The Nature and Weighting of Major Determinants of Women Participation in Policy Process in Nigeria: Evidence from Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors responsible for the very low number of women participating in policy process in Akwa-Ibom, Nigeria. Stratified random sampling was used in this study for the purpose of separating the respondents into educated (HND/B.Sc. and above) and less educated. Responses from educated respondents were used in this study. Data were collected by distributing and retrieving 900 questionnaires across the three senatorial districts of the state (300 in each senatorial district). The various factors tested were economic, cultural, physical, mental, psychological, religion and ideology. Frequency distribution statistics is used to analyze data obtained. It was found that 66% of respondents considered economic factor as most responsible for the low number of women participating in policy processes in Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria.

1.0. Introduction

Gender refers to the social meanings associated with being male or female, including the construction of identities, expectations, behaviour and power relationships that derive from social interaction. Those identities, practices and inequalities are, in turn, embodied in the social roles of women and men, in gender relations and in gender hierarchies (power relations between women and men) (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Scott, 1986). Gender is derived from social relations and cannot be seen as fixed and invariant over time and space, differing in this respect from the term "sex" which refers to the biological attributes of women and men.

The term "gender" acknowledges that ideologies, behaviours and practices with respect to women and men are socially learned and that gender norms, practices and hierarchies vary within regions, across societies and time, and are subject to change. It also recognizes that such norms, practices and hierarchies may intersect with other socially constructed categories, such as those of race, ethnicity and/or class. In addition, relations of power — the capacity to control or influence others — are key elements in the social construction of gender. Asymmetrical relations of power between men and women exist because of prevailing gender norms and practices. However, the asymmetries are also embedded in societal institutions, ranging from the family and the educational system to the political and economic systems and the legal system. They are associated with unequal access to resources, diminished social and economic status, vulnerability to abuse and violence, and reduced life chances. Women are usually disadvantaged relative to men.

Women constitute a significant proportion of any country's population. In most countries however, women contribute much less than men towards the value of recorded production both quantitatively in labour force participation and qualitatively in educational achievement and skilled manpower (Lawanson, 2008). Traditionally, women are regarded as homemakers, who oversee and coordinate the affairs and activities at home. Previously in Africa, women remained at home while their husbands and sons went out to the farm to work (Oladejo et al., 2011). A lot has changed with time, as we can see around us today.

In Nigeria today, however, women are excluded from certain occupational categories due to formal barriers as well as informal barriers to entry. The formal barriers which continue to hinder the entry of women into such occupational categories include: (i) lack of educational or technical training, and (ii) labour laws and trading customs. The informal barriers include: (i) customs and religious practices, (ii) difficulties in combining domestic and labour market activities, (iii) management and worker attitudes, (Lawanson, 2008). These conditions have entrenched the women in a vicious cycle of poverty that places them at a less advantageous position in terms of income and resource empowerment. Few Nigerian women are engaged in top management cadre of formal sector establishments simply because majority of them lack the educational qualifications necessary for such positions. Women including farmers are frequently underestimated and overlooked in development strategies (Oladejo et al., 2011).

Sustainable development combines economic development, social development, and environmental protection with full respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms (UN-Habitat, 2005). Gender interactions between humans and their physical environments, with particular attention to the environmental, economic, social, cultural, and human biological changes that are associated with development are at the root of sustainable development. Gender power differentials manifest in the ownership and control of natural resources; dependence on the physical environment for livelihood, security and other needs; exposure to environmental contaminants; alignment in political participation and decision making among others. The term "gender" refers to economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female (UN-Habitat, 2003). In almost all societies, women and men differ in their activities and undertakings, regarding access to and control over resources, and participating in decision-making.

Lack of fair representation of women in the policy process in Nigeria is a problem to society which must be solved, and is the focus of this research. Despite their contribution to Nigeria's and the global economy (both formally and informally), women are frequently underestimated and overlooked in development strategies. Women's substantial contribution continues to be under-valued in conventional economic analyses and policies, while men's contribution remains the central, often sole focus of attention (Fabiyi *et al.,* 2007). Damisa and Yohanna (2007) stated that the role of women in economic production in Nigeria can never be underestimated. They perform crucial roles in the domestic and economic life of the society. National developments can hardly be achieved with the neglect of this important and substantial segment of the society. Yet, the number of women in policy processes in Nigeria remain very low in comparison to their actual number in the population, and contribution to the national economy both in formal and informal sectors. This is a problem which this research seeks to recommend solution for.

