GENDER, POWER AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA: Lessons from Selected Plays of TessOnwueme

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Abstract
The gender problematic is profoundly central to the leadership debate and one of the main elements of positive leadership in gender studies is that of significant inclusion of all gender types especially women in political contests. Unfortunately because of their lack of needed skills that can ensure a high degree of competitiveness, only a few women have ventured into mainstream political leadership in Nigeria. Their impact in reconstructing the political system is thus quite negligible in an environment that is dominantly patriarchal. Tess Onwueme has interrogated these thematic issues quite succinctly in some of her works that are treated in this study. Increasingly today, the desire for power and leadership within the existing power structure has made women venture more into politics. It is the contention of this paper that gender and political power contests need to be extricated from situations that entrench sexism in leadership aspirations and more fundamentally that for societal transformation to be achieved; there is the need to make a distinction between the sexual and the material reality of socio-economic conditions of production in Nigeria.

Introduction
This paper seeks to find out whether there is a huge disparity in the developmental level between the male and female gender, whether men and women enjoy the same privileges politically, economically and even socially in the Nigerian political system, what are the

constraining and discriminatory factors against women, do they express themselves in form of sexual prejudice, how are the different sexes expressed in the power relations in Nigeria and to what extent does this affect the attempt to access political power in Nigeria.

The concern with gender relations in development generally has further strengthened the debate that equality in the status of men and women is fundamental to every society. In all societies attention is drawn to the differences in entitlements, perceived capabilities and social expectations of men and women, boys and girls. Reflecting the norms and social values of society, the differences in the status of men and women have profound implications for how they participate and are located within the power structure of their society and indeed their access to leadership positions. These differences embody social and power relations and are expressed in the level of access to pubic goods by the different sex types and the huge disparity in the socio-economic development of the genders in Nigeria. Omonubi-Mc Donnell (2003:2) opines that:

> Politically, Nigerian women are a negligible and undermined force, with little political involvement. Economically, they constitute the majority of the peasant labour force in the agricultural sector, while most of the others occupy the bottom of the occupational ladder and continue to be channeled into service and domestic occupations. The consequence of the unequal status between men and women is a high level of economic and political powerlessness among women, powerlessness in turn retard development at any level, politically, economically and socially.

As a way of properly situating these analyses, the paper is divided into sections. Section one deals with introduction followed by

conceptual clarifications. The next section addresses the issue of how power and leadership contests are handled in the context of gender relations. The work ends with a conclusion.

(ii). Conceptual Clarifications
A. Gender
CIRDDOC (2001:1) defines gender as a system of roles and relationship between women and men that are determined not biologically but by the social, political and economic context.

Gender can equally be seen as the process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male and female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and feminity beyond biological differences, all other differences between men and women are socially constructed and have no logical relationship with their biological compositions. The journey of the Nigerian woman into public life right from being a girl is one long battle against harmful traditional and cultural practices that threaten her life and put her down generally. Scott (1988:2) captures the dynamic nature of gender succinctly thus:

> Gender is the social organization of sexual differences but this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men, rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily difference. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups and time since nothing about the body including women's reproductive organs, determines univocally how social division will be shaped.

It is clear from the above conceptualization that sex differentiation alone does not lead to a socially significant gender issue, but it is only when exclusion and discrimination coincides with sex status,

when meanings are attached to sex and when role setting and assignment is sexually determined that a gender question arises.

(B). Power

The concept of power is central in political discourses. It however defies a universally recognized definition. Thomas Hobbes (1960) a British philosopher has opined that "power is the present means to secure some future apparent good". He saw in every human being "a general inclination… a perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death".

In the political system, power is always associated with the ability of an individual or group of actors or institutions to regulate behaviour through the use of coercion, hence power unlike authority or influence has physical effect. Max Weber (1977) had stated that the concept of power connotes the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. Weber (1977:152) concluded that the concept of power is highly comprehensive from the point of view of sociology. That all connectable combinations of circumstances may put the actor in a position to impose his will in a given situation". He further observed that the state is distinguishable from other associations because of its successful claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of the order.

