

# Womanhood and Political Participation



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## Abstract

Womanhood entails the act of being a woman, while political participation has to do with politics; who gets what, when and how in the society. This paper examines the factors that affect political participation of women in Nigeria. The advancement, development and fortunes of any nation are tied to the kind and quality of the political leadership it has had and continues to have. However, leadership like other processes is gendered. As a consequence, women and men who attempt to lead in the political realm go through institutionalized gender power that shapes and structures their lived experience of leadership. In Nigeria, women make up a greater percentage of the human population and they have been known to have contributed and are contributing in no small measure to the development, advancement and sustenance of the society. Notwithstanding, some of them are not politically active in Nigeria, which among other things border on their humanness, value and the concept of equality, equity, justice and human rights. This paper discovers that there are factors that affect women political participation, such as, ignorance, lack of democratic culture among Nigerian populace, and the general negative mind-set about the nature and ability of women. This paper therefore, concludes that incorporating women into the political system is an avenue for political, social, and economic growth and progress of any nation.

**Keywords:** womanhood, politics, political participation, sustainable development, Nigeria.

## Introduction

The human being by nature is a political animal, who does not exist in isolation but in a relationship with others. The humanness of the “being” is expressed through communication and interaction with one another, whether in the family, community or larger society.

Politics is a part of human nature and it exists for the purposes of good leadership and governance in order to achieve a harmonious state. Women in the Nigerian society are seen as lesser humans, who have always played a second fiddle hence they have been excluded from numerous socio-political activities in the society because they are women. In other words, they have been relegated to the background in almost all ramifications of human endeavors.

The Nigerian society and political setting right from its inception has exhibited positive support for male dominance and supremacy over female because the society believes that the men are more intelligent, capable and fit for political responsibilities, while women are only expected to carry out any outstanding role associated with domesticities. As such, politics and political activities are considered as male dominated, thus, putting woman aside. According to Cole and Sabik, femininity puts women out of the political activities and casts them out of the political context.<sup>1</sup> Women are suffering from lots of discrimination, because they are women, who are seen as weak, inferior and less intelligent than men. J.S Chafetz captures the scenario:

“The words used to describe the masculine role are quite positive: practical, logical, experimental, brave, and trustworthy.” The tone of the words used to describe femininity is considerably different. Such terms as petty, fickle, frivolous, shallow, and vain are negatively charged in the society.<sup>2</sup>

This traditional belief that woman’s place is in the kitchen, has for ages reduced women to the degrading, derogatory position and affected her aspirations, ambitions and participation in political activities. Women have seriously remained in politically invisible, inactive and in a passive state. Hence, Rosenwasser and Dean explain that voters expect politicians and leaders to have masculine traits instead of feminine. Masculine traits are more required to run higher offices.<sup>3</sup> The questions become; what is politics? Are women not intelligent beings? What are the factors that affect women political participation? These questions and many of its kind are the concern of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Cole ER & Sabik NJ Associations between Femininity and Women's Political Behavior during midlife. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 2010, 34 (4):508.

<sup>2</sup> J. S Chafetz. *Masculine, Feminine or Human? An Overview of the Sociology of the Gender Roles*. Illinois: Peacock Publishers, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenwasser & Dean 1989.

No doubt, women occupy a greater percentage of the human population, hence have significant roles to play in achieving sustainable national development. The important roles that women play in nation building cannot be overemphasized. Many women (are and) have taken bold steps to demonstrate their capacity in the building process of the society/ nation. Even at that, there are factors that mitigate against women political participation, which is the interest of this paper.

### **Understanding Politics**

The word **politics** is derived from the Greek word *politika*, **which** relates to the citizens, civic or the state. Generally, the word **politics** is defined as the art and science of good governance and also the ability to persuade and make influence in the sovereign electorate to provide political power and authority in the governmental affairs of the state. In other words, politics entails the act of governance in the control of the affairs of the state. The affairs and management of the state can be both internal and external, hence the economic, social and administrative affairs in the public sector revolve round governance.

To Patrick Neil M. Santiago, politics is part of man's nature... It exists for the purposes of good leadership and governance in order to subjugate a harmonious state.<sup>4</sup> Robert Dahl agrees that it is any persistent pattern of human relationship that involves to a significant extent, control, influence, power or authority. It is also ubiquitous; it exists where there are human organizations or social groups, such as churches, clubs, women guild, professional organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The essence of politics is to organize humanity, so as to achieve national and sustainable development. Held succinctly explains: politics entails a study of activities, negotiation and

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Neil M. Santiago, on the Nature of Politics: A Critical Analysis, International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences, 5(3) May-Jun 2020,p.636

<sup>5</sup> R Dahl, *Who Governs, Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961, p.30.



struggle over the use, production and distribution of resources.<sup>6</sup> This however emphasises the importance of governance, since the production and distribution of resource play significant role in national development.