1.1. Objective

1. To determine the major factors responsible for the low level of participation of women in policy process in Nigeria.
2. To determine the ranking of those factors in their order of importance

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the major factors responsible for the low level of participation of women in policy process in Nigeria?
2. What is the ranking of those factors in their order of importance?

2.0. Literature Review

As women's contributions toward a strong and vibrant society are increasingly well documented, there is also growing understanding of why women's meaningful participation is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Women's political participation results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace.

Women's meaningful participation in politics affects both the range of policy issues that are considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. Research indicates that a legislator's gender has a distinct impact on policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalized citizens and help improve the responsiveness of policy-making and governance. And as more women reach leadership positions within their political parties, these parties tend to prioritize issues that impact health, education and other quality of life issues. There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a

corollary increase in policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Women's political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen's lives (Wollack, 2010).

In places as diverse as Timor-Leste, Croatia, Morocco, Rwanda and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers led to legislation related to antidiscrimination, domestic violence, family codes, inheritance, and child support and protection. Only five years after the women's suffrage movement achieved the rights of women to vote and run for office in Kuwait, newly elected female legislators this year introduced new labor laws that would give working mothers mandatory nursing breaks, and provide onsite childcare for companies with more than 200 employees.

Women lawmakers tend to see "women's" issues more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities; and more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups (Camissa and Reingold, 2004). Women lawmakers, therefore, have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs. Women are deeply committed to peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and have a unique and powerful perspective to bring to the negotiating table. Women often suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilization, reconstruction and the prevention of further conflict. Peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better chance of long-term success when women are involved (Chinkin, 2003). Furthermore, establishing sustainable peace requires transforming power relationships, including achieving more equitable gender relations (Strickland and Duvvury, 2003). Women's peace groups in Uganda, for example, have used conflict resolution training to successfully reduce the level of violence in their communities. In the face of strong resistance from male leaders, women have established cross-community coalitions to open up dialogue and are operating centers to rehabilitate former girl abductees and child soldiers (International Crisis Group, 2006). Women's leadership and conflict resolution styles often embody democratic ideals in that women have tended to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative way than male colleagues (Rosenthal, 2001). Women are also more likely to work across party lines, even in highly partisan environments. Since assuming 56 percent of the seats in the Rwandan parliament in 2008, women have been responsible for forming the first cross-party caucus to work on controversial issues such as land rights and food security. They have also formed the only tripartite partnership among civil society and executive and legislative bodies to coordinate responsive legislation and ensure basic services are delivered (Powley, 2003).

Around the world, women lawmakers are often perceived as more honest and more responsive than their male counterparts, qualities that encourage confidence in democratic and representative institutions. In a study of 31 democratic countries, the presence of more women in legislatures is positively correlated with enhanced perceptions of government legitimacy among both men and women (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). When women are empowered as political leaders, countries often experience higher standards of living with positive developments in education, infrastructure and health, and concrete steps being taken to help make democracy deliver. Using data from 19 member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), researchers found that an increase in women legislators results in an increase in total educational expenditure (Chen, 2008). In India, research showed that West Bengal villages with greater representation of women in local councils saw an investment in drinking water facilities that was double that of villages with low levels of elected women, and that the roads there were almost twice as likely to be in good condition. The study also revealed that the presence of a woman council leader reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 percentage points (Beaman, 2007).

As the international community continues to give recognition to women's historic exclusion from structures of power, researchers are busy studying the phenomenon from different perspectives. The intrinsic apologists of female political participation argued that since female constitute half of the world population, it is fundamentally right they should have equal participation and representation in politics. The instrumentalist apologists are of the opinion that they should have greater participation and representation because of their female values like care and tender nature (Ademiluyi and Adedamola, 2010).

According to a report by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations published in 2006 titled "2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development", a gender perspective is essential to understanding both the causes and consequences of an issue(s) of economic importance. For example, Migrant

women play a part in the economic development of both their country of destination and their country of origin through financial contributions from remittances, the improvement of their own skills or their contribution to the improvement of the education and skills of the next generation (UN, 2006). This situation/phenomenon is applicable to any other sector of the economy of most nations including Nigeria.

