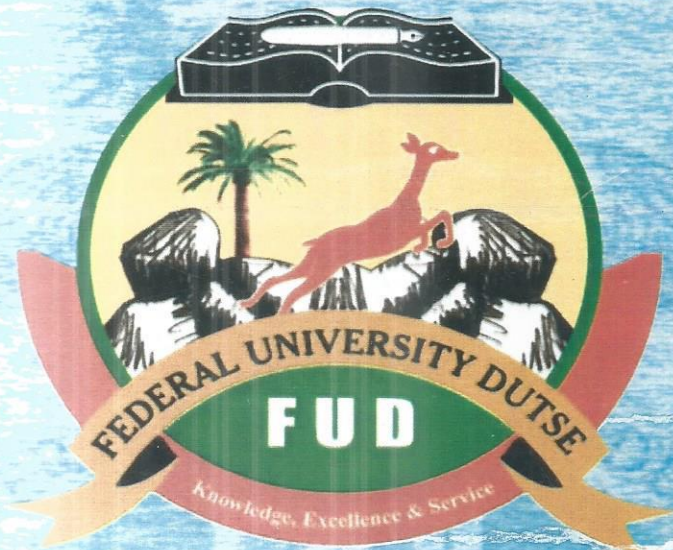


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An Overview of the Role of Women Legislators in Nigeria's National Assembly in the Fourth Republic

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Abstract

The legislature is believed to be an assembly of, predominantly, elected men and women whose responsibility is to champion the cause of the citizens. This makes it central to democratic practice and sustenance, although its existence predates the practice of democracy. But while the legislature, in most instances, is an assembly of elected men and women, the notion of equality in number between both genders cannot be placed on equal pedestal. This may be due to a host of factors but not without some consequences for the larger political terrain. It is against this background that this paper examines the role of women in the Nigerian legislature at the federal level in the Fourth Republic. Through an examination of copious literature as well as observed trend in legislative politics, the paper argues that except of recent, women have had increasing fortune in the Nigerian legislative process but this has not reflected much in their impact owing to institutional and attitudinal variables. Consequently, both institutional and attitudinal reforms are necessary in order to have a robust participation by women in Nigeria's political process.

Keywords: Women, Legislature, Participation, Politics, Democracy

Introduction

The centrality of the legislature to democratic practice is not in doubt. This is because of the convergence of opinion on this fact and by virtue of the multifarious roles which the legislature plays. These roles, which are derived from the constitution and at times by virtue of circumstances of their existence in different contexts (Salih, 2005; Mazrui, 2000; Keefe and Ogul, 1981), impinge on the general societal development. But as noted by Decker (2010), women are at the heart of development because they play robust roles in both monetary and non-monetary aspects of the economy. Similarly, Dantake (2011) observed that mainstreaming gender into governance is critical to national development. To this extent, women are important in decision making process of the society just like their male counterparts. One of such arena of decision making is the legislature. While the issue of low women participation in politics generally is a global phenomenon, the advent of liberal democracy provides ample opportunity for popular participation irrespective of gender or other basis of discrimination. Thus, through various

conventions and treaties, there have been efforts both at national and supranational levels to encourage women participation in politics. In this context, the legislature, being an arena for participation, cannot be ignored.

In Nigeria, the 2006 population census exercise indicates that the ratio of men to women stood at 49.22 to 48.78 respectively. But this high percentage of women is not seen to have reflected in their representation especially in successive parliaments. Indeed, the participation of women in Nigeria's political process, generally, predates the country's independence in 1960. This reflects in the gallant activities of women such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Moremi of Ile Ife, Aba women and a host of others which showed women as being in the forefront of political agitations and repelling of obnoxious colonial policies. In the post independent era, women have been involved in political activism aimed at enhancing their place in governance. Examples can be seen in the activism of Mrs Olikoye Ransome-Kuti and the informal institutionalization of office of the first lady both at the state and federal levels beginning from the mid-1980s. As Dantake (2011) noted, women are in a better position to clearly articulate issues that concern them and other members of the wider society. It is against this background of women centrality to decision-making that this paper, through a systematic examination of documented sources, attempts an overview of the role of women in Nigeria's National Assembly (NASS) in the Fourth Republic. This is necessary given the background that while there is a growing body of literature on legislative studies in Nigeria (Alabi and Egbewole, 2010; Ojo and Omotola, 2015; Hamlai and Suberu, 2014) and profound studies on women political participation (Quadri, n.d.; Mohammed and Zaid, 2014; Daniel and Faith, 2013; Kolawole, Adeigbe, Adebayo & Abubakar, 2013; Dantake, 2011; Agbalajobi, 2010; Decker, 2010), there has been little concentration on the role of women in the legislative arm in Nigeria especially since 1999 when the country transited to civil rule

