

WOMEN, POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Dr. A. C. IZUAGBA

Department of Curriculum Studies
Alvan Ikoku College of Education,
Imo State

ABSTRACT

In Nigeria today women's desire to actively participate in politics and occupy decision making positions has been limited greatly by gender bias that stems from our patriarchal system. Evidence from literature shows that in pre-colonial Nigeria women occupied decision making positions and were very visible in politics, unfortunately, the colonial masters' conception of women's role in the society adversely affected the efforts made to empower women through education and policies. Not only is the content and process of education found to be gender biased, the constitution equally contain elements of gender bias which has made it very difficult to institutionalize some of the conventions that would have brought some leverage to Nigerian women. Based on these, the researcher recommends the restructuring of the education system in order to eliminate all forms of biases and gender inequity in order to ensure social justice and even development of the country.

Introduction

Politics refers to all machinery put in place to ensure the smooth execution of the art of governance, be it in the community, organization or nation. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines politics as activities within a group or organization by which some members of the group try to gain advantage over others, while B. B. C. English Dictionary sees it as all the actions or activities used by people to achieve power in a country, society etc. Nnoyelum (2003) adds that political participation is multidimensional as it involves the following:

being part of the formulation and implementation of public policies, being part of all actions taken aimed at

influencing decisions which in most cases are taken in public representative and official capacities; ability to vote wisely without being influenced or tele-guided, canvassing convincingly for support based on the integrity of an individual politician, the content of the manifesto etc (p. 206).

The multi-dimensional nature of politics makes it all involving as it demands that every member of the society should be part of it irrespective of gender. But unfortunately, the extents to which individuals in the society participate in these different aspects of politics is a reflection of cultural perceptions of division of labour based on gender roles. From a historical perspective the current conception of politics and political activities are alien to the Nigerian cultural background. Uchendu (1993) noted that it is a reflection of nuances, mores and political values of our colonial masters. As a matter of fact literature available note that in the pre-colonial period in Nigeria, women participated effectively and without any discrimination in politics even though the degree of participation differed but it was generally characterized by a high degree of cordiality with men.

Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria, women participated in political leadership, as everybody was assigned economic role. The implication was that, if one excelled in his/her economic role it attracted political position. UNICEF (2001) and Uchendu (1993) state that women in "Ika Igbo" of Delta State, the women of Onitsha and the 'Umuada and Aluturadis' of the whole Igbo land were powerful and acted as watch dogs of the constitution and immediately sanctioned any one who infringed on the constitution. Uchendu (1993) quotes Henderson as saying that the queen (Omu) was regarded as the king equal in some ways, as she could compete with the king in splendour and had great powers over women. In Yoruba land, the 'Iyamode' 'Iyamole' etc. were very powerful. Some of these powerful women represented their market associations in council meetings that managed the business of the society. An example of such women was madam Tinubu, who was a great threat to the colonial government and facilitated the removal of kings whose style of leadership did not favour either the women or their communities. In the north, with the coming of Islam, women played significant roles in politics..Smith (1964) cites the powerful political influence of Queen Amina in the 16th Century.

Unfortunately, the political roles played by women in the pre-colonial period were not taken into cognition by the colonial masters, principally because they came from a quite different socio-cultural background – the Victorian society. The Victorian

society did not recognize women's independence and did not allow employment opportunities for women outside the home and as a matter of fact employment opportunities for women in the society were limited. In the Victorian society, a woman lost her status once she accepted a paid employment. This cultural perception of women greatly influenced the views of the colonial masters of Nigerian women and made them not to appreciate their contributions as well as their sense of independence in certain matters, Uchendu (1993).

Consequently, when schools were established more emphasis was placed on the establishment of boys' schools than girls or co-educational schools. In the same vein, when eventually girls' schools were established, there were differences in the curricular content. The curriculum operational in girls' schools prepared them for marriage and later for secretarial and teaching jobs, thereby instituting gender differences in career offerings. The curriculum of the boys' schools enabled them to pursue intellectual excellence and they were later employed in the colonial administration. This not doubt gave men economic and political advantage over their female counterpart; but more important is that it gave rise to gender discrimination in career opportunities and fundamentally marked the beginning of men dominance over women in formal education.

