

## Female Representation In Nigeria: The Case Of The 2011 General Elections And The Fallacy Of 35% Affirmative Action.

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### ABSTRACT

Women participation in politics in Nigeria is a thing of concern to many because of the continuous low record of female representation after elections. Whereas men occupy large number of seats in elections women are constantly left with few positions. The 2011 general elections with all the promises it held for women, at the end scored one of the lowest female representations in the history of elections in the country. This came in spite of the 35 percent affirmative action and the huge campaign of the Women for Change Initiatives aimed at providing a soft landing for women in the elections. The obstacles to women empowerment are numerous and as many have agreed, they gained root from the colonial leadership. Since then there has always been a consistent blanket of silence on the issue of female representation that negates the traditional importance of women in the Nigerian society before colonialism. Nigerian women traditionally play salient roles including political leadership, as complementary effort to that of their male folk.

This paper therefore critically reviews the issue of political leadership in Nigeria and the position of women especially during and after the 2011 general elections. It surveys in retrospect activities of women in the pre and post-colonial Nigeria. It also offers recommendations towards solving the identified traditional and social factors that inhibit women from political office.

**Keywords:** Female representation, gender parity, 35% Affirmative action, 2011 general elections and pre/post-colonial role of Nigerian women.

### 1. Introduction

The 2011 general elections in Nigeria recorded a sharp drop in women representation, in spite of the numbers that came out for various elective positions. Nigerian women before the elections were highly motivated by the promises and measures taken by the federal government to lessen the difficulties they usually face in past polls. The measures which include the enforcement of the National Gender Policy that came into existence on 15 August 2008, with the promise of providing women 35% affirmative action, was expected to offer them the chance to compete with the men and capture a good number of their aspired positions. The Nigerian Women Trust Fund inaugurated on 24 March 2011 in Abuja by the Ministry of Women and Social Development also offered a launch pad for female candidates at the poll. The 100 million naira Trust Fund was set up to help offset the campaign costs of about 230 female aspirants no matter their political parties.

In addition to these was the activity of the office of the wife of the president, Dame Patience Jonathan directed to the achievement of the political ambitions of Nigerian women in the 2011 elections. The first lady at the peak of the campaigns rolled out her programme, Women for Change Initiatives. The programme is aimed at encouraging and promoting the political ambition of Nigerian women as well as their socio-economic wellbeing. To display her seriousness Mrs. Jonathan embarked on rigorous tour of the 36 states of the federation, prodding the women to come out and make history. The zeal with which the president's wife carried the message of change bolstered the hopes of many women who came to the venues carrying placards declaring their intentions to contest a number of political positions.

Moreover, the fact that the Women for Change Initiatives rode on the presumed efficacy of the 35 % affirmative action, because of the president's sincerity in its implementation, left no doubt of its practicability in the minds of the thousands of women that obeyed the clarion call. Sadly for the women, the result of the elections after the much touted 35% affirmative action believed to bring about gender parity showed a complete decline after all the positive efforts made since 1999. The fact that "Nigeria has yet to achieve gender parity in political representation at the national level, let alone meet the target it set in the NGP"<sup>1</sup>, emphasizes the position of Nigerian women as second class citizens in the nation's politics as in every relation with men. After all the promises made women are still underrepresented.

## 2. WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE AT THE 2011 ELECTION.

The dismal performance of women in 2011 election (both the new entrants and those that were already occupying elective offices before 2011 and wished for a second tenure like their male counterparts) indicates that a lot have to be done if they must effectively transcend political power in Nigeria. The 2011 election was widely monitored by both Nigerian and International election monitoring bodies and this removed the element of bias in their collective judgment of the election as the lowest in female representation.

In a review of women's participation and performance during the elections, Favour Irabor (2011) noted that women aspirants were more and audacious in 2011 unlike in 1999, 2003 and 2007<sup>2</sup>. The total number of aspirants both men and women were 3306, with 3004 (90%) male and 302 (9.1%) female candidates. The increased number notwithstanding the women could not beat their 2007 performance.

In the 2007 elections about 1200 women entered the contest, 660 won the primaries while 93 emerged winners. Out of these winners 6 were deputy governors, 9 senators, 27 members of the House of Representatives and 52 won the State House of Assembly seats<sup>3</sup>. Even though this result was a great leap at that time and given the poor presence of women in the nation's politics, it did not fill the yawning gap. The most important political seat after the Presidency is the Legislature because of their important role of enacting laws of the land. However, with more men in that position, laws affecting issues of gender will always remain inequitable. The general believe among female politicians in Nigeria is that if more women are elected into the National Assembly, they would encourage and help in making laws against most of the problems retarding their progress. Many therefore bemoan the National Assembly result of 2011 where only 7 women emerged winners in the Senate out of the 109 members and 19 female representations in the House of Representatives out of the 360 elected members.

