Gender Discourse in Nigerian Politics: Understanding the rise and Growth of Women's Participation

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Abstract

This article examines the lingering issue of gender inequality in Nigeria, with a special reference to women's participation in politics. The issue has been recurrently kicked back and disregarded by the government. Broadly, the Nigerian woman is continually at a lesser par and treated unequally when compared to her foreign counterparts. Often, culture is usually the justification wielded for the denial of women's rights and the perpetuation of gender inequality in Nigerian politics. The latter has been traced to the cultures, traditions, and beliefs, which gave a strong foundation to its perpetuation, facilitated by some harmful cultural practices including female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, child brides or rape and forced marriages, among other such cases of abuse against women. The struggle for women's empowerment is explained using theories deducted from the western world, whose antecedents differ from that of Africa. In light of the foregoing, the article adopted the historical method of description and analysis to shed more light on the phenomenon. The article discovered that in Nigeria, the power relations between men and women still undermine women's role in politics, and their socioeconomic and diplomatic values due to the cultural consideration of women as only relevant to the social side of life, and the cultural composition of the society that perpetuates these gender roles. Nonetheless, the role of women in governance has continued to attract the international feminist audience and has been at the centre of discourse for decades.

Keywords: Gender equality, Feminism, Third-wave feminism, women empowerment

Introduction

Gender inequality in the arena of Nigerian politics has not received adequate attention. Instead, over the years scholars have devoted attention to the general phenomenon of gender inequality in Nigeria. For instance, Makama (2013) opines that women constitute about half of the population of the Nigerian state and are known to play vital roles as mothers, producers, managers, community developers/organizers, etc. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men despite their dual roles in the productive and reproductive sphere. Gender inequality is often stern in social structures that have institutionalized conceptions of gender differences. Cultural stereotypes are possible explanations for gender inequality and the resulting gender disparity. Gender inequality has been a constant violation of human rights thus causing gender discrimination and abuse of rights. In the aspect of the female gender, the inhumane treatment of women particularly caused a need for gender self-awareness thus bringing women to participate in political matters. The introduction of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria in which Nigeria and other world leaders agreed to put an end to poverty, and gender inequality and promote women empowerment among others by 2015 has been an abysmal failure in the drive for women's inclusion in the electioneering process in Nigeria (Mordi 2011).

The clamour for gender equality received a boost due to the universal declaration of human rights, which was adopted at the United Nations General Assembly on 10th December 1948. It saw the rise of the international feminist movement in the 1970s which was followed by the declaration of the International Women's Year in 1975. By 1980 there was a conference to review the achievements of the United Nations decade for women, equality and peace which was held in Nairobi. That significant event marked the birth of global feminism because over 157 participating countries agreed to adopt the Nairobi strategies up to 2000 in which all issues were declared to be women's issues. It was agreed that the female flock would be able to attain the necessities of life, through the help of their male counterparts who shared their access to opportunities.

Therefore, even though President Babangida (1985-1993) was the first to set up an official agency to work on women development, the Abacha regime that came into power on November 17, 1993, treated women poorly on the political front. It appointed only one woman as a minister in the 36-member cabinet it constituted that month. On March 20, 1995, when the late General Sanni Abacha reconstituted his cabinet, three women made the list, but they were junior ministers in the Education, FCT and Foreign Affairs Ministries. At the state level, the picture was less encouraging. No woman held a portfolio of

Chief Executive, whether during the 29 years that the military-ruled or during the ten years that civilians were in power. During the Obasanjo regime, women were not considered in politics. The Yar'Adua and Jonathan administrations tried to a large extent to include women in the electioneering process, but not much was achieved. The participation of women in politics did not start until very recently. This was due largely to the impact of the western media and the influence of the feminist ideology on Nigerian society (Mordi 2011).

Considering the foregoing, this article addresses the literature on feminism that has tried to tackle the issue of women inequality in politics. It equally examines the way the governments have attempted to address the glaring differences in women's participation in politics to bridge the yawning gap.

