

Cultural and Socio-political issues: Gender Politics of Military & Civilian;

The Nigerian woman

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ABSTRACT

The pattern of culture and socio-political development in any given society generates peculiar structural inequalities between men and women. This goes a long way in determining the opportunities available to both sexes in the economy, politics, religion, education etc which in turn reinforces the roles played by the sexes in the prevailing culture and socio-political order. Thus paper argues and sheds light on the structural inequalities that exist between men and women in which woman's right are abused is due largely to the patrilineal nature of the society. In Nigeria, Gender politics of military and civilian rule is largely a function of the prevailing and entrenched pattern of human rights practice, the role of the military and political gladiators cannot be overemphasized, which of course is a reflection of the cultural and socio-political values of the Nigerian society.

INTRODUCTION

The constitutional and legal status of women, and women's participation in all level of governance have long been taken as key indicators of the general level of democracy, usually on the basis that since women constitute a historically oppressed and marginalized group and at least half of most national populations, their level of political representation and participation is crucial.

It is important to emphasize that the term gender is not the same thing as sex because while sex refers to physical difference between males and females, gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women. Sex differences are natural, biological and universal while gender differences are cultural and socio-political and vary from society to society. It is on this note that Attoe-Effah Stella (2002) posits that the origin of gender inequality and subsequent abuse of women's rights is not biology as some believed, but the way in which every culture define and evaluate female biology.

The impact of the cultural and socio-political factors on women the world over and Nigeria in particular, could be associated with cases of non-Chalant government (military & civilian) assaults, rape, prostitution etc. in the present era of democratization, it is both theoretically and politically important to access the changes in gender politics accompanying the transition away from military and civilian dictatorship and towards civilian and multi-forms of government with the Nigerian women as our focal point.

WOMEN AND THE NIGERIAN STATE: DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE BABANGIDA YEARS:

This paper posits that British Hegemony deliberately weakened the position of women in the Nigerian society through their introduction and administration of the modern state taking a practice favourable in one segment of the country; they applied it to the whole country. The seclusion of Muslim women in the purdah was seen as the natural exclusion of women from the public sector and the total reliance of women on men. This was a wrong conception of the position of all women in Nigeria. First of all, because seclusion is not a general practice, and also because the Hausa/Fulani women still participate actively in economic matter. Secondly, it was only wealthy Muslim men who could afford to put their women in seclusion.

Undoubtedly, women were excluded from some traditional matters which might necessitate some rituals/discussion from such secret societies/cults as the *Or* or *Oghoni* in Yoruba land. But then, to arrive at the final decision and implementation, women cannot be excluded or, whatever decision solely made by men would fail. (Afonja 1986) However, the colonialists not knowing the political culture prevalent in the Yoruba land/Society excluded women from all public affairs and invested totally in the men all vestiges of rulership. In a way, it is understandable, since they themselves came from a culture steeped in patriarchy and Victorian norms which did not interfere with any of the cultural restrictions traditionally placed on women. As a matter of fact, the introduction of the British common laws could be seen as additional constraints on women.

Because of the ambiguity which the Christian/Islamic and common laws imposed on the people, generally women became less than full citizens. Women were treated as things to be required and disposed of at will. Hitherto, they could have redress under traditional law depending on the hat she was wearing: mother or wife. As a wife all the injustices can be heaped on her.

Since independence, Nigeria laws have been deliberately misinterpreted and manipulated to suit the male ego. Over the years, certain myths have been perpetuated on the limitations of the female on legal matters. Perceived and treated as minors, the Nigerian women whatever her status can not bail people out of court or police custody. Married women cannot obtain Nigerian passports on their own recognition without a written permission from their husbands. Women can not insert names of their children in their passports without the expressed consult of the father of the children. There are differentials in the benefits women enjoyed in the public service with regards to men, even if they occupied similar positions. If a husband died interstate, his property, which includes the wife will be inherited by the family.

