Women and Participation in Nigeria: The Imperative of Empowerment

1. Introduction

*Politics is too serious a business to be left in the hands of politicians*

-Charles De Gaulle.

If Charles de Gaulle were alive he would be giving a revised version of this oft-quoted maxim. In my estimation, it would read like: “Politics is too serious a business to be left solely in the hands of men.” And that spoof could better be directed at Nigeria. In Nigeria, politics is presumed a man’s turf where No Woman needs Apply (NWNA) - an unspoken slogan reminiscent of the discrimination against the Irish nationals in 19th century Britain. This unwritten rule is one that only a few women relative to their population¹ have dared to successfully defy. While democracy presupposes a pluralistic system that is all inclusive, it is ironic that women are systemically excluded from participating in the process.

Consider the following telling statistics: *during the last general elections held in April 2007, there were a total of 1,200 women aspirants to 1,532 offices. 660 of these women won their primaries. Of the 660 candidates who contested elections into various posts, Ninety-three finally emerged as winners: six deputy governors, nine senators, 27 national representatives, and 52 in various state Houses of Assembly. Even though this represent a significant increase in the women participation in the political process, it is still a far cry from aspirations of women the world over².*

2. Female Participation: Then and Now

Despite being a patriarchal society, Nigeria has a rich history that is sprinkled with the inputs of women who have broken out of the mould to participate in politics. Our pre-colonial history is replete with the exploits of Queen Amina of Zaria who led armies to drive out invaders from Zaria; Moremi of Ile-Ife, whose sacrifice for her people speaks to selfless leadership that we are so bereft of these days. Our recent past bears testimony of prominent women leaders like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, a crusader and scourge of despotic leaders who led Egba women on a protest against taxation, Margaret Ekpo, Hajia Gambo Sawaba, who championed the cause of the oppressed in the northern parts of Nigeria to mention a few. Iyalode Tinubu of Lagos testified to the rich participation of women on the economic scene. The legacies of these women are at the risk of extinction. Even though an increasing number of women are finding their way into boardrooms and

¹ [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6217719.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6217719.stm)

The controversial census conducted in 2006 recently puts the population of women as 68.3 million

proving leadership for blue chip companies, the modest feats achieved by women in present day Nigeria pales into insignificance in light of the minimal participation of the preponderant population of women. In reality women participation in decision making in Nigeria is still a far cry from the Rwandan experience- whose economy rode to recovery on the back of women. It is instructive to know that in some parts of the country, women did not earn franchise until 1976 16 years after Nigeria’s independence from Great Britain. Like it was then, so it is now and there are nagging fears that exclusion of women might be with us for the long haul for reasons that are not farfetched.

3. Hurdles before Women and Active Participation
Several impediments have been identified as limiting the participation of women on the social, economic and political scenes. These barriers are cultural, economic, legal amongst others. This intervention would focus on some distinctly Nigerian variants of these barriers.

Cultural Mores.

“Men are the decision makers; women should be cooking in the kitchen while men play politics.” - Comments passed to Dorothy Nyone when she announced her intention to represent the Gokana area in south-eastern Rivers State for the ruling People’s Democratic Party.

Social conventions, values and mores conspire to deepen the stereotype of women as perpetual habitués of the kitchen who are only gatecrashers into other spheres outside of their matrimonial homes. In fact, they are usually socialized from birth to see their place as a second fiddle. The birth of a male child is warmly received. To show the preference for the male child, women often feel that their place in their matrimonial homes is not secured until they give birth to male children. Cultural practices are often harmful to women. Some of these harmful practices include burial rites that ensure that women remain social outcasts common in the eastern parts of the country- widows are forced to drink the bath water of their dead husbands as part of the mourning process; Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), that results from early marriage of teenage girls in the north. Victims of these cultural practices can hardly participate socially as they are viewed as outcasts

Religion
Religion is an accomplice in the stereotyping of women and the reinforcing of the barriers that prevent them from participating in politics, economic activities, and on the social scene. For instance in the northern part of Nigeria, women are held in Purdah in deference to Islam. The implication of this is that only their husbands can have unfettered access to them and their movement is restricted to their quarters. They are at the mercies of the husband for the needs to be met. The conditions of their lives can be best left to

3 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/15/AR2008051504035.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/15/AR2008051504035.html)


5 Frontline Women. Issue2 volume I.August 2007
conjecture as most households subsist below the poverty line. Religion ensures that a significant number of women are shut out from participating in politics either as voters or as aspirants into elective officers and also participating in economic activities.