Literature Review

African societies, including Nigeria, are replete with several cultural practices which tend to promote male superiority over the female gender. In the case of Nigeria, for instance, Enemuo (1999) has rightly observed that "Nigerian communities approve such practices as a preference for the male child, payment of bride price, female circumcision or female genital mutilation, FGM, negative attitude (to women) towards childlessness, degrading widowhood practices and inheritance practices that discriminate against women… giving away girls in marriage early and without their consent". He has further analyzed the implication of each of these discriminatory practices against women in the following words:

> The widespread preference for the male child means, in part, the families often prefer to send the boy to school and not the girl since she is expected to stay at home to help nurture her siblings and to be married off soon. It is therefore not surprising that women constitute the majority of the illiterate population of most communities. Girls given out early in marriage not only have their education aborted but are additionally exposed to early pregnancies and viscous vaginal fistula, a disease that leaves its victims deformed and unable to control urination. When marriages do not result in children, it is often the wives that are blamed and consequently subjected to inhuman psychological pressures and dangerous medications. Traditional widowhood practices in most communities are such that compound the tragedy of the unfortunate women and also seriously endanger her health (pp319-320).

However, Enemuo's opinion does not fully explain gender inequality in Nigerian politics. In general, it merely details the harmful effects of early marriages in Nigeria's Muslim- dominated Northwest in which the female gender is given out in early marriages. Indeed, over the years certain cultural practices had given men the authority to oppress the female gender in terms of their social, political, and economic rights. Yet, Nigerian history is replete with evidence of women who were in power even before colonialism in Africa, that occupied diverse positions including spirit mediums, seers, and advisors. Women also dominated the spiritual system across the lands. However, unlike the positions they held before colonialism, it is very rare to see a 21st-century woman holding any position of spiritual relevance.

Many other scholars including Aina (2012), Soetan (2014), and Agbalajobi (2010), Emama (2022) have unveiled the travails of the female gender, notably humiliation, manipulation, and marginalization through several culturally biased norms and practices which have culminated in systematic institutionalization of male superiority over the female in all spheres of life – socio-culturally, economically and politically. Indeed, the life cycle of a woman from the cradle to the grave is said to be characterized by all manners of violent related manipulation and control of women by men through sex selection, abortion, different access to medical care, incest, and sexual harassment in the workplace, rape, marital rape, abuse of widows, etc.

Our focus here, however, is to explore the process through which the Nigerian political space became predominantly a reserve for the male gender to the exclusion of their female counterparts and identify instances of Nigerian women who have been politically marginalized or otherwise. To Haywood (2007), the Nigerian political scene has been that of a male game. On the other hand, to Ruiz (2012), the two key terms that are central to the feminist discussion have been 'gender' and 'patriarchy'. In the feminist context, gender is not a replacement word for sex or the biological difference between a man and a

woman. Instead, it refers merely to the power relations between men and women, how the relations have been socially and habitually implemented, and how the power is deployed. Patriarchy, on the other hand, refers to the system where the female is subordinated to the male (in power and status terms).

Feminism in Nigeria originated from an increasing demand to improve the quality of life of Nigerian women; it has been a distant tool of intellectual discourse and political action for the majority of women scholars and activists in Sub-Saharan Africa (Adamu, 2006). In Nigeria, records of women's struggles to correct acts of discrimination and violence have been in existence since the 19th century. Nigerian women have been recognized to play significant roles in anti-colonial struggles. The struggle for Nigeria's independence and social modernization also resulted in the formation of women's movements. The pre-colonial and colonial eras revealed the active participation of women in activities aimed to better their lot. The intervention of women in the social and political landscape helped to improve their status at the grassroots, national and regional levels. In Nigeria, women have been involved in various movements and activities in their ways even though such movements were not identified or labelled with any specific name. In the early stages, feminism as a concept attracted negative connotations, and usually, feminist women were associated and/or stigmatized as being 'men haters', frustrated or divorced women with nothing better to do but 'cause trouble'. Thus, feminism gained attention in Nigeria as a result of different attempts made by women to secure and sustain equal rights and opportunities for women.