However, since 1985, the Babangida administration had made some overtures to women by removing some of the discriminatory policies. For instance, women enjoy the same benefits as men if they occupy similar positions. There was also a convention that in every state cabinet, one commissioner or more must be a woman.

In order to embark on the democratization process, the following institutions were set up namely; The Political Bureau, the Directorate for Mass Mobilization, for Self-Reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), Better Life Programme (BLP) for rural and urban women among others. The BLP was established by the wife of the President, Mrs. Maryam Babangida in September 1987, it aimed to improve the living condition of women and uplift their socio-economic status. It was said that to a large extent, it had been able to achieve this. Women farmers and other women in various economic ventures were trained at the federal and state multi-private centres in their relevant fields in order to become self-sufficient. Also the BLP had a huge network which linked the various levels of government from the national level down to the village level so that women at various levels were in contact with themselves and helped to solve their problems.

THE PHENOMENON OF FIRST LADY IN NIGERIA

More than any period before, the first Lady syndrome became pronounced during the Babangida administration. Right from the inception of his administration, Mrs. Maryam Babangida refused to be obscured. This is a novelty in the history of first ladies in Nigeria and there were seven before her. They were “all represented mostly in absentia” (Gentle strokes, n.d:6) some were seen presiding over tea parties while others were never heard of. Maryam insisted that her place is beside her husband, Nigeria’s military President. As President of the Nigeria Army Officers Wives Association (NAOWA), she was quite assertive and galvanized the association into embarking on self-help programmes. When she became Nigeria’s first lady, she transformed an erstwhile mainly ceremonial position into a movement for the improvement of women both at urban and rural areas. Mrs Babangida was said to have “An implicit philosophy that informs every activity, every involvement and every programme for women in development” (Gentle Stokes n.d:4) she distinguished between elite women groups and masses groups perceived that the latter was the less privileged of the two and therefore her primary task was to create a useful setting for their “self development and self esteem” using the position of the first lady, she advocated along side Economic Commission for African (ECA), that the Nigerian rural women be integrated into specific development programmes than being lumped with the disabled.

Today, in Nigeria, the “Office of the first lady” is officially recognized. Since Maryam was not just a feminist or a “woman libber” she ensured that her office was complementary to that of the President and its program for the improvement of the lot of Nigerians. Nonetheless, she was the leader of the pressure groups for women’s progress. Thus, in this democratic era, Mrs Babangida was able to cut a niche for herself in the public arena and laid a procedure difficult to find in any developed or developing countries. (Gentle strokes, n;d;8) Her efforts to improve the lot of women socially, morally and economically and politically through the establishment of the Better Life Program (BLP) and National Council for Women (NCW) popularized and made more glamorous the office of the first lady. When she passed on, her works and deeds spoke for her. From all over Africa, other first ladies made “Pilgrimages” to Lagos and Abuja, as it were to learn the secret of making the first lady less ceremonious and more meaningful. Probably taking a cue from her, the first ladies of some African countries became more vivid in their respective countries. The ladies which come easily to mind are Mrs. Diouf of Senegal, Mrs. Nana Rawlings of Ghana and Late Mrs. Sally Mugabe of Zimbabwe. These ladies mobilized women in their countries along the lines of BLP. These efforts have been very rewarding as their various incumbent husbands have been able to retain their governments with votes of women.

EMERGENCE OF FERMINISM

Mrs. Maryam Babangida was not an activist of any kind until her husband’s Seizure of power in 1985. after her primary school in Asaba and secondary school at a convert in Kaduna, Miss King as she was then called gained secretarial qualifications in Nigeria and the USA and met her husband, the then Captain Babangida in 1965. Four years later, they got married and she converted and renamed Maryam, continuing her career as a housewife for the fourteen years that followed. In 1983 when her husband became Chief of Army Staff, she too benefited by becoming the President of the Nigeria Army Officers wives Association. It was in this capacity that she first began to see herself as a leader.

