

WOMEN, GENDER AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right. They are endowed with reason, conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Every one has the right to take part in the government of his/her country directly or through freely choosing representatives. In the words of Aristotle, "man is a political animal". It is opened for both men and women irrespective of gender differences, cultural/religious and other beliefs should not be a barrier to women's participation in politics. This paper is to x-ray women, gender and politics in Nigeria.

Introduction

Politics as a term is derived from twin Greek words "polis" meaning "city state" and "tikos" implying the act of managing or organizing. Literally therefore, politics originally connoted the act of organizing for or management of the affairs of the city-state. It is an observed fact of life that man a homo rations and a rational being is a social animal. This by virtue of being born scientifically and capable of reasonable interaction with others and civil society and as such he is predisposed to numerous insatiable wants, quests and desires he cannot definitely guarantee himself or be an island unto himself but must socialize and inter- relate with all the material and human resources available to fulfill his multifarious quest.

In this mad quest for subsistence and needs satisfaction, man runs into an intricate and somewhat and irreconcilable conflicts of interest with fellow men and women as well as in contradiction of his immediate environmental possibilities. This in turn tends to frustrate man's effort towards fully actualizing his innumerable desires. This relationship of the individual member of the society with the other at this stage thus need articulation and regulation by an authoritative structure called government in order to avoid anarchy, the phenomenon of 'homo-homini lupus' (man being wolf to man) a situation which tends towards self destruction as well as the ultimate annihilation of the society at large.

In any event whereby a body of people is clearly organized as a unit for purpose of government for systematically managing the affairs of peaceful co-existence and for the maintenance and stability of their group or society and geared towards the realization of their mutually independent objectives and interest. They are said to be politically organized or to be engaged in politics. They may be called a body of politics or state that is politically organized.

What then is Politics?

Various scholars have views of politics hence according to Mbaebie (2009), politics is “who gets what, when and how? Thus, politics concerns itself with power acquisition so as to control positions of decision making and policy implementation. Politics functions in various organs, groups and bodies such as political parties, interests groups etc. Mbaebie (2009) also quoted in Robert Dal’man Modern Political Analysis as any persistent pattern of human interaction that involves to a significant extent power to rule. That is politics is interplay of contending actors which one actor always want to gain a relative advantage over the other.

According to Oriaku (2000), in introduction to Political Service quoted in Laswell on power and Society, she maintained that politics includes the decision making and enforcing processes in any group that makes and enforces rule for its members. Politics in this context may be defined as the process of making government policies. This definition implies that when government officials are called upon to take some actions or inactions in a particular field, they are always faced with a number of alternatives which might be pursued. They cannot however undertake all these simultaneously if for no other reason than that someone would conceal out others. In such a situation, public officials always select from the available alternatives. The cause of action thus taking are for that moment, government policies and the process by which policy makers choose which alternative they will not use is according to their definition of politics.

For some political writers, politics has to do with the struggle on how to win, consolidate and the use of power to influence the behavior of others in the society. in the words of one of the western eminent philosophers, Aristotle, ‘man is a political animal’. By reference to man, Aristotle meant the general mankind which comprises of men and women. This is a pointer to the fact that the field of politics is open for both men and women irrespective of their gender. Even in Nigeria or contemporary societies, most of their enactment is in support of women’s participation in politics as clearly seen in section 37 of the Republic constitution of 1979 which recognized the right of every person to assemble freely irrespective of gender.

Section 71(2) of the same constitution also accorded rights to vote and be voted for to every citizen that attained the 18years of age and also reside in Nigeria. Also, section 39 provision enunciated the principle of non discrimination and equality of sexes or gender. From this provision, the impression is that the political rights and positions of women in Nigeria are guaranteed.

Reasons for Non Participation of Women in Politics

An appraisal of women in political and decision making, the nature and degree of their involvement and participation shows that Nigerian women are politically marginalized. This politically limitations result from a variety of factors which establish women’s domain in the private sphere.

A major factor leading to women political rights violation in Nigeria is military rule in the state. Military oligarchy is undemocratic and militarism is a total obstacle to the protection of the rights, both politically and human. It is an

unconstitutional regime which believes in the doctrine that power flows through the barrel of gun. Under military rule or regime therefore, the constitution is suspended and the state is ruled by coercion, by force of arms through the promulgation of decrees and edicts.

The unfortunate position of Nigerian women following the period of above is that of unparalleled apathy, poverty, degradation, marginalization, hunger, disease, illiteracy and lack of political power. The dominance of all male military autocracy in Nigeria did not provide a conducive ground either for the protection of women's right or for their active participation in position of authority or leadership in the society. Also violence and monetization of political process continue to impede women's political behaviors and participation.