**Women’s Perception of politics.**

“Politics is a dirty game”.
The general perception of politics in Nigeria is one dirty vocation that is reserved for unrefined people who have little scruples with bending the rules and subverting due process. Nigerians are regaled daily with the details of the unsavory actions of members of the political class. Female politicians are therefore seen as accomplices of vile male politicians who are adept at manipulating the popular will of the people. They are treated as deviants who are at home with devious male politicians. It is acceptable for women to take the backseat as cheerleaders while contesting for public offices is often considered going overboard.

**The Demands of Politics.**
Politics is time consuming and it demands great attention. There are caucus meetings, primaries, campaign stumps ad infinitum. Participation often requires attending nocturnal meetings. Juggling their traditionally ascribed roles with an interest in politics, without a supportive spouse, could result in needless conflict. Some women keen on actualizing their political dreams have had to pay some costly price. The tradeoff could be their marriage and marital happiness. Female politicians are often perceived to be divorcees and marital failures.

**Violence and Threat.**
As an aspirant, Dorothy Nyone had to defy jeers from the chauvinists opposed to her candidacy. The forces of patriarchy in her party ensured that she lost. While her loss was no news, what was telling was the violence- so vexingly rife these days- which marred the elections. In her words: A ward chairman was shot dead; all the women and most of the men fled the scene. My husband rushed there and took me home. I was scared; men who were fully prepared for the violence were the only ones who remained behind to hand pick the various winners.

One of the potential disincentives to participating in politics is the crudeness of the Nigerian politics that brooks no opposition and resolves dissent by visiting violence on political opponents. The ‘do-or-die’ nature of politics in Nigeria is hardly veiled and threats are made intermittently to warn opponents that when push comes to shove, the side with the monopoly of violence will carry the day. The spate of politically motivated killings has not helped matters. As I write one of the nine female senators in the national assembly, Senator Gbemisola Saraki narrowly escaped death in the hands of paid

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6 http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nigeria_statistics.html
According to UNICEF, 64% of Nigeria’s population live below the international poverty line of US$1.25 per day, 1992–2007
7 Frontline Women. Issue2 volume I.August 2007
assassins on a mission to kill her\textsuperscript{8}. Such political motivated attacks are rife. Nigeria’s chequered history has had its own fair share of women who have had to pay the ultimate price for venturing into politics. Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Suliat Adedeji\textsuperscript{9} and many others are easily recalled as hapless victims of the sanguinary predilection of Nigerian politics.

**Funding**

One of the frightening bogeys that politics conjures is the figure of a pot-bellied, avuncular male figure that holds court in a political party as a godfather. His role is not mentoring. Rather the godfather’s brief is to provide a robust war chest and clear the path for the emergence of the godson or daughter for the contested office. In return the godfather is for unrestricted access to the corridors of power and inflated contracts that are rarely executed. For a process that requires tons of cash to buy votes and compromise conscience, candidates without deep-pockets and money bags as backers cannot actualize their dreams of contesting for public office. Nomination forms to contest for elective offices in most parties are very expensive\textsuperscript{10}. The average earnings of Nigerian women partly explain why they are reluctant about active participation in politics\textsuperscript{11}. In view of the exorbitant fees charged by political parties for aspirant to run for elections one can safely ascribe the back seat role of cheerleaders and clappers that women have settled for in these collectives. On the economic frontier, limited access to credit/finance also scuttles women’s dreams of participation.