When she accompanied her husband into state House as wife of the head of state after a successful coup, Maryam Babangida embarked on a short career which was to mark the emergence of a new phase in the history of Nigerian first Ladies. She opened an office of her own and by astutely wielding her influence, she soon became a prominent figure in public life. A brief look at her predecessors indicated how different her approach to her position as wife of the head of state was.

General Buhari's wife, Hajiya Sefinatu was courted by her husband from the age of fourteen, married at eighteen and remained shy and retiring woman committed to a conservative reading of Islam. Hajiya Hadia Dawaiya, as the most senior of the four women married to President Shehu Shagari, assumed the position of the first lady, when her husband became President, but remained out of public eye. General Obasanjo was not known to have a wife while in office, and Mrs. Ajike Murtala Muhammed was not in place long enough to wield much influence as a result of the brevity of her husband's rule. Mrs. Victoria Gowon married her husband during the civil war. Although their wedding was a prominent social event and Mrs. Gowon became known for accompanying her husband on tours and generally being supportive, her input was unremarkable, being largely in accord with conventional notions of a good wife. Mrs. Victoria Nwanyiicha Aguyi Ironsi was similarly unremarkable. During the first Republic, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa's wives were kept in seclusion and none of them ever accompanied him on his duties or performed any public function. It is therefore in comparison to predecessors that Maryam Babangida features so prominently.

GENDER POLITICS OF MILITARY AND CIVILIAN RULE

Military rule may not necessarily be completely male dominated, but in Nigeria it does appear to be so. Given that no woman has ever ascended to the top echelons of the Nigerian army, it comes as no surprise to find that women played no significant role in central government during the military regimes. Have the years of civilian rule allowed for greater participation in government? Mba, (1989) points out that women appear not to have fared any better in the civilian government till of recent. It is worth recalling that the Northern region was so virulently opposed to women being given the vote that only the government in the former Southern region were enfranchised. Nonetheless, men in the former Northern region insisted on being given seats on behalf of the disenfranchised female population as well as themselves in the first house of Assembly. Although General Gowon supported the idea of women being given the vote in 1973, discussing about returning the country to civilian rule. (A hand-over which never occurred). Northern men mounted such vocal opposition to this that he found it necessary to backtrack, finally declaring that in the North, only "educated women" should vote, a move which provoked further outcry, this time from women's organizations. It was not until 1979 that the Obasanjo military regime backed with all the coercive powers of a dictator was able to introduce universal suffrage for women (Draft local Government Edict No, 189, 1976)

In the rest of the country, women threw themselves into politics both before and after independence, generating a history ably documented. The Gowon administration was supplanted by a military coup led by General Murtala Mohammed, who was in turn assassinated within a few months of taking office, to be replaced by General Olusegun Obasanjo, who was to rule from 1976 – 1979 and ushered in the civilian 2nd Republic. The policies of these regimes were not different from their predecessors in their gender politics, continuing the almost complete exclusion of women from government.

When the second Republic came into being, led by President Shehu Shagari, a Northern former school master, the record continued to be poor. Regrettably, one cannot conclude on the basis of this track record that Nigeria's civilian regimes have adopted a significantly more favourable position than the military with regards to involving women in public life. However, there is a remarkable improvement in this current dispensation as the government at President Goodluck Jonathan has indeed been fair to women with regards to appointments.

The return of the military through the 1983 coup d'état led by Generals Buhari and Idiagbon saw women once again excluded from federal levels of Government. With the Babangida administration, the steady picture of military and civilian exclusion of women from all levels of government altered, it is on record that the Babangida's administration is likely to go down in History as one in which women gained prominence. This was not because it had radical gender policies but because his wife engaged in highly publicized activities and ordered other wives of the military oligarchy to replicate her example.

It is evident that feminism has affected the gender politics of the nation, but not in the way that we might have hoped. It can not be said to have enhanced gender equality.