Discourse on the Evolution and Functions of Legislature

The legislature is an assembly of, predominantly, elected men and women who represent, mostly, geographically defined interests within a political entity. Although it often goes by different names in different political systems - Congress in the United States of America (USA), National Assembly (NASS) in Nigeria, Parliament in Britain, *Reichtag* in Germany etc., - the existence of such assembly has remained a common feature of contemporary political systems. Indeed, it has been observed that legislatures are the most pervasive of political institutions (Dunnmoye, 2006; 2003). This is amplified on the fact that majority of the world's independent states have some kind of legislative chambers at the national level while some also have legislative assemblies at sub-national levels such as provincial assemblies in Canada and state assemblies in Nigeria. Given the centrality of the legislative arm to democratic

practice, its pervasiveness, therefore, cannot be divorced from the democratization wave that is sweeping across continents. Consensus exists in the literature as to the fact that the legislature is a product of Medieval European civilization (Ahmadu, 2006; Veillete and Deering, 2003; Weeds 2003), but transformed in the age of democracy to suit the needs of a great variety of contemporary political systems (Ahmadu 2006). The inference here is that, the existence of a legislative assembly has a long history and predates modern democracy. According to Weeds (2003), the idea of a parliament slowly emerged in Anglo- Saxon England with the *Witenagemot* (meaning – meeting of wise men) which operated between 7th and 11th centuries. The *witenagemot* was an assembly of the most powerful and important individuals in the society invited by the king to advise him on such matters as wars and imposition of taxes. He noted further that before the unification of England in the 9th century, ‘separate *witenagemots* were conveyed by the kings of Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex and Wessex; (Weeds, 2003:2). However, when William the Conqueror invaded Britain in 1066, he set up a new but similar council called *Curia Regis* (the king’s council) which meets with the king three times a year. However, this council cannot be adjudged democratic as appointment into it is strictly based on the king’s preference while the members represent no one or any geographical interest.

The 13th century, however, marked a turning point in the evolution of the modern parliament (Weeds, 2003). First, while the king was increasingly using the parliament as a forum for consultation, there developed a gradual struggle between the monarch and the parliament as the group (which comprises the nobility, bishops, barons, knights) began to claim some rights and privileges from the crown. For instance, by 1215, the barons of England demanded that King John sign the Magna Carta Agreement to protect some rights of the barons such as preventing the king from imposing taxes, controlling forests and some churches. Because of the feeling of indispensability that pervades between the two, the king had to give-in to their demands (Weeds, 2003). The implications of this for future evolution of the parliament are two-fold. First, the signing of the agreement indicates a gradual reduction in the powers of the monarch and a gradual increase in that of the parliament. Second, as Weeds (2003) has noted, it was the signing of such agreements that gradually evolved into the modern Acts of Parliament.

A second point which makes the 13th century significant in the emergence of modern parliament is the fact that, from this period, the idea of having a council or parliament began to appear in other parts of Western Europe – Italy, Spain, Sweden, France and Germany. This was equally accompanied by increasing reliance of the kings on such assemblies for issues relating to taxes, war and peace. As Ahmadu (2006) noted, in some countries, monarchs do meet separately with leading members of the assembly thus giving rise to the

idea of bicameralism as witnessed in some countries today. With time, the parliament acquired greater powers as to force the king to take to some of its advices. This was accentuated by its development of a sense of collective power anchored on the fact that they were representing the interests of some particular groups. From this idea emerged the 'custom of electing representatives to convey the consent of particular group in the polity' (Strayer, 1970, p.?) which today forms a major cornerstone of representative assemblies and democratic politics.

In a general sense, parliaments have faced a fluctuating fortune. In some political systems, it has completely declined in stature while in some others; it continues to oscillate between decline and being assertive. This obviously is due to a number of factors which scholars have noted to include the existence of strong party discipline and influence, history of authoritarianism which affects the growth of the legislature, nature of the electoral process that produced the institutions, the information generation and processing capacity of both institutions and character of political contestation among others (Dunmoye, 2003; Serema, 2000). This has led to the tendency to classify the legislature according to its role and relative influence in relation to the executive arm of government.

