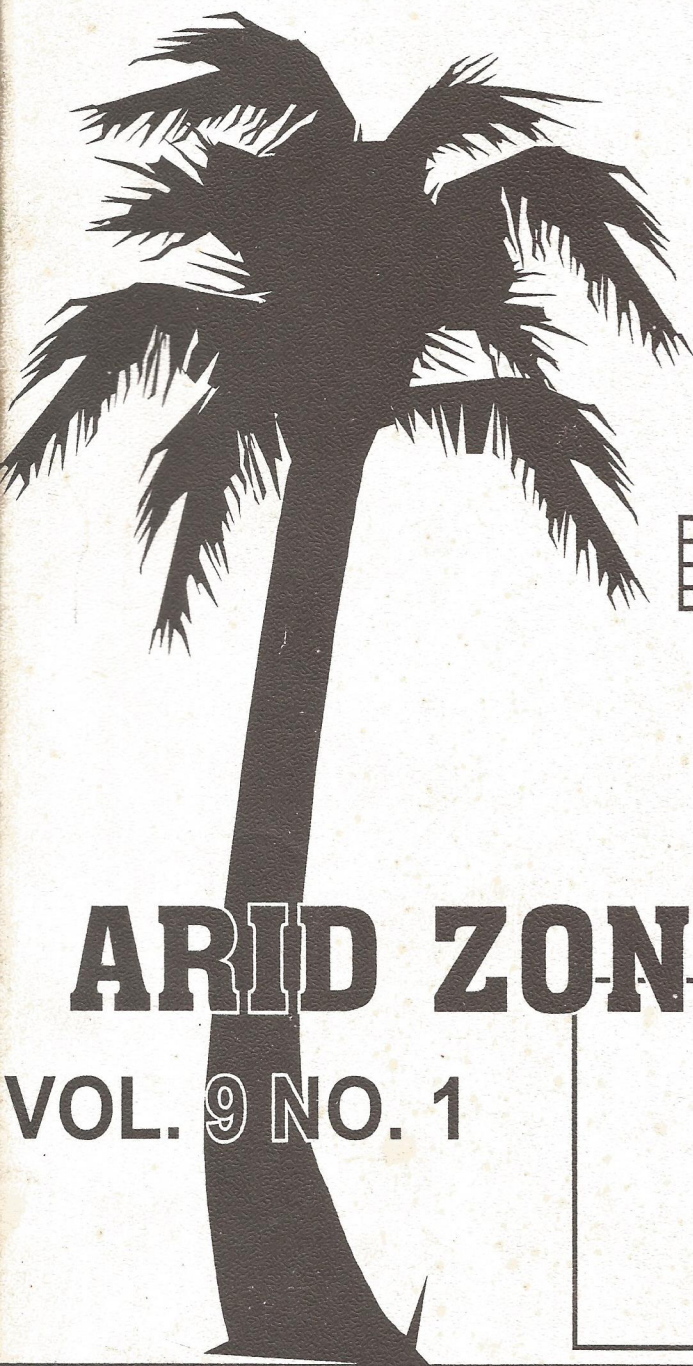




S. D. AdeKeye



JOURNAL

OF

ARID ZONE ECONOMY

VOL. 9 NO. 1

DECEMBER, 2007

PUBLICATION OF DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS, UNIVERSITY OF MAIDUGURI.

ISSN 117 - 5753

**JOURNAL OF ARID ZONE
ECONOMY**

VOL.9, NO. 1

DECEMBER 2007

ISSN117-5753

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NIGERIAN WOMEN IN POLITICS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