One of the dominant issues of discourse in the world today is gender and the struggle for equal rights for women, a struggle to move the women from the marginal to the centre of power. The popular coinage being women empowerment. This got endorsement by the United Nations since 1946 with the setting up of a Commission on the Status of Women aimed at focusing on the promotion of women's rights in political, economic, social and educational fields. This became a global phenomenon following the end of the United Nations decade on Women in 1985. One of the

avenues therefore for accessing power and political power at that is in the context of political participation. Indeed there is a dialectical relationship between political power and political participation. Okwuoba (1995:6) opines correctly that there can be no political power without political participation and that political participation is an activity directed at the objective of control of the decision making machinery a means to a goal. Political power is also directly linked to the question of political leadership.

(C). Political Leadership

Political leadership means the ability and willingness of person in position of authority to harness the resources of the country for the greatest good and for the benefit of the greatest number of its citizens.

Dunmoye (1991:7-9) posit that political leadership must be able to set an agenda for national development that will take into cognizance the evolution of a national consensus through social engineering which will involve the issue of national unity given Nigeria's heterogeneity in every aspect of societal life. Political leadership is of great importance in the desire for a sustainable and stable polity. Deakaa (2007) has added to the discourse on leadership that for developing political systems like Nigeria with a myriad of socio-economic and political problems, focused political leadership is required to confront these challenges and to also bring together the disparate groups and interest with the Nigerian polity and mobilize them for the much desired structural transformation and economic development.

Institutional, political and psychological resources are thus mobilized in competition and conflict in order to address the aspirations of followers in Nigeria. The stall in the process of development has been blamed on the quality of leadership right from the period of political independence in 1960. What is apparent is that there is the need to give serious consideration to the manner

of leadership recruitment in Nigeria which celebrates mediocrity, parochialism irresponsibility and marginalization on the basis of status and sex.

(iii). Gender Inequality and Political Participation

In all male dominated societies, the social relations and activities are governed by patriarchal systems of socialization and cultural practices that favour the interest of men above those of women. Despite a general commitment of the principle of non discrimination as enshrined in section 2 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Nigeria falls short of the desired result of giving males and females equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, politically and economically. Evidences bound that several negative aspects of gender relations, such as gender based division of labour, disparities between males and females, access to power and resources and gender biases in rights and entitlements remain pervasive in Nigeria.

Nzongala-Ntalaja (2001) collaborates an earlier work by Lipset (2000) on the definition of democracy as a mode of governance based on among other principles that of participation and a social mechanism that permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions. If democratic practic generally connotes the people's rule, for themselves and by themselves, it follows therefore that both sexes should be engaged in the leadership of the society. Other characteristics of democracy include justice and equity and it is only just and equitable that all the segments of the population be included and represented in the power structure and indeed the governance process (Dahl 1989).

Political participation expressed in access to power is a civil duty of all citizens and it is usually an indicator of how politically healthy a country is. Milbraith (1965) has categorized various forms of participation from the highest to the lowest into gladiator activities such as holding public or party office, etc to transitional activities such as attending a party meeting or rally etc and spectator activities such as voting or exposing oneself to political stimuli etc. Of course, there are those in the society who are completely apathetic to politics and political developments around them. They simply do not engage and are not interested in politics at all. The obvious explanation for this kind of attitude in the context of a developing democracy like Nigeria has to do with the inability of the political system to respond positively to the needs of the people using state available resources.

Different analytical perspectives have been employed by scholars from both the European continent and in recent years by African scholars to explore the plight of women of African descent in the wider context of societal transformation. The Marxist feminist paradigm, a western construct employs the varieties of race, class and gender to review the African woman's subjugation and such scholars such as Sharon Stitchter, Elizabeth Schmidt, Nancy Folbre amongst others have aided our comprehension of African women's subjugation from a system of production inquiry. Their various studies of the African woman range from the pre-colonial and colonial system of production to unequal gender associations and class alliances. These studies further show that women's subjugation must be viewed in terms of gender relations and to linkages with the processes of production and reproduction within the framework of historical materialism. Radical feminists have argued that women's repression is a consequence of gender control and not class domination, thus, the exploitation and marginalization of women is the most integral form of domination.

Fundamentally, the patriarchal system of the production paradigm spotlights the material cornerstone of gender exploration. This view reinforces the argument about class conscious, gender oriented society in which a class of male bourgeoisies possesses the system of production and a powerless proletarian workforce (Zillah:1979). Omonubi-Mcdonnell (2003:16)

has reiterated and further pushed this argument by stating that the pattern of association in Africa is premised on gender specific labour groupings, production based on women's agrarian efforts and land ownership established on the recognition of sexual functions and patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance configurations.