Adapting frameworks devised by William Robinson and Nelson Polsby in different works, Johnson and Nakaruma (1999) has come up with a four-fold classification of legislatures. These are:

(i) **Transformative legislatures:** These are legislatures that are simultaneously capable of representing and shaping societal demands. They articulate diverse societal preferences and serve as an independent shaper of the policies that emerge. To effectively do this, such legislature (US Congress as an example of such), requires an internal structure that is capable of channeling conflict and reconciling differences as well as a high information capacity that facilitates initiative and performance policies.

(ii) **Arena legislature:** According to Johnson and Nakaruma (1999), this is an assembly where societal differences are represented and articulated. Also, public policies are debated from different perspectives while actions of government are assessed by different criteria. Although this type of legislature does not need a highly complex internal structure like the transformative legislature, it however requires a party leadership system which can organize the rules which permit orderly discussion and, a committee structure that is capable of channeling parliamentary system.

(iii) **Stamp legislatures:** In this case, legislative bodies only serve as "stamp" for executive proposals. Although this is common in

authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, it is also typical of some democracies, especially where the executive succeeds in exercising profound influence on the legislature. Since such legislatures merely endorse decisions of the executive, they typically require little of internal complexity and information processing capacity (Johnson and Nakaruma, 1999).

(iv) **Emerging legislature:** This is the process of change from one type of legislature to the other. In this case, a legislature without much internal structure and capacity tries to develop more of the things necessary to play a larger role in the governance of the society. This transformation may be due to a number of factors that include increased societal complexity, political mobilization and party systems (e.g. from single to competitive party systems). In other words, emerging legislature has the potential to evolve into some other forms. Quite a number of Latin American legislatures and some in the former Soviet Union, as noted by Johnson and Nakaruma (1999), fall under this category.

It must be stated, however, that the above classifications are not a rigid categorization of legislatures given the fact that there could be some migration between types at different historical moments. It must also be stated that earlier attempt to classify the legislature was by Weinbaum (1975) who distinguished legislatures on the basis of both their 'decisional role'. That is, their capacity to initiate legislation, influence bills and administrative actions etc and, their 'integrative function' in terms of their conflict resolution capacity (cited in, Eminue, 2006:157). Consequently, Weinbaum identified five types of legislatures as 'coordinate', 'subordinate', 'submissive', 'indeterminate', and 'competitive-dominant'. It was based on this that he submitted that most third world legislatures are submissive institutions with weak decisional capacities and modest integration capacities (cited in Eminue, 2006, p. 158). However, the problem with this classification is that what qualifies a legislature to be subordinate and another submissive when in actual fact, both words mean almost the same. In other words, such classification is riddled with some tautology.

But irrespective of nuances in the development of the legislative arm in different political systems and irrespective of the type or form it takes, the legislature generally performs some constitutional functions and extra constitutional roles. The role they perform, it must be noted, constitutes some sort of haphazard assortment since there is no single term or subject that captures them all. Keefe and Ogul (1981, p. 15), underscores this when they observed that:

The functions of the legislature resemble the listing of a catalogue: no single, agent theme ties them all together or dominates the rest; some represent a

heavier investment than others; some appear as basic requirements, while others are simply the accretions that attach to an ongoing institution.

The above observations of Keefe and Ogul notwithstanding, a point of convergence in the literature is that irrespective of the nature of the political system, the legislature performs the task of representation, law making and oversight. The first, representation, entails legislators serving the specific interests of their constituencies which are often complex and diverse. Such interests may range from minor to awkward problems. But the basic thing is that, the legislature, primarily, is an assembly of men and women representing the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of different sections of the community. Second is law making. This is the primary role of the legislature in any political system. It is usually the only body that has the constitutional power to make laws (through parliamentary debate on bills or through delegation to some other agencies outside the parliament) for the good governance of the country. It must also be stressed that in doing this, the legislature relies more on proposals from the executive arm or any of its agencies. The third traditional function of the legislature is its power of oversight. This, according to scholars, consists of monitoring executive activities for efficiency, probity and fidelity and, provides the opportunity to track policy failures and change laws accordingly (Johnson and Nakaruma, 1999; Albert 2008; Smith, 2003). In a presidential system, this is an important activity of the legislature which helps provide the intended checks and balances between the arms of government. Often, oversight function is usually carried out through the instrumentalities of specialized legislative committees. However, for oversight to be effective it requires that the legislature must have enough information about executive branch's activities; adequate capacity of the legislature to effectively process such information and; the power to effect changes or re-direct the course of executive action. Given the nature of oversight, it not uncommon, to discover that, it usually constitutes a major point of discord between the executive branch and the legislature. In other words, while there could be disagreements in other aspects of legislative functions (especially law making), oversight activities often produce more adversarial relationships between the two.