In the same vein, the colonial masters dislodged the traditional dual political set up and replaced it with the appointment of warrant chiefs who were only men. This development was not taken kindly by women. Uchendu (1993) states that while the colonial administration viewed the Nigerian women's respectable position as a past glory, the women themselves were determined to maintain their elevated position at all cost. This development led to the women's riot in Aba and Abeokuta in 1929 and 1948 respectively which was staged to express their dissatisfaction with the colonial administrations' marginalization of women and some other oppressive tendencies.

This anti-colonial struggle marked the foundation of women emancipation, equality and empowerment in Nigeria. Under the leadership of Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome Kuti the movement quickly spread and by 1945, Nigeria had the first fully national body organized across class, regional and ethnic lines. This body was known as the National Women's Union formed in 1953 which later metamorphosed into the Federation of Nigerian Women's Society (FNWS). This society was political in character and content as it was under this umbrella that women demanded political participation and direct representation in all legislative houses. It is in the light of the foregoing that this research sets out to find out the extent of women participation in politics in Nigeria since independence.

In the early years of independence, men dominated Nigerian politics and even when the military took over power in Nigeria the fate of women in politics was not better as their desire to be part of decisions making positions was never recognized. The stance of the military on women's role in politics is not unconnected with their British orientation. This was why there was never a woman representative in the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) or the Provincial Ruling Council (PRC).

Another reflection of their perception of the role of women in politics is seen in the appointment made by General Obasanjo's administration, in which no woman was appointed a member of the constitution drafting committee. It was however, due to criticism that later 4 women were appointed members of the Constituent Assembly and one of the women, Abigail Ukpabi championed the removal of some laws infringing on the rights of women, (Uchendu, 1993).

The advantages Nigerian women would have had from the different programmes of the 'first ladies' were strangled because most of these programmes – Better Life for Rural Women and Family Support Programme were ab initio aimed at self aggrandizement and to feather the nest of the initiators. Confirming this IDEA (2001) and McDonnell (2003) note that the introduction of the structural adjustment by the Babangida's administration introduced compounded women's access to economic empowerment which contradicted the objectives of the First Ladies programmes. Consequently, the Better Life Programme and the Family Support Programme never had meaningful impact on the lives of rural women's for whom they were launched.

However, it is important to note that it was during this era that the National Women Commission was founded which was upgraded to the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. This development was not of their making but principally more of a historical accident as it was during this period that many important conferences aimed at promoting the rights of women were convened worldwide.

The marginalization of women in politics and in decision making position is disheartening especially when one considers the numerical strength of women and the different conferences and conventions put in place to promote and encourage equal participation irrespective of gender.

Conventions and Instruments that Promote Women Participation in Politics

As a matter of fact there are conventions and instruments put in place internally to which Nigeria is a signatory to, that are aimed at ensuring gender equity. Some of such include:

- UN Human Rights Charter;
- UN Committee on the Status of Women;
- UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1967;
- UN General Assembly Designated 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY);
- UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- UN International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and
- The UN Fund for Women (UNIFEM);

In addition, there are other important world conferences held to strategise and enforce all the declarations which include:

- The 2nd Copenhagen World Conference in 1980;
- The 3rd World Conference in Nairobi Kenya in 1985;
- The 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, 1995;
- The Nairobi (Kenya) conference adopted the Forward Looking

Strategies (FLS) for the Advancement of Women in the year 2000 in 1985.

Probably, it was in line with these global efforts that the 1979 constitution made provision for freedom, equality and justice to all citizens and in the year 2000 Nigerians formulated the National Policy on Women that advocates 30 percent equity shares for women in line with Beijing platform – Affirmative Action.

Unfortunately, the drive to implement this affirmative action has been a mirage in Nigeria, it is only in Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa that women have attended 30 % seat in the National Parliament in Africa, in line with the UN target and Beijing affirmative action. Globally, only 12 countries of the world had realized this level in their national parliaments (Mutume, 2006).

Causes of Marginalisation of Women

A lot of reasons have been posited by scholars, feminists and laypersons as being responsible for the invisibility of women in politics and decision making positions in Nigeria. Some of the reasons posited are as follows:

The first is the patriarchal and capitalist nature of our society, which has given room to extreme repressive social behaviours, and regulations that oppress and exploit women. The patriarchal system sets parameters for women to be exploited in the family and in the larger society by legalizing gender differential terms of inheritance rights. Nonyelum, (2002) confirms this when she says that:

Patriarchy is a set of social relations which has a material base in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them enables them in turn to dominate women. The materials base of patriarchy is men's control over women's labour power. That control is maintained by excluding women from access to all necessary economically productive resources and by limiting women's sexuality (p. 210).