However, for many scholars, African feminism is the solution to emancipating, the masses from all forms of dominations. Proponents of this approach emphasize that African feminism is a dogma which calls for emancipation from subjugation and injustices that emanate from the economic, socio-political and habitual manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual and class biases. African feminism recognizes the uniqueness of the genders but emphasizes correlation and complementality.

Political leadership and power contexts: Exploring the Gender Question in Tess Onwueme's plays.
The success of any political system in terms of its attempt to propel and ensure the process of societal development is highly dependent on its capacity to ensure equal or better representation of its entire people in the decision making processes irrespective of their sexes.

This imperative was acknowledged and accorded its importance in the declaration of Affirmative Action by the United Nations Conference on women (1995) in Beijing, China, where it decided that 30 percent of all positions in government owned concerns and agencies should be given to women. Other international instruments adopted to this regards in narrowing women marginalization and mainstreaming in the decision making processes include-The United Nations' Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women held in 1979, followed by other conferences held on women in Copenhagen (1980) Nairobi (1985) and New York (2000).

One theme ran through all of these conferences, namely, the overall desire to improve the lot of women and address the problem of gender inequality and social injustice that most women are subjected to.

Nigeria indeed has tried to respond to these developments from the international arena by articulating policies and programs that seek to reduce gender inequality in the social, economic and political spheres. For instance in 2000, the Nigerian government introduced the National Policy on Women whose objectives are to ensure that the principles and provisions on equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law and non-discrimination against any citizen, as is enshrined in the Nigerian constitution are indeed effectively enforced. Adereti (2005n:153) states that the policy is aimed to also mainstream gender perspective in all policies and programs based on a systematic gender analysis at all levels of government.

Before 1995, women had made remarkable efforts at challenging male dominance of politics especially access to political power and leadership positions. At the end of the elections into the state Houses of Assembly under the General Babangida transition to civil rule program, women won 27 of the total 1172 seats across the country. This was a mere 2.3%. This was remarkable however because the Nigerian government had not formally done anything to promote women's share in electoral politics (George-Genyi and Genyi, 2008:151).

Of the 8810 councillors at the local government level only 143 were women. At the National Assembly, of the 109 Senators only 3 were women, while 12 female representatives make up the 360 House of Representative members. Throughout the 36 states Houses of Assembly, only in Benue did one woman, Mrs. Margaret Icheen emerge the speaker. She was however forced to resign before her tenure ran out because of what Genyi and George-Genyi (2008:153) have referred to as "a complex wave of political shenanigans and systematic political conspiracy against her".

Lagos state had a female deputy speaker. The Fourth Republic between 1999 2003 could only record a female deputy governor in Lagos state. However, constant disagreement with the governor made her ineffective at least in terms of being a rallying point for women.

Unfortunately, female members of the Benue State House of Assembly were a formidable force that moved against her removal and this factor has remained a major challenge against feminist movement in Nigeria. Tess Onwueme (1992) in " Go Tell it to Women" has also described this disposition of women towards each other. The play cast a contrast between rural and urban women. That the latter having assumed new status treats with contempt their rural counterpart and are more concerned with the glamour of those positions, instead of mobilizing for gender identity politics.

The Nigerian state has made impressive progress in responding to its policy on women and the affirmative action principle, by its appointment of women into executive positions. In 1999 118 ambassadorial appointments were made and 14 of these were women. Of the 662 career diplomatic staff 69 were women, 13.4% of Federal cabinet members were women, 1.6% women councillors, 1.2% local council chairpersons, 2.8% female councillors and 3.3% female representatives. This progress however falls short both at the legislative and executive levels of the expectations of affirmative action in Nigeria (LEDAP, 2003).

At the end of the 2003 General Elections, much progress was recorded in terms of women accessing elective offices. At the states Houses of Assembly, 38 female legislators emerged compared to 12 in 1999, 21 for House of Representative compared to 12 in1999, while the Senate recorded 3 female Senators same as in 1999.

In the run up to the gubernatorial election in 1991, there were 293 aspirants that contested the primaries, only seven were women. The two political parties on whose platform the elections were conducte3d, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) were dominated by men. The best women got from the exercise was two deputy governorship positions. Shettima (1995:77) stated that of the total 30 Presidential aspirants, only one was female. A major reason for women's handicap then and now has to do with the huge monetary requirement for Nigerian brand of politics, compared to men; women do not possess the financial muscle required for the electoral process.