The varying systems of dominant religious practices via Christian and Moslem culture constitute a cog in the wheel of women political participation. These respective religious doctrines perpetuate the relegation and subjugation of women; they generally propagate the gospel of domination. Women thus re-inforce their inferiority status of disposition of women vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

According to Aju (2009), quoted in Eze on human rights in Africa;

'The status of African women has tended to be conditioned by tradition and the philosophy of the dominant religious...aware of the danger of over simplifying the issue, it may be stated that the dominant religious tended to encourage the submission of women to men'.

In Christianity, the genealogy of the human creation suffixes the biblical history which records that God created women from Adam's rib (one of Adam's many ribs) has been frequently used to support women's inequality, submissiveness, subordination and inferiority to man. Various cases or references from the bible tending to rationalize the subjection of women by men include the following, "The head of every woman is man and the head of every man is Christ and the head of Christ is God". (1 Corinth 11 vs 3). In another chapter it is said:

'let your women keep silence in the church for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience and they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church'.(1 Corinth. 14:34-35).

The above references have been often cited by adherents in proving God's original plan of domination over women and that women should not and are not allowed to politically participate or take up positions of leadership in the church. All in all, the over siding view is that religion is anti-women, anti feminists and anti-liberals and has been consistently manipulated for the violation of women's right to

political participation and freedom from political discrimination and subjugation both in the continent and in the whole world in general.

Furthermore, political discrimination against women and failure to recognize the value of their contributions to society has been common to the traditional setting. In Nigerian tradition and custom, many aspects of our culture inhibit the participation of women folk both in politics and in national development. These factors include the belief that women are weaker sex to men, preferences to male children, lack of believe in the importance of educating girls. Early marriages and child betrothal, female genital mutilation, dowry collection, widowhood rites an disinheritance, negative attitude towards chilliness, gender discrimination, low education, inheritance facilities, denial of land acts on ground of gender. In its totality, the result to the society is abysmally negative. The role of women in Nigeria is largely unrecognized.

Nigerian women constitute about 50% of the agricultural labor force in the sector, producing much of the country's food. UNDP research has shown that the Nigerian rural women, the poorest of the poor have been gravely neglected despite the significance of the rural sector in economic development in Nigeria.

Afolabi (2003) stressing on the importance of women's participation in politics says that if democracy permits diverse opinions and the participation of different groups, then it could not survive democracy by excluding women who constitute effectively half of the world's population and half of each an every single national population in situation vein. Tijani in Kuudu (2004) posited that empirical data shows that women given their population strength have a need to increase their participation in politics. Equally, Osuji and Gayus (2204), in comparing the percentage of women parliamentarians in the world with those of the men felt that more women should get involved in politics since the women constitute about half of the world's population.

Ezuma maintained that women should have a fair share in the decision making process in the country because they have equal rights as men to participate in politics. Afolabi (2003) noted that the 1999 constitution is an entitlement upon all citizens by law. Section 40 of the constitution stipulates that:

'Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other person and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his/her interest'.

Also section 42 sub section 1 provide that: 'A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion, political opinion shall not by any reason be subjected to any form discrimination'. The report of the political bureau (1987) sees women involvement in politics as one method of defending and promoting women's interest in the society. Mamman (2004) noted that women during the colonial era contributed to the political development of Nigeria by organizing themselves as pressure groups that canvassed for one right by fighting against injustice, oppression and exploitation of the colonial administration. Particular mention must be made about Aba women riot of 1929 which exemplified

courage and the ability of the women to mobilize themselves to fight for their rights. The accounts of these women's activities by that era clearly indicate that if women of today could organize themselves for political power just as the women of the pre-colonial era, the sky will be their limit.

Conclusion

Politics is all about an organized struggle for the application of power, use of power and sustenance of power. It is accepted by the highest law of the nation that women have rights to participate in politics as men do.

Women should be positively encouraged to fully participate in Nigerian politics bearing in mind the vital roles they play in the development of the nation. They should be encouraged to take their education seriously for when you train a woman, you trained a nation. All the cultural/religious practices should be abolished so as to give them free hand in participating in Nigeria politics.

Recommendation

Based on the situation at hand in our country Nigeria as regards women participation in politics, the author recommends that:

Women should be encouraged to participate in politics.

Since education has been identified as one of the set backs preventing women to participate fully in politics, they should be encouraged to take education more seriously.

The government should find a way of making the military to remain contented with their primary role of safeguarding the nation from external aggression.

Culture / religion should not prevent women from participating in politics.

Women should not feel inferior to men or allow themselves to be victims of exploitation, oppression, domination and subjection.

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