Anyalebechi (2016) also believes that gender has to do with the social complex relationship between males and females in society as well as the power and economic differential associated with them. Inequality has to do with social factors in society. It deals with activities that are appropriate for males and females and what rights and resources reflect and perpetuate discrimination against female folk. It is inadequate participation of women in developmental issues and the decision-making process. As Awe (2019) stated in an interview, Nigerian women should have equal rights to participate in the top levels of society, further distinguishing that what a man can do a woman can do better and that women should always have a voice in whatever situation they find themselves.

Conversely, Okolie (2004) perceives political participation as "freedom of expression, association, right to free flow of communication, right to influence decision process and the right to social justice, health services, better working condition, and franchise opportunity". Political participation is one of the key ingredients of democracy in its real sense, but the Nigerian experience in recent times shows very low participation of women in politics, notwithstanding the lone case of Patricia Olubumi Ette who was impeached as Honorable Speaker of the House of Representatives. The first female presidential candidate in Nigeria Sarah Jubril who contested four including the 2015 presidential elections failed in her bid.

Furthermore, Aluko and Arolowo (2010) have described women's participation in the National Assembly, using a table of contestants for National Assembly seats,1999-2007.

Table 1: Women in the state Houses of Assembly and National Assembly, 1999-2007

Houses of Assembly	Total number of seats	Men	Women	Percentage of Men	Percentage of women
1999	978	966	12	98.8%	1.2%
2003	951	912	39	96%	4%
2007	990	936	54	94.5%	5.5%

Source: Aluko and Arolowo(2010;p585)

The Table shows the number of men and women in the State Houses of Assembly, where in 1999 women occupied 12 seats out of a total of 978 representing 1.2%. In 2003, men occupied 912 seats out of 951 seats leaving 39 for women representing 4%. Also, there was an increase in 2007 as women occupied 54 seats out of 990 representing 5.5%. Looking at the great impact of women's participation in the Houses of Assembly the numbers have only marginally gone up over the years. Uzoanya and Awodipe (2015), reinforced the low participation of women in politics when they identified that in 1999, only three of the 109 members of the Senate were female. This increased to eight in 2015. Female representation in the House of Representatives was equally low; in 1999, there were only 12 members out of 360, with 21

in 2003, 26 in 2011, and 19 in 2015. For this reason, Nwabunkeonye (2014), stated that there should be equal representation of Nigerian men and women to ensure that enacting laws of the land and making policies, particularly those affecting gender issues will remain equitable. Thus, those women in high political positions should be able to set a good example for others to follow and also not misuse their political positions.

Going further, Krook (2020) described the phenomenon of violence against women in politics starting with political reasons providing a set of motivations for women to remain silent. In this case, women recognize violence as both sexist and deeply problematic. They have decided to keep these experiences private for strategic reasons; some remain quiet to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of women as to the rough world of politics. Women's participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the types of solutions that are proposed (Paxton et al, 2020).

Other scholars including Dewi (2022), Ramona (2022), Simpson (2021), and Lizotte (2020), have been of the view that women are worth more than whom they are expected to be and they have a high chance of politics if given an opportunity, by seeking to uncover the political role of women leaders. According to Ogunnira (2013), women played an important role in the amendment of the Nigerian constitution. Thus, the proponents of natural law make a distinction between men and women based on the perceived physical superiority of men putting only men in political positions, and seeing this effect caused an amendment of the constitution.

Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014) stated that the educational assistance programs under colonial administration were reserved for only African males who were later recruited into colonial civil service and merchant houses. This practice gave the African male gender an undue advantage over the opposite sex and thus marked the beginning of women's under-representation in formal agencies of government. For his part, Adjepong, (2015) stated that the gender relations created by colonization gave rise to the degradation of women in contemporary Africa. Gender parity concerns relative equality in terms of numbers and the proportion of women and men is often calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator. Nelson (2012) also added that In Nigeria today, traditional institutional arrangements have distinctively changed in respect of both genders not too much subordinating women like in the past.