Moreover, only one woman emerged as a presidential candidate. This calls to mind the pathetic spot Sara Jubril (the only female presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party at the Party's primaries) found herself during the party's presidential primaries nomination. She contested for the Party's presidential nomination ticket with President Goodluck Jonathan (that was his first attempt to the position by ballot) and former Vice President Atiku Abubarka. Mrs. Jubril lost woefully, she had no supporters and the only vote she got was the one she cast for herself. Many see her inability to match the spending power of her opponents as the greatest challenge Nigerian women face in politics. The reign of political godfathers in Nigeria who bankroll anointed sons (always male) and do everything including buying votes to make sure they win, means that women will always come last. Women are yet to have a lot of money with which to earn the sobriquet 'political godmothers' to be able to sponsor their political daughters.

The British Council (2012) report further reveals that women lost some of the ground they gained in 1999 at the 2011 elections. It noted that the low percentage of women elected to various positions in the 2011 polls especially in the House of Representatives where women recorded a mere 9%, has earned the nation 118 position out 192 countries in terms of gender parity. The 9% representation of women lawmakers in the lower House puts Nigerian women representatives far lower than their counterparts from South Africa (43%) and Rwanda (65%).<sup>4</sup> This collaborates the findings of the European Union on the elections that the performance of women in the National Assembly was "a downward trend in comparison to 2007 elections...women were generally represented as voters and among polling workers".<sup>5</sup> The report reiterates the already known roles of women during elections that men are comfortable with which establishes women as active participants in the success of their male counterparts during elections.

It is regrettable that although women constitute the greater number of registered voters in any of the elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to experience full representative positions. The role women play during the electioneering campaign and voting processes therefore demands that they be allowed to partake in leadership positions for their sacrifices to the success of the various political parties at the polls. Political appointments, supplementary seats in the National Assembly and enabling constitutional amendments to safeguard women's positions have been suggested as alternatives to female elective positions.<sup>6</sup> These will remove from them the pressure of competing with the men and allow more women to be involved in policy making. Abike Dabiri-Erewa, a member of the Federal House of Representatives, who was elected into office in 2007 and regained her seat in 2011, believes that it is a far better option. Politics to her is male dominated and "appointive positions are better than elective positions".<sup>7</sup>

Appointive positions apart from giving women the freedom to participate in the politics of the nation, will also reduce the unequal gender ratio where men surpass women at all times. The political analyst, Bisi Alabi Williams sees the 35% affirmative action as uneven while blaming the failure of elective positions for women in

Nigeria on the “difficult terrain of politics and the domineering attitude of the male folk” apart from representation in elections, having women in appointive positions also helps to balance the equation.<sup>8</sup> Given the results of the elections of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 which glaringly demonstrate that women in Nigeria are underrepresented, the above alternatives seem to be the best for the realization of gender parity in governance.

### 3. TABLES ILLUSTRATING FEMALE REPRESENTATION FROM 1999-2011.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1: Women Elected to Public Office in Nigeria 1999-2011.**

Office	1999		2003		2007		2011	
	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women
President	P	0		0	1	0	1	0
Senate	109	3(2.8)	109	4(3.7)	109	9(8.3)	109	7(6.4)
House of Reps	360	7(1.9)	360	21(5.8)	360	27(7.5)	360	25(6.9)
Governor	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
State House of Assembly CSHA	990	24(2.4)	990	40(3.9)	990	57(5.8)	990	68(6.9)
SHA Committees Chairpersons	829	18(2.2)	881	32(3.6)	887	52(5.9)	887	—
L.G.A Chairpersons	710	13(1.8)	774	15(1.9)	740	27(3.6)	740	—
Councilors	6368	69(1.1)	6368	267(42)	6368	235(3.7)	6368	

**Table 2: Women Elected to Political Office by Region (Nigeria)**

2011	Governor	Senate	House of Reps	State House of Assembly
North-Central	0	1	2	15
North-East	0	1	4	4
North-West	0	1	1	2
South-East	0	2	6	21
South-South	0	1	4	12
South-West	0	1	8	15

**Table 3: Participation by Gender in Elections by April 2011(Nigeria).**

Office Contested	Gender		Total
	Female Candidates	Male Candidates	
2011			
Presidents	1(0)	19(1)	20
Vice presidents	3(0)	17(1)	20
Governor	13(0)	340(36)	353
Deputy governor	58(1)	289(35)	347
House of reps	220(19)	2,188(341)	2408
senatorial	90(7)	800(102)	890

The numbers in bracket represent elected candidates.