The Abacha period (1995-1997) was one characterized by heavy manipulation of the political process, a direct antithesis of liberal democratic principles and most Nigerians refrained from the process. To country only returned to liberal transition to civil rule in 1999 and this provided the platform for both men and women to participate and vie for political offices, there was no concessionary opportunities for women either by the political parties or the Nigerian government. Significant progress was made at the local council, 9 women emerged council chairpersons out of the 774 local councils across the nation. In the absence of any institutionalized mechanism that seek to ensure gender representation, the achievements made by women are remarkable considering the wide array of constraints the way of women in the political process.

There is a regional trend in progress being made by women to access state power and assume leadership position. The comparism shows that women from the southern part of the country are ahead of their counterpart in the north largely as a result the conservative Islamic representation for women in the north, supporting evidence indicate that a total of 10 seats were won by women in the north central zone comprising Benue, Kogi, Plateau, Nassarawa, Taraba and Kaduna, while only 5 women were elected from the other states that are in the core north. The scenario has improved with the 2007 General elections where more women have

been elected in the parliament and other spheres of political power. This progress has however being made outside the purview of legislation and institutionalized mechanisms.

A major challenge that has come the way of Nigerian women is that acknowledged by Tess Onwueme in The Reign of Wazobia, 1988 where she laments the oppression of women as a result of mis-governance by the leadership led by men, and so for her solution lies in empowering the women through self actualization and equal partnership with their male counterpart in the arena of leadership.

Onwueme (1992:152) challenges women to reject their treatment even within the home front as inferior beings and take up their empowerment as their personal commitment to ensure their empowerment and social re-engineering in love. In other words, they do not deny their love for their spouse and home but use this as a means to achieve the objective of equity, equality and empowerment. She provides insights into new dimensions for feminists in their conceptualization of power, empowerment and marginality and where continuity and change are contesting values in the construction and deconstruction of the woman question.

It is of note that one of the major constraints to women accessing power and political leadership in Nigeria has to do with illiteracy and low level of educational attainment. It is also of a fact that education is a key to development of any nation. Thus both men and women but especially women must be educated to be empowered and break the cycle of female deprivation. From the play, Wazobia takes it upon herself to informally educate her women to be empowered, to participate in nation building as she helped to restructure her town. That in the quest for this empowerment and equality, the woman must take her motherhood as the supreme responsibility and power that nature bestows on women over men.

Onwueme's story portrays the realities of her time and challenges the code of patriarchy, a major constraint to women

development in contemporary times, using women in active agents of change for development. Wazobia is presented as providing the platform for leadership for the women and insists that once women are able to access power and political leadership, they should use it as a basis for empowerment for all.

Conclusion

The nature and character of the Nigerian state inherently does not allow for effective and massive participation of women especially in the political process. This is more so that access to power is a hot contest and also that access to state power directly translates into personal gain with the result being that access to political power is a do or die venture and thus few could afford it, least of all women.

However, two issues have characterized the question of gender politics and mainstreaming in Nigeria. One of this has to do with the elitist and episodic character in which gender issues of representation access to political leadership have been pursued since the era of the National Commission for Women Society (NCWS) and that of Better Life Program (BLP) in the late 80s. The struggles to improve on gender representation and access to political power and leadership roles have largely taken an elite and opportunistic character. The women who therefore find themselves in leadership positions do not see their role as a function of gender identity politics as is advanced in the Reign of Wazobia by Tess Onwueme.

Gender identity politics should be about representation and access to politically institutionalized decision making processes that have strong legislative implications on the polity. On the basis of this and other such constraining factors like cultural impediments and the power configuration, and the inability to ensure legislative and institutionalized processes, the question of main streaming gender in political leadership has not been considerably achieved.

There is the need for women to take this battle to their own tents, especially for those women who are placed in leadership positions. This should be a veritable platform for their own mobilization to present a united front in order to extract more

benefits from the state in form of participation.

The Nigerian state needs to democratize the political space in order to accommodate more for political participation and access to political power and leadership.

Related to the above is the necessary legal framework that guarantees the rights of women especially in achieving the provisions of international and domestic instruments for more participation in the governance process of Nigeria.

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