THE ANATOMY OF ABUSE OF WOMEN'S RIGHT IN NIGERIA

Anatomy of abuse of women's rights is used here to mean the structure or forms and channels of abuse of women's rights. In Nigeria, the socio-cultural status of women implies the judgement about women's relative worth, value, competence and rights, determined by the role of women in their social environment. Women are merely accorded nominal reverence due to their procreative role. In tracing the origin of gender inequality and abuse of women's right, Uchendu (1995) argues that in traditional African Society, these are largely derived

from the economic roles of the sexes. Male domination was significantly a result of the patrilineal ownership of land, which is the most important factor in the production process. Therefore, women's access to wealth is usually a function of their relationship mostly through marriage. He further argued that informal education focused on preparing males and females for culturally determined roles. He observes that women were trained to be obedient daughters, subservient to the parents and later to their husbands. Marriage was considered as the only important goal or career for women.

It is important to emphasize that the term gender is not the same thing as sex because while sex refers to physical difference between males and females, gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women. Sex differences are natural, biological and universal while gender differences are cultural and vary from society to society. It is on this note that Attoe-Effah Stella (2002) posits that the biology as some believed, but the way in which every culture defines and evaluate female subordination would be removed. Engels (1972) in his analysis of the origin of the Family, Private Property and the state, posits that gender inequality and abuse of women's rights originated in the period of barbarism, that woman suffered would-historic defeats, men gained the upper hand when animals were domesticated and headed. In the words of Engels;

The men seized the reigns in the house, women were degraded, enthralled as the slave of the man's wish, a mere instrument for breeding children (Engels in Bryson, 1992).

The impact of the socio-cultural factors on women in the world over and Nigeria in particular, could be associated with cases of assaults and apprehension as seen in rape, prostitution and unnecessary quest for large family size in some cultures despite the hazard of repeated as the property of the husband; hence the right of the man and even the extended family to discipline and subdue the women is an accepted norm. In the Northern part of Nigeria, women are prohibited from riding on the same Motorcycle with men. It is a taboo for women to drive cars in Islamic fundamentalist societies, more so, if a woman is raped, she is one the law will condemn to death while her male accomplice is set free. A good example here is the case of Amina who was raped and condemned to death by a Sharia court but for the intervention of the International Communities and the Federal Government, Sharia Court of Appeal eventually acquitted her. Also, in some Northern Culture, women (wives and daughters) of a man can be used to indemnify a debt owned by the man. A man can give one of his wives or daughters to sleep with a visiting friend as a mark of honour to the friend. This surely constitutes an abuse of the fundamental rights of the affected women. Similarly, in Igbo culture, a married woman is compelled by her husband to prepare delicious meal for his visiting concubine. Men are free to commit adultery but any woman caught is instantly divorced and sanctioned. In Igbo, Yoruba and some other cultures such as the Anan culture in Akwa Ibom, Okrika in Rivers State, and some parts of Bayelsa States, to mention but few, women are most times, assault, battered, subjugated, dehumanized and even killed. If the man dies, the man's kinsmen and kindred usually accuse the wife of his death and in a bid to dispossess her of her husbands property now in her care; she is usually subjected to some inhuman treatments.

Apart from forcing her to drink from the water used in washing the deceased husband's body in spite of how long it has stayed, she is compelled to mourn him with her hairs shaved with sharp broken bottle, with one dress to cover her body for one year, and sometimes forbidden from mixing with other people. Notably too, widows are still being forced or coerced to accept men to take the place of their deceased husbands. In most cases, this is done with total disregard to the wish of the women and the feelings of the children, if she had any. In the event of the husband's infertility, he hands over the wife to any preferred man so as to make children for him this encouraging promiscuity. Besides, childlessness in these cultures is never the responsibility of the man. The women take the blame for everything and are even stigmatized. Generally, sexual matters in these cultures are treated on the system of double standards. In view of this, Williams (1992) explained that the subordination and powerlessness of women posed by the control of their lives by socio-cultural factors, makes it detrimental should a women dare to suggest the use of condom to her husband for fear of contracting AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. She would do so at the risk of being rejected, battered, or even thrown out by the men. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) violence against women include; Physical abuse such as battering, sexual assault and abuse, molestation at home, educational institutions, workplace, community and society as well as rape, infanticide female genital mutilation, incestuous relationship, denial of reproductive rights; psychological abuse such as sexual harassment, portrayal of women as sex objects by the media, restricted access to sources of power (economic, political and social), education, landed property, decision making; commodification of women, trafficking, forced prostitution and commercialization of women's bodies (guardian, Lagos, August 8, 1998 p. 14).