 Women's participation in Nigerian politics is a topic of importance. That is why Oloyede (2016) stated that despite the challenges women are facing, women's activism and advocacy, education of women, positivity on the part of successive governments toward women empowerment, and interest of women to participate in politics are getting a lot of positive energy. Other scholars like Ezeilo (2008), Obiezu (2019), Igbelina (2013), and Falola (2007), argued that the situation of Nigerian women being highly ineffective in the political life of the country is a crisis that needs to be attended to, that every Nigerian woman should be allowed to participate in politics just like that of the outside world. Thus, Mohammed and Zaid (2014) stated that achieving gender equality is about making a real difference in women's lives, particularly in labour and political contexts.

Therefore, Ngara and Ayabam (2013) opined that if gender parity is to be realized, efforts need to go beyond achieving statistics for gender parity. In many parts of the world, there is still much room for progress in realizing women's access to basic human rights such as education, safe and secure employment, and to own property, among others. However, the idea of women being made to be quiet on political issues or to the extent of not letting them get involved in politics is seen as a complete disruption of Human Rights, which these authors are trying to prove, thus giving women a stronghold in the community.

Theoretical Framework
The theory adopted for this article is the feminist theory, which is one of the major arms of political science and international relations. To Offen (1988), the term feminism was coined by a French socialist named Charles Fourier in 1837 and was first used in 1872 in France and the United States in 1910, and it includes a wide range of subjects from political, economic, social and cultural, but its central message remains the equality among the sexes, equal opportunities for women and the dissolution of the

oppressive practices associated with patriarchy, while also seeking increased access to education, better health care, and improved life choices for women.

The two key terms that are central to the feminist discussion have been 'gender' and 'patriarchy'. Ruiz (2012) stated that in the feminist context, gender is not a replacement word for sex or the biological difference between a man and a woman. Instead, it refers merely to the power relations between men and women, how the relations have been socially and habitually implemented, and how the power is deployed. Patriarchy, on the other hand, refers to the system where the female is subordinate to the male (in power and status terms) Crossman (2022) stated that the concept of feminist theory can be understood in the context of being both a normative and intellectual discourse, shining its limelight on the social phenomenon, issues, and experiences as it concerns women that are swept under the carpet, following years of dominant male perceptions. The feminist theory is aimed at understanding and explaining the intricacies that surround the subject of gender inequality and gender roles, while also trying to explain the blurred lines that exist between men and women within a social construct.

The feminist theory was originally designed to explain and address the growing rate of oppression faced by women globally, without recourse to tribe, nationality, status, and age. Feminism as a theory has evolved over the years and has developed into two major shifts which include particularizing and contextualizing the different experiences as they affect women, rather than the previous approach which universalized the struggle, losing elements in the way. To Carlson and Ray (2011), the second dimension involves the shift from seeing women as categories to be focused on, to get into such categorization, while exploring what makes up oppressive gender practices.

According to Onyenwere (2017), the feminist theory although an old theory began to gain ground following the speech made by Susan Anthony in the aftermath of her arrest after illegally voting in 1872 which challenged but gained more momentum in early 1900, and a period was characterized by the increased clamour for the protection of the women's suffrage and women's rights. Feminist campaigns have recorded remarkable success over the years and have been identified as a major force in the process that has recorded historical changes in the establishment of women's rights, especially in the west where issues that affect the wellbeing of women, for example, women's suffrage, freedom to make decisions as it affects reproductive rights, education, equal employment and pay, and freedom to enter into contracts without the approval of the men in their lives.

Although, feminists' thoughts vary, feminism and feminist movements and ideas cut across national boundaries and cultures with common agitation for the social reconstruction of the society that made women permanently subservient to men's domination socio-culturally, politically, and economically. From the standpoint of Udokang and Awofeso (2012), feminists and the world, in general, should reject gender inequality and "oppose discrimination policies against women in both public and private spheres; they seek for equality of women in all ramification-political, economic, educationally and opportunity wise".