The development of a nation and establishment of a just, equitable, balanced, viable, healthy, and prosperous society depends, to a large extent, on the full and active participation of women in the political deliberations and key economic activities of that nation, beyond the window-dressing of featuring in the fanfare at political rallies and similar events. It is, therefore, arguable that addressing the issues surrounding women's inclusion in public life is key to the emergence of an economically sustainable society (Duke, 2010; Pitten, 1980; Damisa and Yohanna, 2007; Ehanire-Danjuma, 2005).

While there have been attempts by researchers in the past to study women's participation in political and policy processes in Nigeria and sub-saharan Africa (Agbalajobi, 2010; Duke, 2010; Ehanire-Danjuma, 2005), little has been done in the area of ascertaining the major determinants of women participation in policy process in Nigeria, and the weighting of those factors responsible relative to each other. This is the gap this research intends to fill.

2.1. International Policy Framework for Women

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, drew attention to the persisting inequality between men and women in decision-making. The Beijing Platform for Action reaffirmed that women's persistent exclusion from formal politics, in particular, raises a number of specific questions regarding the achievement of effective democratic transformations, in practice. It undermines the concept of democracy, which, by its nature, assumes that the right to vote and to be elected should be equally applied to all citizens, both women and men. The absence of women from political decision-making has a negative impact on the entire process of democratization. In addition, democratic institutions, including parliament, do not automatically achieve gender equality in terms of representation, or in terms of policy agenda setting and accountability.

The Beijing Platform for Action emphasized that "women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the perspective of women at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved" (Para 181). The Beijing Platform for Action defined two strategic objectives in its critical area of concern on women in power and decision-making:

• To ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making;

• To increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

The following measures were recommended by the Beijing Platform for Action for the implementation of the first strategic objective: to achieve gender-balanced composition in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administration and in judiciary, including through setting specific targets and, if necessary, establishing a positive action policy; to integrate women into elective positions in political parties; to promote and protect women's political rights; and to reconcile work and family responsibilities for both men and women.

For the second strategic objective, the Platform for Action recommended the organization of leadership and gender awareness training; the development of transparent criteria for decision making positions; and the creation of a system of mentoring. To accelerate the implementation of action in these areas, the Commission on the Status of Women, at its forty-first session in 1997, adopted Agreed Conclusions (1997/2), which emphasized that attaining the goal of equal participation of men and women in decision-making was important for strengthening democracy and achieving the goals of sustainable development.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Most researches on political participation treat participation as a dependent variable or outcome, and seeks to identify factors that account for the level and type of participation in which individuals engage (Stewart et al., 1998). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) developed the mobilization theoretical approach. They argued that socioeconomic status influences *who* participates, but that mobilization by political elites drives *when* and *how* they participate. The mobilization theoretical approach is adopted for this study. Their argument is that although socio economic status determines who participates in politics (and policy process) but mobilization by political elites

drives when and how they participate. In the Nigerian context, it is generally found that women's socio-economic status is generally lower than that of men, which could possibly account for their low participation, and in addition, the political elites mobilize the male gender into political (and policy processes) offices to the detriment of female gender. Mobilization theoretical framework regardless of whatever weakness associated to it, enables us gain useful insight with respect to the underpinning logic that precludes the female gender in participating in policy process in Nigeria.

3.0. Methodology

3.1. Study Area

This study focuses on Akwa-Ibom State of Nigeria. Akwa-Ibom State is located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It has a population of 3,920,208 and a land area of 6,900 sq Km. It is located between latitudes 4°N 32' and 5°N 33' north and longitudes 7°E 25' and 8°E 25' east (AKSG Online, 2012). It comprises 31 local government areas. Uyo is state capital. The three senatorial districts namely Akwa-Ibom North East, Akwa-Ibom North West and Akwa-Ibom South were used for the purpose of this study.

3.2. Data Source

Primary data was used for the purpose of this research. Primary data was obtained by the use of questionnaire as the instrument. 900 Questionnaire were distributed to cover the three senatorial districts of the state (i.e. 300 in each senatorial district). Respondents were carefully to reflect unbiasedness (equal number of male and female respondents in each senatorial district). Educated persons who can relate with the subject matter (i.e. people with HND/B.Sc. and above) were used as respondents from whom data were gotten. Four options (factors) were on the questionnaire from which the respondent will chose the factor which he considers the most responsible for the low number of women participating in policy process in Akwa-Ibom State Nigeria.