By

Adekeye, D. S.¹ and Mahmud K. Adebayo²

ABSTRACT

Gender disparity in politics is a global phenomenon. Women participation in politics can be taken as an index of the level of democratic politics in a country since women often constitute half of the population of most countries. In Nigeria, the participation of women in politics has been generally low. This low level representation of women in politics can be attributed to certain socio-cultural and economic factors. Thus, this paper is that of a cursory look at the level of women involvement in democratic politics during the fourth republic (1999-2007). The low participation of Nigerian women in politics can be explained using some relevant theories. The first is Feminist African Political Model, which highlights the inappropriateness of the use of western economic conceptions to explain change in Third World nations. The second is social psychology theory. The paper also explores the trends of women in Nigerian political affairs in order to appraise the journey so far, articulates the challenges and projections for future. It then concludes with a number of recommendations towards effective participation of women in the future political activities. Most prominent of the recommendations is the need to provide adequate social infrastructures to remove the burden from women's unpaid household work, enactment of legislation against official gender discrimination, and the liberalization of the political space/environment so that women can effectively participate in partisan politics as well as decisions that affect their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity in politics is a global phenomenon. Women participation in politics can be taken as an index of the level of democratic politics in a country since women often constitute half of the population of most countries. Politics is an area where there has been minimal women participation since Nigeria gained political independence in 1960 (Ojo, 1997). Forty-six years after Nigeria's independence, there are still fears that increased participation by women in politics is being threatened by practise already discarded by other democracies. Women are still already sidelined in both elective and political appointments. It was not supposed to be like this when Nigeria attained independence as it was expected that the activism of late Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Hajia Gambo Sawaba and Mrs Margaret Ekpo, among others, would blossom into policies, which should propel Nigerian women to the forefront of governance.

In fact, when it comes to top party decision-making and candidacy, male chauvinism prevails everywhere (FOS, 1995). This phenomenon was partly displayed in 1991. The two political parties, the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the

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Social Democratic Party (SDP), respectively had 20,503 and 24,194 party executive posts at all levels. Women holding top executive posts accounted for very low proportions of 4.2 percent for the NRC and about 4 percent for the SDP (Ojo, 1997). The same can be said in other aspects of democratic politics.

There is no doubt that Nigeria's fourth republic has witnessed an upsurge of women who are actively involved in politics. At the inception of the Obasanjo administration on May 29, 1999, a couple of women were appointed into political offices. Though this action indicated an upward trend in women's participation in democratic politics, the fact however remains that there is no significant increase in the number of women who contested for both elective posts and those who were appointed into decision making (Omede, 2002).

It is against this background, the thrust of this paper is that of a cursory look at the level of women involvement in democratic politics during the fourth republic (1999-2007). The paper will also identify the challenges and the future of women involvement in politics.

Conceptualising Politics

Politics as a term lends itself to a more definite and precise explanation. Its original Greek roots are polis city and teche (art, skill or method). Etymologically, politics refers to the art of governing a city. A city here designates an organised and governed territory as state under the jurisdiction of city (Nwoko, 1988). In this classical sense then, politics is held to be the art of organising men in a society to live and interact with one another for the realization of their social nature. Furthermore, it requires the institutionalization of social structures such as the establishment of legal and governmental systems to facilitate this interaction.

In trying to explain politics, David Easton cited in Greenstein and Polsby (1975) contends that politics involves authoritative allocation of values for a society. Harold Lasswell shared the same view. He defines politics as "who get what, when and how". It is difficult for every one in a society to get all his needs and desires without competition, hence politics is inherently a fierce struggle for power (Pennock and Smith cited in Ayinla, 2005).

In addition to the distribution of societal values, politics is used to create values for a society, to satisfy common needs, to wield power and influence decisions, as well as actions of others in a society. For this reason, those who struggle for political power often claim that they intend to use such power for the best interests of the members of their society where people struggle for interest, influence, and ultimate power at any level (Adeyemo, 2000).

Etzioni (1979) sees politics as competition for the control of the public policy-making process within the organized framework of government. The study explains further that in a democratic society, control is achieved privately or collectively, irrespective of gender through a process of participation. She concludes that in modern democracies, there cannot be political power without political participation (Lewu, 2004). Hence, there is the need to organize our democratic system in such a way that it will be devoid of hooliganism and thuggery etc.

Nigerian Women in Politics, 1999-2007

The fact that Nigerian women are in active politics is not in doubt. They participate in politics as voters, party supporters and usually attend political rallies in large numbers. They listen to political speeches and are exposed to all manner of campaign propaganda from politicians (Lewu, 2004). Despite the numerical advantage women have, they are often been discriminated against and marginalized in politics.