However, politics can either be formal, semi formal or informal. According Charles A. Obiora et al:

Formal politics refers to the operation of a constitutional system of government and publicly defined institutions and procedures. Semi-formal politics is politics in government associations, such as neighbourhood associations or student government. Informa politics is understood as forming alliances, exercising power and protecting and advancing particular ideas or goals. This includes' anything that affect one's daily life...<sup>7</sup>

The ethical and moral principles of politics is centred general welfare (or common good) of the society. It usually focused on the roles of political parties with motive to administer and manage the governmental affairs of the state. The political dynamics of the government administration is always intended to develop the society.

In essence, the end goal in politics is on how to gain political powers through party affiliation. This is the usual issue and concern of politics as the self-interest for collective recognition and respect; self-actualization and social stratification may have ethical and moral impact in the society. The idea of political deception is always there once the political influence and persuasion appears in winning the confidence of the sovereign electorate.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Held, quoted by Obiora, Charles Arinze, Onwunyi, Ugochukwu M, "Contending and Conceptual Issues in Politics of Gender" *Contemporary Gender Issues*, eds Emeka Obi, Charles Obiora, Njideka Ebisi, Ifeoma Ezeabasili, Oniotsha: Bookpoint, 2018, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Obiora, Charles Arinze, Onwunyi, Ugochukwu M, "Contending and Conceptual Issues in Politics of Gender" *Contemporary Gender Issues*, eds Emeka Obi, Charles Obiora, Njideka Ebisi, Ifeoma Ezeabasili, Oniotsha: Bookpoint, 2018, p.36.

<sup>8</sup> Ada odionye, C. Ofoego., Education as a Panacea to Women Active Participation in Nigerian Politics, *Journal of Education and Practice* Vol.7, No.30, 2016, p. 215.

### Factors that affect Women Political Participation

There are factors that affect women political participation in Nigeria. These factors include: lack of formal education, patriarchal culture, religion, stereotyping of sex roles, women's lack of confidence and poor self-esteem, lack of finance, political violence and intimidation, family responsibilities, party system among others.

First, lack of formal education affects women political participation in Nigeria. This points at women's inability to read and write or to be knowledgeable, like their male counterpart. Lack of finance, as well as favoritism can lead to this. According to Fidelis Nwobi, low level of education makes most women least qualified for political offices, due to low educational attainment. This is also an effect of colonialism, where men were more favoured by women.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the nature of the party system. The political parties in Nigeria are male-dominated and this affects women political participation. Men usually occupy the strategic positions of the executive members and make decisions in their favor. Just as it is said, that majority carries the vote, the men are the majority and continue to carry the votes, as regards politics and political issues. Fidelis Nwobi, explains again that, it is obvious that no cockroach will win a case in any court, where a fowl is the chief judge. This implies that it is very difficult for women to win elections, where men decide the political outcome.<sup>10</sup> Hence O. Aina and C. Ukeje explain more:

Political parties in Nigeria are more or less rhetoric than real and obviously pay lip service to the gender equality agenda. The political parties are characterized by a gamut of problems including undemocratic administration of the parties such as violence, money politics, blackmail, name calling among others.<sup>11</sup>

Political party gatherings are usually a night affair and women who attend such gatherings are sometimes labelled as possessing easy virtues. Fidelis Nwobi further adds that most pertinent political party meetings are usually held at night and this makes it difficult for women to cope, for

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<sup>9</sup> Fidelis Nwobi, "Culture and Women Participation in Politics" *Contemporary Gender Issues*, eds Emeka Obi, Charles Obiora, Njideka Ebisi, Ifeoma Ezeabasili, Oniotsha: Bookpoint, 2018, p.119.

<sup>10</sup> Fidelis Nwobi, "Culture and Women Participation in Politics" *Contemporary Gender Issues*, eds Emeka Obi, Charles Obiora, Njideka Ebisi, Ifeoma Ezeabasili, Oniotsha: Bookpoint, 2018, p.116.

