18	Okey Nwadiarir	M	Commissioner for Special Duties
19	Ezechikamnyo F. C.	M	Commissioner for Information and Strategy

Source: government house printer Umuahia 2009.

Evidences from the data indicate that thirty eight commissioners were appointed by the former and incumbent governors of the State but only four were women. This represents just 1.3% of the number of executive and political appointments in the State. Thus, between 1999 and 2011 the State elected one female Senator out of nine. Only five members of House of Representatives were female from Abia State from 1999 to 2011. In every spheres of political life in Abia State men assume pre-eminent position. Such masculine leadership posture would arguably not advance the prescriptions of the Beijing affirmative action or put into consideration the

plight of women in policy process. Indeed, it could be asserted that patriarchal nature of Abia State is actually one of the problems that perpetuate administrative imbalances, but more importantly is to note that the act of creating special agencies and offices for women have continued to undermine many empowerment frameworks that aim at advancing their involvement. Consequently, fierce contestation on who occupies such specialised one or two offices limits women's focus and ensued disunity. This to a greater extent explains why no woman won elections in the State House of Assembly, National Assembly and local government council's in Abia State in 1999. It has also made some women to prefer male candidates in lieu of their fellow women. Beyond these problems, there is need for awareness which will draw government attention to realize that the present empowerment agenda has metamorphosed into disempowerment strategy by many governments (including Abia State). It is on these bases that the trend of ceding few cabinet positions to women as presently practice would be seen as an instrument of disempowerment that must be discouraged if women advocates, campaigners and sympathizers are to make any head way.

Conclusion

From our analysis so far, it has been established that women are actually marginalized in Abia State. We also observed that there are already existing frameworks globally (Abia State inclusive) for gender equality and women empowerment. However, we noted that there is need for a paradigm shift from the hitherto methods and approaches which focus on empowerment. This is because beyond the issues of patriarchy, tradition and religion, the study discovered that designation of specific political positions is one of the major issues responsible for the maintenance and perpetuation of women's marginalization and low zeal for political positions in Abia State. This explains why women hardly win any contested political or administrative positions in spite of their numerical advantage. Based on this, the paper recommends a total review of empowerment programmes and approaches in which emphasis would be laid more on education and re-orientation rather than specific designation of few positions. There is also need to revert the trend of demonising hours of political meetings to encourage women participation.

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