#### **4. THE EFFECT OF COLONIALISM ON NIGERIAN WOMEN**

That political leadership in Nigeria is not favorable to women is a fact that started to emerge with the colonial government. Colonialism brought many changes in the African traditional society especially in the role of women. Whereas the Western society at the time of colonization shielded women from the socio-economic and political affairs of that society, African women on the other hand were integral part of all the aspects of their society. Colonization however displaced African women from these roles by hounding them to the home front while their male counterparts were empowered through education and leadership positions. Hunter (1973:94) asserts that the contact with Europe adversely affects African women who had always been strong participants in the different sectors of their society:

But since the era of colonialism, women have been placed on the lower rungs of the proverbial ladder by the dominant forces of capitalism and now globalization, which emphasizes the need for power, superiority and compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with different values attached to them.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years, with the leadership of the country in the hands of nationals including the periods under Military rule, Nigerian women fared less in politics. Women operated on the margin during the many years of military rule. The then Arm Forces Ruling Council had no female member but democracy with the expected freedom it offered reassured Nigerian women to join politics in 1999. It is pertinent to note here that the World Women Beijing Conference of 1995 drew the attention of Nigerian women to their rights. Part of the fulcrum of the Beijing Conference was to:

Ensure women's participation in power structures and decision making; develop education and training to increase women's capacity to participate in decision making and leadership; and aim at gender balance in government bodies and composition of delegation to the United Nations.<sup>11</sup>

Although the political rights of women in Nigeria was not in contention before 1995 since it is fully entrenched in the nation's constitution, implementing it to the fullest to give women fair and equal rights remained a problem. In spite of the remarkable change from 1995 till date, Nigerian women are yet to attain that level of political participation that would bring significant difference in elections.

#### **5. WHY WOMEN FAIL IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA.**

There is a general perception towards political leadership in Nigeria as the preserve of men. Traditionally men are born leaders and this has affected the notion of who should be the effective and right candidate in various political posts. The stakes against women are legion because, apart from the issue of men being heads of families, so many other taboos are invoked by men to scare women away from contesting political positions. It is very difficult for a married woman to participate in politics without people casting aspersion on her person as promiscuous. A husband's consent must be obtained and his relatives consulted before a woman enters into politics. An unmarried woman venturing into politics is simply inviting public scrutiny to her private and personal life. Political opponents will accuse her of sleeping with all the party stalwarts to win. In addition, the nocturnal hours politicians keep in strategizing and mapping out campaigns deter women from effectively following the electioneering process. Most times meetings are called for in unholy hours when they are expected to take care of their children and homes. The ones that brave it to the venues are booed and taunted by opponents as shameless women.

Majority of the people in Nigeria believe that no decent woman can play politics without compromising their virtue; all the women that go into it are seen as women of easy virtue even when they are married. Women themselves see the name calling and odd hours fixed for meetings as schemes hatched by the men to remove them from the happenings in the political circle.<sup>12</sup> This attitude of the society creates a sense of apathy in the women and explains the reason why they are more comfortable as voters, 'mobilizers', praise singers and supporters to male candidates.

Even when all these challenges have been met the women's greatest test is in financing their ambition. To play politics in Nigeria money becomes more important than the political supporters. With money a candidate can buy overwhelming number of supporters few minutes to voting. Again, none of the women can match the men in money politics. Many female aspirants during the 2011 elections were abandoned by their supporters because they could not match the men in money politics. Finance determines a lot in any elections in Nigeria and men are way ahead of women in financial stability. Here again we are confronted with the effect of colonialism on women who received

education late. Colonialism favored the education of men than women and this accounts for the position of men in almost all the sectors of development in the Nigerian society.

Another reason women fail is the incidence of violence during elections. There has never been any recorded history of elections in Nigeria without reports of violence. The 2011 general elections witnessed high level of political violence that caused the death of many. The security agencies failed to provide proper protection of the electoral process. Political violence has therefore forced many women to pull out of the race, and some in most cases quit politics prematurely. The activities of political thugs intensify during the voting process and they are the main reason vote jacking exist. It is at this level that violence becomes imminent, because whoever grabs the ballot box determines the winner. Female candidates of the various political parties at this point scamper to safety leaving the field to the men who sponsor those thugs. Female voters are also intimidated into casting their votes for the wrong candidates especially in the rural areas where many are not educated. Political parties have also come under the hammer of critics for their lack of internal democracy and their inability to reduce the charges of nomination forms which compounds the difficulties female candidates face.