She continues that this has been tacitly condoned by the different governments in Nigeria since independence and the consequence is the feminization of poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria.

Poverty is feminised by dispossessing women of rights to inheritance of all forms, access to economic power or loan rather women are seen as properties of their husbands; rather than inherit their late husbands' property they are inherited by their husbands' relations based on the levirate tradition/law.

The extent to which women are repressed is aptly couched by Osasona (2002) that your home is doomed when a hen crows which implies that a man's home is wrecked once he allows women in it to air their views.

Related to this is the fact that politics is capital intensive, given the fact that women have been deprived economically through the patriarchal social system, they do not have the economic base to access fund for election. Moreover, the social system has entrenched some gate – keeping measures that deprive women of other avenues to

social up-liftment (such as education) most of them are in the lower rung of the economy.

Furthermore, the constitution to some extent institutionalized inequity and gender discrimination, for instance, in drafting the constitution the composition of members was not balanced as there were more men than women. Supporting this, Omonubi (2003) cites section 44 (B) of the Federal Constitution of 1960 which stipulated that only the male person is qualified to seek electoral office in the House of Representative in the Northern part of the country. To reinforce this, the Northern Nigeria constitution denied women franchise 40 years after women from other parts of the world had it. It was for this same reason and other repressive regulations that Hajiya Gambo Sawaba was jailed severally.

In addition, section 131 of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in specifying the conditions concerning the election of the President of Nigeria uses "he" repeatedly for persons aspiring to the position of the president. This clause reflects the views of a majority of men on the extent women can go in politics. And that it was passed into law is a reflection of a society that is deep rooted in male chauvinism. This development contradicts our national desire for even – development. It equally underlines the reasons for our failure to achieve the anticipated desired development as confirmed by Acholonu (2003) who quotes the United Nations Human Development Report 1975 as stating that:

The process of human development becomes unjust and discriminatory if most women are excluded from its benefits. And the exclusion of women from many economic and political opportunities is a continuing indictment on modern programmes (p. 4).

Similarly, the use of the English language as the official language of Nigeria has adversely affected women participation in politics and developmental processes. English language is seen as the language of exclusion in politics and education. The import of this assertion becomes obvious if we consider UNESCO (2006) that states that, female illiteracy is much more prevalent than male illiteracy implies that women cannot read and understand party rules and manifestoes without help. But that is not all, being illiterate is a curse, as there are other leeches attached to illiteracy that contribute to the women's subordinate positions and their inability to participate in governance. Such leeches include poverty, malnutrition, high infant and maternal mortality, multiple pregnancies and exploitation in labour and sex which create a

sense of fatalism and powerlessness that inhibits self reliance and the drive crucial in making economic progress.

In addition, many women abhor politics in Nigeria, because the political landscape has been coloured by violence, assassinations, corruptions, mudslinging and all forms of criminal activities. Based on this, many Nigerian see women in politics as immoral because they have managed to withstand male domination, the violent political landscape and male hegemony in order to access power and dominant discourse.

On the other hand, the proliferation of women organization and their pursuit of varied group and individual interests rather than women's collective course have militated against women's efforts to gain ground in politics (Longwe, 2003).

Furthermore, the curriculum and the organizational structure of our education system is gender biased and has skewed the acculturation process; thereby negatively affecting the psyche of the girl-child and making her develop a feeling of low esteem and lack of confidence which inhibits her ability to develop to the fullest. The consequences of our gender insensitive curriculum and education system are the low rate of completion and poor academic performance of girls despite their high enrolment rate in the southeast and west (UNICEF, 2001).

Finally, the issue of indigene and settler has adversely affected women's participation in politics. Most women are screened off by political parties on grounds that they are not from the same states as their husbands and these women can neither contest in their home state either. This is contrary to the constitutional provision that makes it possible for every Nigerian to live in any part of the country they choose and contest elections there if they meet the residency requirements.