<sup>11</sup> O. Aina, C. Ukeje., "Engendering the Political Space: The role of NGOs in ensuring the Participation of Women in Politics", *Ife Social Review*, July, 1998, p.35.

the fear of being nicknamed tramps by their respective husbands and even fellow women. Most women therefore see politics as a dirty game, played by men alone and simply withdraws from it.<sup>12</sup> L.E Okoye et al, point out that generally, Nigerian politics is regarded as "hazardous," and female politicians are generally regarded as having questionable moral character due to their desires and ambitions.<sup>13</sup>

Third, family background and responsibilities. Family background and family responsibilities affect women political participation, in the sense that, women are expected to marry, bear children, take care of their home rather than pursue political career. Fidelis Nwobi gives a detailed analysis of this situation:

Most women are involved, not only in child bearing, but also in child rearing. Thus, much of the time they could have devoted to politics is taken up by their maternal challenges and obligations...most men do not allow their women to deeply or actively get involved in politics, for the fear of losing their wives to political activities and gladiators, becoming more powerful or more influential than them (husbands), reneging their domestic/family responsibilities, among other things.<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, patriarchal culture, religion and stereotyping of sex roles affect women political participation: Almost every culture frown at women participation in politics, because of the mentality of women been seen and not heard. According to Fidelis Nwobi;

Among Igbo, Hausa, and Tiv people, women are seen as domestic beings, with their place in the kitchen. Most cultures in Nigeria forbid women from competing with men in issues involving public interest... Also, among the Islam-practicing Hausa people, the religious practice known as "purdah" forbids women from been seen in public.<sup>15</sup>

This culture has given rise to women not participating in political activities.

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<sup>12</sup> Fidelis Nwobi, p.117.

<sup>13</sup> L..E Okoye et al, An Empirical Analysis of Women Participation in Nigerian Politics from 1963 to 2022, *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports*, 2022, p.52

<sup>14</sup> Fidelis Nwobi, p.117

<sup>15</sup> Fidelis Nwobi, p.117

However, some religions and religious beliefs ensure women are excluded in politics. Hence, E. Luka, explains that religion ensures that a significant majority of women are excluded from economic and political activities, including voting and running for office.<sup>16</sup> Islamic religious practice is interested giving girls away in early marriages, denying them an education, and limiting their ability to participate effectively in politics in general and when selecting candidates of their choice. Rashida Adamu Oyoru explains further:

...religion, also works to promote gender stereotypes that are discriminatory against women. For instance, in some northern parts of Nigeria, women are in Purdahs out of reverence for Islam. This suggests that they are segregated in their rooms and that only their spouses have full access to them. The spouse is the only one who must satisfy their requirements. It is best to let rumors about how people are living since the majority of homes are below the poverty line<sup>17</sup>

Also, women who engage in politics and political activities are stereotyped, shamed and called all sort of negative names. Women's stigmatization by other women inhibits them from participating in politics; in many cases, the lack of true and decisive affirmative action to encourage women to participate in politics leaves a legacy that limit women's political participation as candidates and voters.<sup>18</sup> Udedibie points out that:

The stereotypical role in which women are seen as subordinate to men hinder the women's ability to exercise choices that would enable her to acquire the necessary skills for mobility in the global economy....<sup>19</sup>

The social, religious and cultural limits set by the society, affect women advancement and active political participation.

Fifth, is political violence. The political system in Nigeria is characterized by various forms of violence, which women may not withstand. These include threats, bullying, intimidation, assault

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<sup>16</sup> E.Luka, 2011, p.34.

<sup>17</sup> Rasheda, p.308

<sup>18</sup> L.E Okoye, p.53

<sup>19</sup> U.J Udedie, Issue in women and national Development, Keynote address presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Forum for African Women Educationalists Nigeria, p.5

among others. Politics is a game for the strong-minded as well as a do or die (desperation) affair. Rashida, points out violence and threat Political violence is another element that lowers women's political participation in Nigeria. Due to the involvement of thugs, before, during, and after elections and the ensuing insecurity, which involves the loss of lives and property, politics is generally out of the question for women.<sup>20</sup> A Female candidate Dorathy Nyone described her own experience by saying, "A ward chairman was shot dead; all the women and most of the males fled the scene. My partner picked me up and drove me home. I was afraid since, to determine the winners by hand, only men who were well equipped for the bloodshed remained behind."<sup>21</sup>

It is evident that the foundation of Nigerian politics is high political virility; the candidates' capacity to take it by force when force is necessary, and the ability to march violence with violence. Women are viewed as being weak, passive to participate in politics, leadership and governance, whereas men are viewed as being more capable, competitive, strong, independent, and willing to battle in political doings. With this violent situation, many women are afraid of politics and active political participation.