In addition, apart from the above challenges directly caused by others, Nigerian women when it comes to politics, lack the spirit of sisterhood which seriously militates against their struggle for political relevance. Traditionally Nigerian women are known for drawing strength from one another especially when it comes to issues that affect their collective interest. Unfortunately that unity of purpose is not found among women during elections, they are more interested in campaigning for men than lending support to one another. The above factors are among the numerous problems women face in Nigeria and unless they are dealt with, women would continue to experience hurdles in their political aspirations.

## **6. THE LEADSHIP ROLES OF WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL NIGERIA.**

The Nigerian society like all societies of the world is patriarchal, yet the traditional role of the Nigerian woman is not that of a homemaker who sits at home and waits for the man to cater for all the needs of the family. This is because in the semantics of African womanhood there is no word like 'housewife', rather both men and women work together for the betterment of their families and society at large. The history of the Nigerian traditional society recorded both male and female leaders in the socio-political structures of the society. According to the Encarta Dictionaries, History is "a chronological account of past events of a period or in the life or development of a people, an institution, or a place."<sup>13</sup> That the exploits of African women in the past is not accorded the respect they deserves when issues bordering on the development of the continent are called up, is regrettable. The essence of recounting history is to learn from the past and keep alive the basics of the past for the future. Historians on African history and indeed the world over have failed to raise awareness on the roles of women in the society. Kleinberg (1988) sees it as "one of the scandals of the world which we live that women have been systematically omitted from accounts of the past, it warps history by making it seem as though only men have participated in events thought worthy of preservation".<sup>14</sup>

Women in Nigeria were also part of the past socio- economic and political development of the many ethnic groups that make up the nation. Many dynasties were founded and nurtured by women who determined the fate of kingdoms as well as men. Amina of Zazzau whose mother Queen Bakwa Turunku was the founder of the ancient city of Zazzau (modern day Zaria in Northern Nigeria), inherited her bravery from the later. The story of Queen Amina reminds one of the British Empire and her well beloved 'Virgin Queen', Elizabeth 1. The women were passionate about the enlargement of the territorial borders of their Empires and both remained unmarried to be able to achieve their set goal.

Queen Amina's military bravery invoked songs extolling her as a 'woman as capable as a man'. She is said to have started the famous system of guarding Northern cities by erecting walls that fortify them against enemy invasion. It is a system she adopted in all the conquered cities during her reign. Amina's aim was to enlarge the borders of Zazzau.<sup>15</sup> Neighboring cities like Kano, Katsina, Bauchi and Niger paid tributes to Queen Amina as conquered cities. Her legacies are still celebrated till date especially in the architectural design of city walls in Northern cities.

Traditionally, the Yoruba of South West Nigeria allows women to occupy positions of leadership. Their cultural mores make provisions for women to attain positions where they determine the fate of the entire society. Afonja (1986) explains that although the progenitor of the Yoruba race Oduduwa overstepped his eldest daughters and conferred on their seven younger brothers leadership powers "the monarch was a source of legitimate authority for women either as direct monarch or regent".<sup>16</sup> Such women included Yeyenirewu of Ekiti who ruled between

1511 and 1552 and one time female Ooni of Ife, Luwe. In Egband history records accounts of female traditional rulers three of whom stood out: Tenilade, Erelu and Latoni.

Among all these Yoruba great women, Moremi of Ile Ife remains most popular for her patriotism, heroic acts at saving her people from the rampaging Igbo tribe of the Yoruba. She offered herself to be captured by the Igbo (not the same as the Igbo tribe of South East Nigeria), their tormentors for decades who were thought to be spirits. Moremi left her husband and young child to be freely enslaved in order to spy the secrets of their enemy. Having succeeded in learning the power behind the Igbo invaders, she escaped their hold after warming her way into their trust and discovered that the people of Igbo used dry grasses as camouflage thereby causing their neighbors including Ile Ife to be utterly afraid. Moremi came to her people with this information and advised that the invaders be set ablaze on their next attack. Her people did as she advised and the Igbo were defeated. She also fulfilled her promise of sacrificing to Esimirin a befitting offering if she succeeded. As a result of this, her only son Ela was offered as that sacrifice when the gods rejected other offers made.<sup>17</sup>