In the fourth republic, which began in May 1999, there are more women political activities at the ward and state levels, on party committees and as paid staff of party secretariats. In particular, since the recommencement of democratic rule in 1999 till 2007, women's membership of political parties, the elections and the appointments of female to political positions at all levels, have increased dramatically compared to what it used to be in the past.

An examination of the country's political climate in first part of the fourth republic reveals that there was only one woman deputy governor (Mrs Kofoworola Akerele Bucknor of Lagos State) among thirty six (36) Deputy governors nationwide. There were also three female senators (Stella Omu, Florence Ita Giwa and Khairat Abdul Rasaq-Gwadabe) in a senate of 109 members and 12 female members in the 360 members federal house of representatives respectively. Out of the 36 heads of the legislative houses in the country, only one, Mrs Magraet Ishen was the speaker of Benue State House of Assembly. Of the 774 local government party chairman in the country, there was only one female (Mrs. Esther Nakhere Amadasun). More importantly, out of 70 political (ministerial) appointees, less than 10 of them were women. In addition, out of more than 200 appointments into federal parastatals and government agencies, less than 20 women benefited from this largesse (Omede, 2002).

In the second part of the fourth republic (2003-2007), women occupy 13 per cent of political positions at the federal level but at the state levels, in some cases it is zero (Sunday Tribune, 2007). A cursory look at the political terrain during this period also shows that there are two deputy governors among thirty-six deputy governors nation-wide. They are Alhaja Salmat Badru, the deputy governor of Ogun State and Erelu Obada, the deputy governor of Osun State. About three women indicated their intention to vie for the presidency under the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2007 April election, but they did not make it as the position went to a man. Out of 474 governorship aspirants, only nine were women but none of them was elected as governor. Of the twenty-five presidential aspirants, only one was a woman in person of Mrs Moji Adegunle Obasanjo (The Nation, 2007). The above scenario indicates the political consciousness of the nation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist African Political Model

The Feminist African Political Model highlights the inappropriateness of the use of western economic conceptions to explain change in Third World nations. The model identifies the primary agents of change as indicated by the political economic system and the response of women within it. That is, the extent to which women are constrained within the system, because of individual and structural variables, and the extent to which women are positively responding to change (Oyekanmi, 2005). The matrix of relationship embedded in the political economy models explains the situation

of Nigerian women beyond patriarchy to include the global exploitation of men and women within the modern capitalist system. It should be noted that Nigerian women are underdeveloped resource, constrained by factors in and outside the country. Their fate is determined by culture and the system of values as much as by the global economy and politics. These factors are inhibitive of the extent to which Nigerian women are involved in active politics.

Social Psychology Theory

Social psychology theory has produced a variety of explanation for women's low participation in politics. McIntosh (1985) opined that women are socially and professionally believe that they are second class citizen, this often translate into potent psychic narratives of inferiority resulting in overwork, fear of assertion, occupational stress and unrealistically high standards. All these suggest that women in politics are under unacceptable pressure to live up to unrealistic demands of perfection. Another aspect to this is that, getting to the top also implies a competitive determinism that is actively discouraged in women. Ambition is perceived as greedy and not to be desired; women have been socialized to be communal, rather than agentic and self interested. Hence career progress such as political offices can be seen as unfeminine.

The above theories capture the major factors that are militating against full participation of women in politics and it is in line with these theories that we identify the following challenges in order to project the future of Nigerian women in politics.

The Challenges and the Future

There are many obstacles, which pose challenges to active women participation in politics in the fourth republic. It has been observed that although women and men share the burdens of poverty in Nigeria, women are more subjected to socially imposed constraints, which further limit their political opportunities and deny their equal access to politics (Awopegba, 2004). The constraints are perceived as ironic given the significant roles women play in the society.