History of Feminism in Nigeria
Feminism in Nigeria originated from an increasing demand to improve the quality of life of Nigerian women. Feminism in Nigeria emerged out of the demands of women to improve their status and eliminate debilitating factors that deprive them of enjoying their full human rights. For Faseke (2001), the origin of feminism can be traced to the pre-colonial era when women who were vocal like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Margaret Ekpo went against the tide characterized by acute patriarchy of the Nigerian society, became politicians, and identified as pioneers in the feminist struggle in Nigeria. In line with these brave women's actions, Strobel (2001) also gave recognition to the women and many others who played key roles during the era of the 1950s nationalist struggle campaigning for equal rights and opportunities for all in Nigeria. There were a series of protests in the pre-colonial era, one of which includes the prominent Aba women's riot against warrant chiefs on the introduction of new taxes in Aba. Another example is the Abeokuta (Southwest Nigerian state) market women's protest in 1948 against heavy taxes levied by colonial authorities. Faseke (2001) stated that these protests were led by Funmilayo, who by then was already recognized as a women's rights activist(Oduntan & Mcintosh 2011). The protest of these women led to the abolishment of the excess tax system and the struggle against unjust treatment given to women even though these women fulfilled their civil responsibility. Despite the sacrifices made by these women to ensure effective inclusion and active participation in the decision-making sphere, the goal is yet

to be actualized as women still constitute the minority in power, as the goal for 30 percent representation in the legislative arm is not yet attainable (Oluyemi, 2016). The question everyone would want to ask is why Nigeria is still lagging in instituting comprehensive culture and tradition to reduce the wide gender gap, thereby empowering females to enhance development.

A common view amongst observers was that this under-representation by women within the political space has been compounded over time and contributed to the low quality of life of most Nigerian women. And although, Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations convention that protects the rights of women, yet, gender domination has pervasively persisted unabated due to patriarchy within the society. The argument behind the origin of feminist analyses is the ideological implication of female subordination over the centuries. Awajiusuk (2015) also stated that there has been a high prevalence of superior male status across time, space, and social circumstances that are beyond denial, especially in the Nigerian political system. For example, politics in Nigeria is mainly considered for men and even in political appointments; the role of women is just to hold a few key appointments. Therefore, the pervasiveness of male dominance is the absolute aim of analyzing gender differences. Following this sex distinction between males and females, some advanced societies (Western and North American societies) have tried to narrow down the gender gap by empowering females, redefining laws, and ignoring others to enhance development. However, in developing countries like Nigeria, the distinction persists and would always be there owing to some factors such as tradition, culture, religion, and political system that exist.

Historically, women in Nigeria have faced a wide spectrum of experiences in navigating through several hindrances that have confronted them. According to Adamu Fatima (2006), the culture of patriarchy and male chauvinist anarchy has undermined the rights of women and the outcome of this is the exploitation and the marginalization of women in the public sphere. In modern-day Nigeria, a renowned feminist theorist who has championed the cause is Prof. Bolanle Awe. Bolanle in her transcript interview talked about the importance of feminism in Africa and Nigeria. According to her;

A few people have been making so much about African feminism. It's a tough thing—one thing. Like, from the very beginning, one could even see that our women had in their way been feminists. They had their views. They knew their mind. They knew how to express themselves. They were not prepared to be pushed aside by anyone. And so we've always felt we can also do it. That whatever any man can do a woman too—if she tries hard enough—can do it. There's no big deal about it. For Awe, women using the skill in any place necessary will create more room for them.

Effectiveness of Feminism in Nigerian Politics
Feminism in Nigeria over the years has not proven effective as it is a new trend trying to gain more ground in the society, particularly the political sector which is majorly dominated by the men folk. The role and contributions of women in the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria have often been sidelined or neglected in the history of Nigeria. Their role in childbearing and raising children is often not acknowledged. It is through the woman that a child learns the first rule in social life, good manners and acceptable behaviours until the child is weaned. Despite women's major role in our society, they are often not treated properly as men in most Nigerian communities.

However, there are a few changes taking place in most aspects of the political sector. Nigerian women have been progressively climbing the political ladder gradually. In recent years, women's participation in politics and decision-making has received significant attention across the world. Hence, in 1995, a declaration was made for a 35 percent increased affirmation action of women's representation globally at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. This declaration is built on the argument that women's political participation, as recognized globally, is an essential determinant of the status of women in any particular country (The United Nations, 1995).