Although the above constitutes a major point of agreement among scholars with regards to the functions performed by the legislature; other scholars have also identified some other purposes served by the existence of the legislature. For instance, writing against the background of the Kenyan Parliament and America's Congress respectively, Hopkins (1975, p. 213-214) and Keefe and Ogul (1981, p. 15 - 38), identified a number of purposes served by the legislature. These include serving as, an arena for the training of political leaders; facilitating communication between government and populace; curbing constituent and special interest demands; interpreting government

responses and legitimizing decisions that are made outside the legislature; providing political education for the public; judicial function and that of leadership selection, among others. In similar vein, while posing a question about the 'historical roles and constitutional functions of the parliaments in the political process, Mazrui (2000) formulated ten purposes served by the existence of parliament in Africa which, according to him, are sometimes directly constitutionalised and sometimes *de facto*. They include, serving as instrument of liberation (political, cultural and gender); platform of national debate; as a check on the executive branch; mechanism of budgetary control; as an instrument of social control; vanguard of social reform; as a co-architect of national policy; serving as a bridge between the judiciary and the executive branch; as an electoral college and; as the ultimate seat of sovereignty. He concluded by noting that no legislature is an island entire unto itself. Since they are part of the wider social and political forces, they are equally subject to them.

One major inference that could be drawn from this discourse is that all legislatures tend to experience some constraints in the discharge of their functions. Such constraints may include party influence, pressures from lobbyists, poor perceptions by and relations with civil society, inadequate access to information, lack of and/or inadequate trained manpower among others. In a similar argument, Salih (2005) noted that legislatures are more or less, a mirror of the state and its level of development. Based on this, he identified separate groups of functions performed by legislatures in Africa which are concomitant to its level of development. That is, African under colonial rule, Africa in a one party state and Africa in the era of multiparty democracy. According to him, during the colonial era, parliaments were the rallying point embodying the new hope for an Africanised machinery of government operating under the Africanisation banner. The role of the parliament at this period was therefore confined to some specific domains: political socialization, modernization, constitutional development, legislation and representation. With regards to parliaments' role under one-party system, he argued that the role of parliament then could be described as muted at best and oppressive at worst. This was because parliament's representative role at this period was curtailed and duly made subservient to the whim of authoritarian rulers. But with multiparty democracy, legislatures in Africa began to assume new roles that include, legislation, representation, ensuring accountability of elected leaders, political recruitment of a pool of talent and conflict management (Salih, 2005).

It must, however, be stated that the extent to which the legislature performs its constitutional and historical functions and, the nature and extent of constraining elements depends largely, on the one hand, on the nature of the governmental system (i.e. presidential, parliamentary or hybrid) and, on the

other hand, it relates directly with the level of a country's political development. Also important is the fact that, along with the above, the state of the legislature's development (which at times is influenced by the circumstances of its emergence among others), determines the nature of its relationship with other arms of government especially the executive. Nonetheless, along with the executive arm, the legislature constitutes an important pillar of modern democracy especially in countries operating the presidential system of government.