Other regions of Nigeria also produced women with outstanding leadership qualities. Queen Kambassa of Bonny, Omu Okwei of Osomari, Emotan of Bini kingdom and Princess Inikpi of Igala all left in their regions footprints that are still indelible. The famous Aba women's Riots of 1929 was the aftermath of the failure of the colonial government to keep women in their presumed natural place which is the home. While it is true that colonialism changed a lot of traditional structures, women then did not expect that their way of economic sustenance would be disorganized. Farming being traditionally the main occupation of men and women is the basis for trade and both businesses are done side by side by the sexes. Little wonder it came as a shock to the women when the colonial leaders tried to drive them to the kitchen so to say as full time housewives. Their refusal however attracted the introduction of heavy taxes on women and their goods, a step aimed at discouraging them from trading. That measure at curbing their financial freedom brought many conflicts of interest. From Oloko in Umuahia the present day Abia state, South East Nigeria, Madam Ikonna Nwanyiukwu mobilized women to revolt against the taxation. Other women traders in Aba the biggest commercial city next to Oloko joined her initiative and the Aba women's Riot of 1929 began. The women through the revolt challenged the colonial mentality of total subjugation of women by men. Madam Ikonna Nwanyiukwu's leadership role in organizing women for the agitation of their rights has been praised as worthy of immortalization as a "symbolic acknowledgement of the historical fact that the famous Aba Women's Riot took off in Oloko".<sup>18</sup> Twenty years after the Aba Women Riot, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti led Egba women traders in Western Nigeria, in another revolt against taxation on women by the colonial authority.<sup>19</sup>

The Aba Women Riot of 1929 and the Egba women revolt of 1949 consequently heralded the first female politicians and activists of modern Nigeria like Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Lady Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Janet Mokelu, Hajia Sawaba Gambo, Lady Olayinka Abayomi, Madam Tinibu, Mrs. Wurola Esan and several others. Contemporary Nigeria has also seen many women building and tapping from the legacies of these past political mothers. They have so far managed to assert their presence in the political dispensations of the nation irrespective of the hurdles on their path. Women like Mrs. J. C Eze, Franca Afoegbua, Alhaja Latifat Okunu, Linda Ikpeazu, Florence Ita-Giwa, Chris Anyanwu, Dora Akunyili, Oby Ezekwesili, Onyeka Owenu, and many others have contributed immensely to the development of political leadership in Nigeria.

That Nigerian women who are imbued with leadership qualities can effectively carry out any political responsibility given to them is not in doubt. The only challenge they face is the apparent lack of trust on the part of the leaders who are men. Nigerian leaders are naturally suspicious of the effectiveness of female political leadership, yet Nigerian women have not failed in any political responsibility given to them. The success of the leadership of former president Olusegun Obasanjo depended to a large extent on the role of the few women that were part of the decision making processes of that administration. Government therefore should remove all the identified challenges women face during elections by formulating enabling policies that are realistic. This will check a repeat of the relapses in female representation as recorded in 2011. Moreover, as the result of the 2011 general elections exposes the level of non inclusion of women in decision making and policy formulations, more appointive positions should be enforced to beef up the number of women in political offices.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The failure of the 35 percent affirmative action puts women representation in the minority thereby relegating issues concerning women and gender equality at the border of our national development. Thus, as the political circle is now heating up for the 2015 elections with each political party strategizing on ways of winning, making gender parity a reality should start through the practice of internal democracy. The achievement of gender parity at party level will

automatically ease the way for women in any position they want. It should be part of the manifestoes of the various political parties. In the other hand the Women themselves need to work together like their predecessors by championing a common front and working towards achieving success in 2015 and beyond. They need to help one another, be there for each other in order to hasten their “dream of gender equality”<sup>20</sup>

In addition, as lack of proper planning contributed to the failure of the 35 percent affirmative action in the 2011 general elections, to forestall a repeat government should plan against its failure in 2015 by making funds available to women and on time. Provisions of adequate security, reduction of late hour meetings as well as bequeathing on female politicians the respect they deserve will yield better result in 2015 elections. Although appointive positions are being advocated for, Nigerian women have the right to vote and be voted for. This therefore calls for more enlightenment programmes, training and support for aspiring female politicians in the form of the UNDP Democratic Governance for Development Project. The project which is part of a five- year US\$80 million project aimed at consolidating and strengthening democracy in Nigeria has trained 2043 female politicians and candidates on how to engage in electoral processes at all levels.<sup>21</sup> Of greater interest is their choice of women in the rural areas with the firm believe that exposing women into mainstream politics must start from the local level. The initiative if undertaken by other NGOs would educate women more and better than the last minute election campaign sensitization programmes undertaken by government and political parties. Finally, until a lot of energy is put in the global fight for gender parity by making elections in Nigeria favorable to women, policies like the 35 percent affirmative action will remain what it was in 2011 general elections - a political fallacy.

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