**Poverty**

*In Africa, poverty wears a woman’s face.*

- UN’s Economic Commission for Africa\textsuperscript{12} (2009)

A corollary to funding is the stark poverty that confronts Nigerian women. Under stifling economic conditions, women are mostly at the receiving end as they have less access to education, credit information, skills and finance and health care—all critical recipes for attaining financial independence. The combination of all these factors and the burden of child bearing and house keeping conspire to keep them out of the social and political

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  Senator Gbemi Saraki is being tipped to contest for the gubernatorial elections in Kwara state.
  \item[10] http://thenationonlineng.net/web2/articles/17760/1/PDP-throws-Anambra-governorship-race-open/Page1.html. The ruling PDP sold it nomination forms for the recent held Anabram governorship election for 5million naira ($34,000)
  \item[11] http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_GEM.pdf. According to the Gender Empowerment Index Ratio of estimated female to male rank value earned income is 0.45
  \item[12] UN’s Economic Commission for Africa’s report submitted to the eighth African Regional Conference on Women held in Gambia in November 2009
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scenes. In some cultures in Nigeria women have no property or inheritance rights. African women are said to own just 1 percent of the continent’s assets. This makes it difficult for them to access loans as they do not have collateral.

Empowerment in my reckoning is the absence of the barriers to the actualization of natural dreams of women. By this, empowerment would mean the leveling of the playing field such that men do not have an undue advantage in their quest to utilize the human potential whether in business, politics or other social platforms. It is the opening of the space for women to have unfettered access to education, skills, and to participate in the decision making process on matters that affect them.

5. Linkage between politic, social and economic empowerment
The link between social, economic and politic exclusion of women lends credence to the presupposition that the empowerment of women along either of these lines: social, economic and politics holds prospects for increased participation on other aforementioned fronts. Building on the premise of the existence of a clear inexorable interconnection between women’s deprivation and some economic and socio-cultural factors, it therefore follows that to address women’s participation on any front efforts must be made to address the barriers to participation on the two other fronts. In Nigeria, social ranking of women depend on age, lineage and achievement. Empowering women economically affects the way women perceive themselves and the way they are also perceived by the community. Thus women would have no inhibition in participating fully on both the economic and political scenes. The absence of non discriminatory laws in statute books would ease women participation in business and politics. Women can own properties without recourse to the approval of existent and non-existent spouses; they can access finance for their business ideas without the ridiculous requirement of approval from their spouse as it is the case in some parts of Africa.

One of the barriers identified in the exclusion of women from political participation is poverty. With the predominant population of African women living below the poverty line, the pressing needs for most women would be scraping a living for themselves and their families. According to the United Nations, of the three quarters of all economic activities in developing countries ascribed to men, women actually perform 53 percent of the work. Women feature prominently in the informal sectors of most economies in Africa. The under-representation of women on the political scene can be reversed by empowering them economically. Increasing the income of women gives them self confidence. The link between economic empowerment and quality of lives of women come to the fore as

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14 Afolabi M.M Scaling Inclement Hurdles To Women Participation In Nigerian Politics: A Pragmatic Approach
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 educated 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.

7. Women Participation and the benefits for Nigeria’s economy
Research has shown the connection between participation of women, a product of economic empowerment and its effect on children, the home and the society at large. Empowered women take adequate care of their children, ensure education of their female daughters and hold in breaking the vicious cycles of poverty that is so rife in Africa. It is widely reported that the Rwandan economy owes it recovery from coma to the effort of its women. Women are said to be driving that economy. With 50% of Rwanda’s parliament made up of women, Nigeria can take a clue from the Rwanda by empowering its women. Experts say women make better investment decisions than men. Empowering women with the right skills, adequate funding and timely information will no doubt ensure national productivity.