3.3. Sample size

Sample size of 900 was used in this research. This size was adopted to make the sample representative. 300 questionnaires were distributed to and retrieved from educated persons in each of the three (3) senatorial districts.

3.4. Sampling Technique

Stratified random sampling is used for the purpose of this study. Possible respondents are divided into 2 strata: 1. Educated, and 2. Less educated. The educated stratum (which represents people with HND/B.Sc. and above) was used for this study. Among educated folks, random sampling was used to obtain to obtain respondents.

3.5. Analytical Technique

Descriptive statistics is used for the purpose of this study. In this technique, the frequency and percentage of factors tested are reported, and from that result is drawn on the objective of the study.

4.0. Result

Table 1: Frequency Distribution showing Response of Respondents to Each Tested Factor

4.1. Discussion

From the result above, it is obvious from respondents that economic factor is judged most responsible (70.6% of respondents interviewed making 594 of 900 respondents) for the low number of women participating in policy process in Akwa-Ibom State of Nigeria. Cultural factor is next in the order, 180 respondents (20% of respondents interviewed) considered cultural factors to be the most responsible. Physical factor is third on the list with 90 respondents of 900 (10% of respondents interviewed). Fourth on the list is mental with 30 respondents of 900 (3% of respondents interviewed). Fifth on the order is Religion with 10 out of 900 respondents (1% of respondents interviewed). Psychological and ideological factors reported nil each among the 900 respondents interviewed (0% for each of them).

The findings of this study therefore reported the order of factors determining participation of women in policy process in Nigeria as follows in their order of importance from the greatest to the least: economic, cultural, physical, mental, religion, psychological/ideological. The findings of this study proved to be in tandem with the positions of Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) theory of mobilization approach. Their argument is that although socio

economic status determines who participates in politics (and policy process) but mobilization by political elites drives when and how they participate. In the Nigerian context, it is generally found that women's socio economic status is generally lower than that of men, which could possibly account for their low participation, and in addition, the political elites mobilize the male gender into political (and policy processes) offices. The findings of this study indeed shows that socioeconomic status determines who participates in politics (and policy process).

Agbalajobi (2010) in another study stated that the customary practices of many contemporary societies are biased by subjugating women to men and undermining their self-esteem. The overall impact of gender bias, cultural norms and practices has entrenched a feeling of inferiority in women and place them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterpart in the socio-political scene even in urban centers. These socially constructed norms and stereotype roles make women overplay their 'feminity' by accepting that they are 'weaker sexes', overemphasizing the dainty nature of their sex and regarding exceptional achievement as masculine. For example, most customs often prefer sending the male child to school over the female, who is expected to nurture siblings and to be married off. This marginally increases the illiterate women and stiffens their competition with their male counterparts in politics. These were found to be in line with findings of this study.

5.0. Conclusion

It is obvious that though the Constitution of Nigeria gives women equal right to hold political offices and participate in policy process, both at state and federal level, the reality on ground shows it is not so. This is due to the economic reality and cultural factors (though unofficial) that render women less significant than men, in terms of roles and position-holding in the policy process of the country. This accounts for the relatively lower socioeconomic status of women, and consequent low rate of their mobilization by the political elites for political duties and policy process duties in Akwa-Ibom.

It is clear from the findings of this study that the determinants of women participation in policy process in Nigeria in the ranking of relative importance are as follows: Economic, Cultural, Physical, Mental and Religion. Since economic factor is found to be strongest, the question then is how can women be helped to come to point of equal economic status with men? This may be the permanent solution to this disparity. One option probably the best is education. The use of quotas can be adopted to balance (or at least mitigate) this inequality. These are generally seen as a positive action of laws allocating quotas (a specified minimum) for women to gender balance in public life. Quotas are considered as a legitimate means of securing this end.

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Appendix

Table 1: Frequency Distribution showing Response of Respondents to Each Tested Factor

FACTORS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Economic	594	66
Cultural	180	20
Physical	90	10
Mental	30	3
Religion	10	1
Psychological	--	--
ideological	--	--
TOTAL	**900**	**100**

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