Dissecting the Nigerian Legislature

The legislature in Nigeria, like the executive arm, was not autochthonous to the country. It was essentially a colonial creation. Like initial development of the legislature in global contexts, the legislature in Nigeria predates democratic practice but has come to be an essential pillar of democracy in the country. Currently clad as the National Assembly (NASS), it was previously noted as the Nigerian Council or the Legislative Council (under colonial rule) and later (under First Republic) as Parliament. As mentioned earlier, the legislature emerged under colonial rule and not until 1922; there was no African or Nigerian elected representation in the council. According to Anyaegbunam (2010), the first semblance of a legislative arm in Nigeria's political history was the Nigerian Council of 1913 [sic]. The council was merely an advisory and deliberative one with jurisdiction only over the Colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Essentially, the Council which was made up of 30 members (17 official and 13 unofficial) was to consult the locals and foreign commercial and mining interests on the subject of legislation (Hamlai *et al.*, 2008). In other words, the Council had no formal legislative authority. Most scholars agreed that the formal recognition of a legislative body in Nigeria owed its origin to the 1922 Hugh Clifford Constitution (Anyaegbunam, 2010; Hamlai *et al.*, 2008; Akinwunmi, 2004; Ojo, 1997; Ujam, 1995). The Constitution not only provided for a legislative council with 46 members (27 official and 19 unofficial) but also allowed for the election of four out of the 19 unofficial members. Of these, 3 were to represent Lagos while 1 was to represent Calabar. However, the Council also has limited jurisdiction as it only legislated for Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria while the Governor legislated for the Northern Protectorate by proclamation. Also, the decision of the Council was not binding on the Governor. What is however, significant about this Council was that, on the one hand, its existence and powers were derived from constitutional law and on the other hand, it introduced elective principle in the country. This latter advantage of the Constitution has been acknowledged to be a major landmark in the constitutional and political evolution of the Nigerian state (Ujo, 2000; Osaghae, 1998). First, it aided the development of political parties in the country and second, it signaled victory for the emerging nationalism in the country then.

The growing wave of nationalist agitations for representation and self government led to the emergence of new constitutions such as the 1946 Richards Constitution, 1951 Macpherson Constitution and the 1954 Oliver Lythleton Constitution. Although each constitution had its peculiarities and each is an improvement on previous one, each era of constitutional development was characterized by new developments in the structure and composition of the legislature. For instance, the 1946 Constitution which comprised of 16 official and 28 unofficial members (including the 4 elective posts granted by the 1922 constitution), unified the country under one legislative council and provided for Regional Assemblies. The 1951 Constitution built on this by enlarging membership of the Central Legislative Council with the Regional Assemblies serving as Electoral College for the election of members. By 1954, the legislature became more enlarged and standardized with 184 members most of whom were directly elected – only the Northern region still maintained an electoral college. Also, the Regional Assemblies had improved legislative autonomy as it can legislate without the consent of the Central Legislative Council. This was made possible through the provision of different legislative lists in the 1954 Constitution. That is, the exclusive, concurrent and residual lists. In the views of many scholars (Elaigwu, 2005; Akinyemi, 2001; Akindele, 2000; Tyoden, 2000; Tamuno, 1998; Jinadu, 1994; Oyovbaire, 1985), provisions of the 1954 Constitution marked the formal beginning of the practice of federalism in Nigeria.

With independence in 1960, the legislative arm at the national level emerged as a bicameral parliament. It comprised of a Senate with 44 members and an enlarged House of Representatives (HoR) with 320 members. It also acquired full constitutional powers to legislate for the whole country although, the Queen of England (and by 1963, the President) was required to assent bills passed by parliament. Remarkably, the regions had been operating bicameral parliament before independence in 1960. That is, the House of Assembly and House of Chiefs. This was the position of the legislative arm up to the end of the First Republic in 1966.

During the first phase of military rule in Nigeria (1966 - 1979), the legislative arm was non existent as it was scrapped by the military regime that took over power while the powers of law-making were usurped by the Supreme Military Council (SMC). By 1979 when Nigeria returned to democratic rule, the existence of the legislature became guaranteed by constitutional provisions. This time, the country operated a bicameral legislature at the national level while unicameralism operated at the states level. The national parliament, then known as the National Assembly, comprised of a 95 member house of Senate and 450 members HoR, all of whom were directly elected. Unfortunately, the legislature at this period only existed for a little above 4 years as its life was

truncated by another military coup in 1983. Like the first phase, the second phase of military in Nigeria (1983 - 1999) also witnessed a complete eclipse of the legislative arm. Although a new legislative house was about to emerge between 1992 and 1993 (period of the moribund Third Republic), this was eventually not to be because hardly had the Assembly settled down after inauguration when it was sent packing following the assumption of power by General Sanni Abacha and the sacking of the Interim National Government, ING, expected to complete the process of transition to a Third Republic. With this development, the legislative arm never resurfaced until 1999 when the Fourth Republic was inaugurated.