8. Organizing to Demolish barriers

Agenda setting.
Women can form pressure groups to articulate and voice concerns about workplace issues, redistribution of economic resources, and creation of job opportunities for women among other issues indicative of gender inequality. These groups can also help educate women on the implications of government policies on their business and participation in politics. Organizations like Baobab for Women’s Human Rights, WIMBIZ have played significant roles in this regards. These and many other groups also help by making value adding inputs into legislations that demolish barriers like patriarchal land and property laws that make it difficult for women to own properties by engaging with the political class to enact legislations to encourage the participation of women. The infinitesimal percentages of women in legislative organs still affect the passage of gender friendly law in the country.

16 http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/2213/76/
17 http://www.baobabwomen.org/ BAOBAB For Women's Human Rights is a not for profit, non-governmental women's human rights organization, which focuses on women's legal rights issues under the three (3) systems of law - customary, statutory and religious laws in Nigeria.
18 http://www.wimbiz.org/about.php Women in Management and Business (WIMBIZ), is a non-profit organization based in Nigeria that strives to “be a catalyst that elevates the profile and influence of women in management and business
Mobilizing and Networking
Regular town hall meetings for women can be convened to discuss issues that collectively affect women. The broadcast media can also be exploited to collate issues that affect women. This is especially effective in rural areas where community radio stations are partners in communicating change. Businesses run by women can form coalitions to formulate policy positions and present a common voice before government. These groups can also interact with thought leaders and think tanks to appraise the impact of proposed legislation on women’s intervention in business and politics.

Spreading the word
Periodic publication of IED materials that highlight specific issues can help to galvanise broad support across social lines. These publications should be targeted at a broader audience including particular youths. They should highlight the predicament of other demographics like unemployed youths, widows, the aged and PLWHAs. Quick wins by women should be celebrated. One of such is the recent nullification by a high court in Nigeria of the requirement of spousal approval in form of a letter of consent before the issuance of international passport to married Nigerian women. Young people can help spread report of these quick wins via new media platforms like Facebook and twitter. These social network avenues present the opportunity to rally young people around the cause of gender equality and mobilize public opinion for the opening of the space for women’s participation.

Impacting skills and information
Skills acquisition centers should be established in rural areas for women to acquire skill on the use of modern agricultural tools as the predominant population of women in Nigeria is involved in agriculture. Women can form agricultural workers collectives where they can pool resources together to collectively acquire lands, and modern tools for farming. Collectives make it easy for women to access funding and also learn new skills to better their lot. Women can also build capacities in ICT and how it can be exploited for financial independence. They can share value adding information especially such Goldman Sachs Women’s Enterprise & Leadership Programmes. Young people can play important roles in knowledge transfer to disadvantaged women. They can volunteer during holidays to teach basic skills in modern agricultural practices, ICT and managing business. Young professionals can also volunteer to provide financial advisory services to women on the side.

19 [http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=4414](http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=4414). In a suit brought against the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) by Dr. Priye Iyalla-Amadi, a federal high court ruled that it was a violation of the rights of Nigerian woman to produce a letter of consent from her husband as a condition for issuance of international passport.

20 [http://nigeria.smetoolkit.org/nigeria/en/content/en/3759/Women's-Enterprise-Leadership-Program](http://nigeria.smetoolkit.org/nigeria/en/content/en/3759/Women's-Enterprise-Leadership-Program). The Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Initiative was aimed at empowering 10,000 Women in developing and emerging economies across the world. In Nigeria, the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women Initiative has trained over 100 women under this scholarship which includes a Certificate in Entrepreneurial Management (CEM) and follow up services such as business advisory, consulting clinics, and mentoring.
9. **Conclusion**
The exclusion of women from participation on the economic and political fronts is an affront to the spirit and values of democratic governance and free market economy. In fact the society is worse off for it as they are almost always responsible because of their socially ascribed roles of shaping an entire generation. The onus is on young people to take the center stage in overturning these barriers to women empowerment. Women have nothing to lose by their participation on the social, economic and policy scene; the incentives to gain are as limitless.

**References.**