Nonetheless, women remain severely underrepresented in the political sector and decision-making process and positions in Nigeria (Ette, 2017). Despite women making up about 49 percent of the Nigerian population, Nigeria still records the lowest number of women in active politics with a miserly 4 percent in politics and ranking 133rd in the world survey of female political representatives (Ette 2017). With the effectiveness of feminism agitation, there are now more women in managerial positions in various governmental establishments. This gives a prospect for more positions for women at top levels in

the future even in the political sector. Some major positions in the political sector have been privileged to be held by women in Nigeria and their output was massively felt. Important to note was the transformation of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) which was headed by the late Prof. Dora Akunyili at the point of its transformation. Professor Akunyili was able to stand up and say no to fake drugs amidst all challenges. According to Okoyeuzu, Obiamaka, and Onwumere, 2012), also one of the World's finest Economist, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who headed the Ministry of Finance under President Goodluck Jonathan and Olusegun Obasanjo and brought serious transformation and transparency that made Paris Club, a group of bilateral creditors, to pay $12 billion of Nigeria's external debt in return an $18 billion debt write off.

Conclusion

In all, the issue of feminism is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. It has started for some time now but with the increasing attention placed on it, its effectiveness is believed to be something that will take a center stage in Nigeria's electoral process. Despite the gradual process of feminism's effectiveness in Nigerian society and the political sector, there is still a major belief that Nigeria will get to a point where she can produce a female president in years to come.

In terms of appointment into positions of authority, the situation did not fair in any way better for women. It is on record that between 1999 and 2010, for instance, out of 130 federal boards of public corporations, only 7 had women named as chairpersons, representing 5.6 per cent. Out of 47 cabinet ministers appointed, only 7 were women, representing 14.89 percent (Oloyede, 2016). Other appointments were Director General of government regulatory agency, special advisers, women, senior special assistants, women, special assistants, 6 women, permanent secretaries, 8 women, and one special assistant to the Vice–President of Nigeria (Bashir, 2020). However, during the election campaign leading to the 2011 elections, President Goodluck Jonathan promised women in Nigeria to pursue the National Gender Policy of appointment of more women into his government if elected into office. It was in realization of the promise by the president he appointed 12 women out of the 42 ministers appointed by the Federal Government, which represented 30 percent of the total number of ministers appointed (Omotola, 2007). In addition, out of 20 special advisers appointed by the Federal Government, 4 were women, which represented 20 percent of the number of people appointed. This was an improvement over the past administrations in the country.

To Awajiusuk, (2015), this improvement in the appointment of women into positions of authority could be attributed to the continuous efforts of women's advocacy groups who call for 35 affirmative action plans for women's representation in government by the National Gender Policy. This development implies that what women could not secure at the polls, they were able to get through appointments. Other appointments made in government between 1999 and 2012 include Director-General, National Agency for Food, Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and later Minister for Information Dr Dora Akunyili; Senior Special Assistant to the President on Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence Unit, Minister of Solid Mineral, and later Minister of Education, Dr Obiageli Ezekwesili (Nzomo, 2014). Also appointed was Aruma Oteh as Director-General of the Security and Exchange Commission (Idike, 2013). Further appointments include Director-General of Bureau for Public Enterprise (BPE), Irene Chigbue, and later Bolanle Onagoruwa, Head of Service of the Nigerian Federation, Ebele Ofunne Okeke. Constance Momoh was appointed the Chief Judge of Edo State. In line with the development, Ayotunde Philips was appointed the Chief Judge of Lagos and Aloma Mariam Mukhtar got appointment as the Chief Justice of the Nigerian Federation (Aina, 2013).

Over the years there have been some changes regarding women's appointment into political positions with the aforementioned names we have seen in different positions. Women are still pushing for more positions both by appointment and election to increase the value placed on women in our society today.

The study discovered that the literature on feminism especially in Nigeria has not adequately captured the needs of the women population, especially in politics, health, education, economy, and music, among others. Bridging the gap between the female/male equation in the workspace will be a lot of tasking because most of these women have relegated themselves to the background. For the Nigerian population, the word feminism has been likened to hate for men, anger, and emotional outburst. Thus, until these

terms are disassociated from the general discourse of feminism then the concept will be a very tasking one for researchers.

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