Women and Development

It is truism that women contribute meaningfully to national development especially if we consider the crucial roles they play in the home and the communities, we would realize that the great transformation experienced in the nation would not have been possible without them – being the heart and warmth of the family. In addition, if we conceive of development as the ability to bring about positive and transformational changes that are capable of improving on the quality of lives of people and the environment, we would praise women's efforts. Starting from the cleaning and sweeping of homes and our environments, their strength in agriculture and their untiring labour in the home are unquantifiable. Odionye (2003) confirms that women

provide an estimated 50 % to 80 % of agricultural labour and the proceeds from their subsistence farming play tremendous roles in families' survival.

Unfortunately, that they cannot occupy decision making position despite their numerical strengths indicate that their contributions are still seen as insignificant. This has to be so because to be part of the development process requires that the nation should develop a critical mass of women that are knowledgeable of laws, attitude and norms that repress women and are able to challenge and bring about a restructuring of the social system.

While confirming the contribution of women like Prof. Dora Akunyili and Prof. Ndi Onyiuke, Dr. Okonjo-Iweala to national development, it is disappointing that in the 21st century, we are still counting on our fingers the numbers of women in key positions.

The Role of Education

Our present educational system appears deficient and this seems to diminish the crucial role of education as a great equalizer. It is a powerful instrument fashioned out by man that is capable of transforming human beings and their environment positively. But unfortunately, Azikiwe (2005) notes that women are unable to utilize these potentials of education despite having equal abilities with men while at school because gender bias has permeated the school system, the curriculum, pedagogy, instructional materials and has even influenced the attitude of teachers in favour of boys. Consequently, rather than using education as an instrument of social change it has become a means of maintaining social differentiation. This it has done through its curricular offerings by shaping the behaviour of girls/women in a predetermined direction.

Our educational system is rooted in patriarchy in content and organization. Its process condition learners to rules, values, and norms of patriarchy and this makes it mandatory learners in our schools to be schooled to conform. The illustrations in texts, the language of instruction, the language of interaction, the organizations and leadership at the highest level of the educational system reinforce male domination and gender inequality. This makes the girl child to accept patriarchal authority as a norm and she is never given the opportunity to analyse, query and challenge them as they affect her life. She is not taught to ask questions on the rational for stereotypes in social division of labour, the voicelessness and invisibility of women in the family and the large society.

It is on the basis of the foregoing that this paper argues for the abolition of mass schooling, (which is what we offer today in our educational system) and calls for the restructuring of our educational system to reflect equity, justice and fairness. So that the content of education will enable women to recognize the political and ideological dimensions of social inequality in the distribution of resources based on gender. This no doubt will make women go through a process of "conscientisation" which will enable them understand their disadvantaged position and rise up to the challenge of it. There is no doubt that any attempt to restructure our educational system from its present role of inter-generational reproduction of patriarchy will automatically be opposed by patriarchal establishment. But we must do it if women really want to have a say in politics. Moreover, it is a truism that increased enrolment to schooling can never bring about gender equality and equity in our society. This notion that increase in school enrolment will enhance equality is based on patriarchal explanation of the cause of women's subordinate position and lack of access to leadership position in the society. The reason why the writer disagrees with this is based on what has happened in other parts of the world. For instance, the United States places a high premium on education and has over the years produced women with superior skills and capacities in different fields of human endeavours. But despite this high educational and professional attainment by women, they have not been able to dislodge the grip men in the US have on the political system, as only very few women like Ms. Rice, and Alwell Bright etc, are in top political positions in the US unlike men. Longwe (1997) confirms this and adds that female representation in the US congress remains 14 %.

In Africa a similar situation exist, Zambia invested extensively on mass schooling at all levels and had achieved near universal primary education in the 1990s; had a sizeable number of women graduates but the proportion of women in the parliament did not change as they still remain in the minority.

This situation exists because even when women gain higher levels of educational and professional growth, other criteria for gate-keeping emerge such as: women do not have time for politic, they are not diplomatic; they have domestic duties to attend to, and they lack the aggressions crucial for top political and decision making positions. Consequently, the writer argues for the restructuring of our educational system in order to ensure gender equity in the society. The type of education suggested is on that is free of gender bias, that is rooted in equity and justice, by so doing it can adequately equip all, irrespective of sex with knowledge, generic skills and attitudes to negotiate an unequal world from a position of strength and confidence. Such an educational system must make all learners to:

- think and work collaboratively irrespective of sex to dismantle patriarchal structure;
- think and work collectively rather than working as individual to compete with one another;
- analyse and question the social and political environment ourselves not merely as given to be understood but as an unsatisfactory environment to be challenged and dismantled;
- question whether public institutions are working in public interests;
- collectively develop strategies for working in an area of political conflict and confrontation;
- devise strategies to counter and correct bureaucratic resistance to gender oriented policies and to be part of the political development and decision making body of our country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes that our educational system needs to be restructured in order to develop a critical mass of men and women who will collectively and without discrimination pursue national development goals on equal footing. But this might not be easy because of the various gate-keeping measures aimed at institutionalizing patriarchal culture. Consequently, this paper recommends the following:

- The Federal Government should domesticate and implement the Beijing Plat Form of Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all form of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- The Federal Government should reflect gender issues in Federal Character rather than restricting it to regional or ethic groups. This will ensure a broader involvement of diverse groups, and interests irrespective of gender;
- It should full implement the policy on poverty eradication and provide avenues for micro-finance support for women in order to boast their financial and economic base;
- Women inside and outside politics should network in order to speak with one voice and present a common front;
- Women should discourage socialization of children based on gender;
- Women studies programmes should be set up in various institutions of high learning to review culturally learned behaviours, value and power relations in various communities in Nigeria in order to come up with a valid, objective and comprehensive analysis of new forms behaviours, perceptions and

acculturation that will help us discard the traditional and cultural practices and values that are repressive; and

- Consciousness should be raised among women to enable them discover and develop a new orientation and stop them from running down other women instead of building bridges even across continents since women's plight are the same globally.

References

- Acholonu, R. (2003): Gender Factor in Nigerian Politics, in Ojiaka, C. (ed.) *Gender Issues and Political Development in Nigeria in Nigeria*, Lagos: Gender Rights.
- Dimson, Y. (2003): A Critical Appraisal of the Role of Women in Education for National Development. *NAWACS, JOWACSI (1)*: 165 – 174.
- IDEA (2000): *Democracy in Nigeria: Continuing Dialogue(s) for National Building*. Stockholm: IDEA.
- Longwe, S. H. (1997): Education for Women's Empowerment or School for Women's submission, in Anonuevo, C. M. (ed.) *Negotiating and creating Spaces of Power*. Hamburg: UNESCO.
- Mama, A. (1997): Feminism or Feminocracy? State Feminism and Democratisation, in Jubrin Ibrahim (ed.) *Expanding Democratic Space in Nigeria*. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Mbow, P. (2006): Women, Citisenship and Government. *CODESRIA Bulletin, 1 & 2*: 12 – 13.
- Mutune, G. (2006): African Women Ready to Lead: Push for Change in Social Attitude. *Africa Renewal, 20 (2)*: 6 – 9.
- Nda,buki, J. (2006): For Grounding Women's Agency in Africa, *CODESRIA Bulletin, 1 & 2*: 17 – 19.
- Nnonyelum, A. U. (2003SS): Female Education and Political Participation in Nigeria, in Okeke, E. C. (ed.) *Sociology of Education: Concepts and Applications*. Owerri: Spring Fields Publication.

Noval, G. (1997): Empowering Grassroots Women for Social Transformation, in Anonuevo, C. M. (ed.) *Negotiating and creating Spaces of Power*. Hamburg: UNESCO.

Odionye, A. E. (2003): Prospect of Nigerian Women in National Development, *NAWACS JOWACS*, 1 (1): 62 – 72.

Oduaran, A. B. & L. A. Okukpon (1997): Building Women's Capacity for National Development in Nigeria. *Convergence*. Xxx (1): 60 – 88).

Ojiaka, C. (eds.) (1993): *Gender Issues and Political Development in Nigeria*, Lagos: Gender Rights.

Omonubi – McDonnell, M. (2003): *Gender Inequality in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Osasona, M. O. (200): Woman and Empowerment: A Panacea to National Product. *Journal of Productivity*, 1 (1): 7 – 10.

Stromquist, N. (1997): Literacy Practices among achilt women: An Attempt at Critical Conceptualisation, Anonuevo, C. M. (ed.) *Negotiating and Creating Spaces of Power*. Hamburg: UNESCO.

UNESCO (1006): *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005*. France: UNESCO.

UNICEF (2001): *Children and Women's Rights: A Wake up Call*. Abuja: UNICEF.