Financial constraint is not left out. The Nigerian political system is monetized. In other words, the politics played in Nigeria is money-centric type that the highest bidder is favoured. This affect women active participation in politics. In the words of Paul Amah, it is usually referred to as money bag politics. Election periods have become a time to display wealth by contestants. Electorates are deceived into voting for the highest bidders.<sup>22</sup> E.E Nelson gives another explanation:

Financial resources constrain women's political efficacy as women find it difficult to fund elections, including payment of registration and nomination fees and funds to finance the kind of elaborate and expensive electioneering campaigns required to mobilize supporters and voters to guarantee success at the polls.<sup>23</sup>

Cost of election In Nigeria, no doubt determines the success of any election. According to Nda, an important obstacle for women is the high expense of contributing to political parties and

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<sup>20</sup> Rashida p.309.

<sup>21</sup> Luka, 2011, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Amah, "The Nigerian Woman in Politics", *Contemporary Gender Issues*, p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> E. E Nelson, "The Nigerian Women in Politics" p.213.



campaigns. The least expensive governor's campaign would probably cost 200 million naira. How many men are capable of raising the same amount of money for women, and how many women are capable of raising such a sizeable amount of money? Given that she would have had little impact on party funding and formation, which political party would select a woman for that position? <sup>24</sup>

In a system where lots of money is needed to purchase votes and compromise conscience, candidates without deep pockets and money bags as support cannot achieve their goals of running for public office. The majority of parties charge a hefty fee for nomination forms to run for elective positions. Their average wealth can be partially blamed for Nigerian women's reluctance to actively participate in politics. The high costs charged by political parties for candidates to run for office may be properly attributed to the cheerleader and clapper positions that women have chosen in these collectives. Women's hopes to participate are also dashed by their limited access to credit and money on the economic front.<sup>25</sup> This money or finance factor has significant role in mobilizing and winning elections in Nigeria, at all levels.

Lack of women's political awareness, interest and solidarity affect women political participation. In Nigeria, most women are politically aware, while some lack political interest and support from their fellow women. In other words, the majority of women have little interest in participating in politics and this can sometimes be attributed to a variety of social factors, including their socialization, the idea that politics and leadership are not for them, their disinterest in political competition with men in any party, social stigma, socio-cultural issues, and religious beliefs, among others. According to Abdu;

Most women would appropriately prioritize their efforts if there were justice in the world by getting married, having children, and doing solely domestic duties rather than engaging in politics... <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Nda, 2003, p.38.

<sup>25</sup>Luka, 2011, p.56.

<sup>26</sup>Abdu 2002, p. 20.

Similarly, women who have political interest lack support from fellow women. Most women will prefer to support a male counterpart in an election rather than supporting their fellow female folks.

Godfatherism is another critical element that affects Nigerian politics. It is assumed that anyone that does not have the blessings of the godfather will not go anywhere in terms of contesting for any position, be it male or female.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

From the above analysis and explanations, it is evident that women's equal and active political participation is not only a question of rights, justice, and democracy but represents a necessary condition for women's right to be respected, valued and interest to shape public decision and national development. In other words, women involvement in politics plays a significant role in societal development and achieving sustainable development.

However, women's political participation is crucial for several reasons, encompassing the advancement of gender equality, the improvement of leadership/governance, and the promotion of sustainable development.

On enhancement of governance and leadership, A democratic system thrives when it accurately represents its population. Women make up roughly half of the global population, and their participation ensures that their perspectives and needs are addressed in policy-making.

Also, it is evident that higher levels of women's participation in politics can lead to greater transparency and accountability in governance. Women often advocate for policies that focus on social justice, education, and health, which benefit society as a whole.

Women in political positions tend to prioritize issues such as childcare, education, and healthcare, which are fundamental for societal development. These policies help in building a strong foundation for economic growth and development and social stability. The lack of female involvement in public affairs obstructs the expansion of organizations. There is therefore the need for the prioritization of women's leadership, by NGOs, churches, schools, government sectors by

taking measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

The current women empowerment policy be reviewed to reflect the actual situation and that government should also establish a network of women leaders so that women can share their leadership experiences and successes and challenges to inspire other women who aspire to be leaders.

Conclusively, women's political participation is not just a matter of justice and equality but also a key avenue for political, social, and economic growth and progress. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate in political processes leads to more resilient, inclusive, stable and prosperous nation.

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