Political violence in the fourth republic has served as inhibitive factor to women's active participation in politics, especially during campaign and election proper. Since 1999, the political climate was characterized by wave of assassinations, thuggery, electoral violence, party clashes etc. Given the abhorrence of women for violence (Olojede, 1999), many women were discouraged from participating in elections. Besides, monetisation of the political process by the state and the political class pose a challenge to women's participation in politics during the fourth republic. Monetisation of the political process in this dispensation serves as a disincentive to the participation of women in contesting for elective offices in the existing political parties. Presently, the cost of nomination for elective positions is exorbitant. For example, gubernatorial aspirants under the PDP are to pay a non-refundable nomination fee of N3 million each.

One of the greatest challenges facing women is the socialization process; socialization of women, which has hitherto reflected the traditional roles they are expected to play in the society, is a strong constraint on women political participation (King, 1988). The fact that women especially in Africa, like their counterpart elsewhere are socialized to play a subordinate role to their male counterpart. This does not provide

conducive atmosphere for effective and widespread participation of women in politics. The socialization process also has the positive and negative reinforcement that has continued to hinder women participation in politics. According to Olojede (1996), women unlike their male counterparts are not likely to receive positive reinforcement for participation in politics because it often conflict with their traditional role. A good public office holder for example is expected to place public interest above private consideration in the exercise of one's public duties.

Tradition is another great constraint to the full participation of women in politics. The traditional role of women is limited to that of domestic work and this is paramount over every other issues. According to Awe (1996), it is extremely important for women to rise against traditional customs, which humiliate them and hold them in perpetual bondage. Such traditional beliefs include early betrothal of girls, which denies them the freedom of choice and social justice; female circumcision which could lead to untimely death or damage of the genital, early marriage which exposes women to health hazards such as Visco Virginal Fistula (V.V.F), widow inheritance which reduces women to mere property to be inherited by men and degradation of widows. King (1988) supported the above assertion when he said that one of the greatest constraints on women participation in politics is the burden of tradition.

In spite of the foregoing challenges, the future of Nigeria women in politics in future is bright. This is in view of the following issues to be discussed. First, the increasing number of women in political appointments and their performance will further motivate other women in active political participation in future. Besides, there are large numbers of women contesting for elective positions in the April 2007 polls despite the economic and political difficulties. This will further reinforce women's aspirations towards the future general elections.

The future of women in politics is also bright because of increasing number of women NGOs and advocacy groups that are sensitizing women on their political rights, especially as it relates to political participation. It is expected that this level of sensitization will increase in future, which in turn will improve women's active participation in 2011 political process. Towards achieving the above projection, Gold (2004) recommended that all forms of harmful traditional practices against women should be eradicated. She also noted that a special political quota system in the appointment and election of women similar to the federal character arrangement should be instituted.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined women involvement in politics during the fourth republic, using 1999 to 2007 as the points of reference. It was observed that women participation in politics especially in the second part of fourth republic is negligible. Several factors were identified as major challenges to their full participation. These include high poverty level, political violence, monetisation of politics etc. The participation of women in the future political process was equally discussed.

In order to enhance women full participation in the future politics, the following suggestions are hereby offered. There must be specific measures, including affirmative action to redress past and present imbalance between men and women in all spheres of human endeavour, including political participation. Besides, everybody should support,

promote and encourage women candidates at all political levels; this will encourage them to aspire for political offices and contribute to good governance. The level of public awareness on politics should also be increased among women in order to provide information and motivate more women to join politics. In addition, women education is a very strong instrument for effective political participation. It is therefore pertinent that women should acquire necessary education that will give them the opportunity to compete equally with their male counterpart.

Dakar (1994) also suggested that all development partners and actors should act to empower women and should take concrete actions to eliminate inequalities between men and women by establishing mechanism and strengthening chances for women's full and equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process, power structures and decision making in each community, nation and around the world. This will enable women to contribute their quotas to the overall development of the country.

In fact, the full participation of women in politics should not be undermined. If democracy is to be sustained in Nigeria, it must incorporate the feelings, sentiments, experiences and perception of women in politics. The active participation of women in politics will provide a balance that will accurately reflects the composition of the society and promote its proper functioning.

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