These leave women with a great deal of psychological trauma. Ignorant of their right to protect themselves, they merely yield to the tradition of the society shaped entirely in the interest of the men. With such a poor psychosocial climate they become easily susceptible to many types of abuses. In the political and

educational scenes, there is large-scale discrimination against women both in voting for candidates and in allocating political offices as well as in educational training of children. Male children are usually given greater preference and privilege when it comes to politics and education. Notwithstanding the extent of the problem obstacles and challenges identified above, it is significant to note that these are not insurmountable.

THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

Promotion and protection of human rights of women are two different things. While human rights promotion entail programs of activities in the area of education and general public enlightenment, on what constitutes human rights and what need to be done to graduates and secure them for all citizens, human rights protection entails efforts aimed and directed at prevention of constitutionally and legally guaranteed rights and offering redress, remedies or sanctions if and when such violations occur (Jega, 2007). Both involves making citizens (in this case women) know their rights, to be able to defend them, know the rights of others, and to be able to respect and not abuse them, as well as monitoring of human rights situation and adopting effective strategies and mechanisms to deal with human rights abuses or breaches when they occur. This task falls mostly on the government, and civil society or non-governmental organizations. Efforts aimed at promotion and protection of human rights of women must start with the observance and respect as well as domestication of international treaties of Human Rights. Fortunately Nigeria is a state party to a number of international Human Rights treaties among which are International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Covenant on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEAFDRAW). At the continental level, Nigeria is also a signatory and a party to the African Charter on Human and People Rights (Amnesty International, 2000). Some of these treaties have not been domesticated. Therefore, the strict observance of these treaties will in no small measure, enhance the promotion and protection of women's right in Nigeria. The second step is to improve the educational and economic status of women in Nigeria. The 1995 United Nations reports, stresses the importance of education as the key variable in raising women's status, which in turn opens up so many avenues to ensure equitable growth and sustainable development. Government and corporate bodies including civil society organizations priorities must be directed at bridging the educational gender gap, most especially by encouraging vocational education and training. They should strengthen women education through scholarship grants to under or less privileged women. This calls for special scholarship for women's education.

Similarly given the extent, magnitude, and severity of poverty among Nigerian women, we need to promote a conception of rights that comes to terms with our prevailing reality, and that imposes constitutional and legal duties and obligations on the state by making economic, social and cultural rights of women justifiable. Doing so, would be the most concreted first line of defense and protection of fundamental rights of women. Therefore, increased women's access to both quality education and access to economic power and resources will help re-write their rights in Nigeria.

Affirmative actions such as reserving a specific percentage of parliamentary and executive seats for women is surely a step in the right direction. The report of the Affirmative Action of the United Nations Conference on Women in 1995 held in Beijing allocated at least 30 percent of all positions in government owned concerns and agencies to women. To realize this, we suggest that women must be organized and must be politically conscientised and encouraged to take active part in the political process, as active voters and candidates for elective offices. The media must be on vanguard of enlightenment campaigns to educate both men and women to gradually change their attitudes about women's worth and rights. The media and feminist organizations must focus on those concrete issues capable of mobilizing women to raise their status, self esteem, self-respect and empower them so that they too can be inspired to pick up gauntlet to fight for women's cause. Specifically, the media must beam their searchlight on those harmful cultural and traditional practices that are not only negative but also detrimental to the advancement of women and their development. Attention must be focused on campaign for the removal of existing cultural discriminations against women.

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