Although ever since, the legislature has continued to find its feet in the scheme of governance in the country, some facts are obvious in the course of its development. First, the legislature in Nigeria predates the advent of democracy in the country as its emergence is deeply rooted within an autocratic context. This perhaps informs Egwu (2005) assertion that the legislative council under the colonial government 'was not the organ of the colonized people in exercising power and influence'. Nonetheless, it has come to remain a major pillar of democratic practice in the country. Second, the legislature in post colonial state has had an epileptic existence because of its constant truncation by military rule. This has been a major factor in the underdevelopment of the institution relative to other arms of government. It is axiomatic to note that the extent to which this institution is institutionalised bears directly on its level of performance in a democracy as well as its relation with other arms of government

Prior to 1999 when the country returned to democratic rule, the role of women in the legislature has been less than conspicuous. Perhaps due to the fact that women are traditionally believed to be confined to performing domestic chores (WEEK: Women education ends in kitchen) or perception of the state / politics arena as a male endeavour, women are completely marginalized not only in parliamentary representation but in the entire political process. This is not to suggest that there are no active women in post- colonial political process, but they have somewhat been prevented from entering the arena of main politics. For instance, late Mrs Olukoye Ransome – kuti was known for her active and sustained criticism of governmental misadventures especially during the military era. In the 1990s Late Mrs Kudirat Abiola was known to be in the fore front of realization of the annulled June 12 1993 election. But like their male counterparts, they also suffered repression from the state. In terms of legislative representation, no woman was seen in the first (1960 -1966), in the second Republic (1979 - 1983), Mrs Francisca Afegbua made history as the first female legislator in Nigeria (Anyanwu, 2007). In the Third Republic (1992 - 1993) National Assembly no female was elected. In other words, the

glorious days of women representation in National Assembly started with the Fourth Republic which began in 1999.

Increasing Presence and Impact: Women in Nigeria's Legislature

As earlier noted, the glorious days of women representation in National Assembly started with the Fourth Republic in 1999 when 3 and 12 women were elected into the Senate and House of Representatives (HoR) respectively. Until recently when it is almost static, this number has been marginally increasing. By 2003 when the 5th National Assembly was inaugurated, the number increased to over 5 percent of the 360 – member HoR while in the Senate, it was 3.7 percent of 109 Senate members. These served till 2007 when another election was conducted. After the 2007 election, the percentage of women in the Senate rose to 8.3 while in the HoR, it rose to 7.2 per cent. After the 2011 election, the figures for Senate dropped to 6.4 per cent while in the HoR it also dropped to 6.9 per cent. Between 2015 and date, the figures in the Senate remain static at 6.4 per cent while the HoR declined further to 5.2 per cent. This is depicted in the table below.

Table 1: Percentage of Women in Nigeria's National Assembly, 1999 – 2019

Legislative Year	Senate	House of Representatives
1999 – 2003	3 (2.8%)	12 (3.3%)
2003 – 2007	4 (3.7%)	21 (5.8%)
2007 – 2011	9 (8.3%)	26 (7.2%)
2011 – 2015	7 (6.4%)	25 (6.9%)
2015 – 2019	7 (6.4%)	19 (5.2%)

Source: Quadri, (n.d.)

As will be shown later, some factors serve to explain this. But it must be stated that before the Fourth Republic in 1999, women were not so prominent in legislative affairs though some have forced their way to be reckoned with in the political process. For instance, Mrs Sara Jibril, though unsuccessful, attempted to be the Social democratic Party, SDP, presidential candidate during the aborted Third Republic and in 2011 on the platform of the Peoples' Democratic Party, PDP. Since under the military regime of President Babangida, there has been increasing relevance of women in national affairs through the Office of the First Ladies and their NGO pet projects. For instance, Mrs Mariam Babangida floated the 'Better Life for Rural Women' while Mrs Patience Jonathan floated the 'Women Development Initiative'. From all indications, the focus of virtually all the First Ladies has been on Women Empowerment in the country.

Beyond the issue of numbers of women in the legislature, one may as well consider leadership responsibilities bestowed on women in the NASS between 1999 and 2015 as abysmally poor. It is noteworthy that between 1999 and 2015 in the Senate, there was no woman among the principal officers. Indeed, the Senate has never had below eight principal officers yet despite the fact that there were women in the Senate, none of them has ever been part of the principal officers except after the 2015 election when Senator Bidemi Christiana Olujimi was elected as Senate Deputy Minority Whip. The same account could be read for the HoR in the initial years. The only exemption was the 6th and 7th National Assembly when Hon. Patricia Olubunmi Etteh was elected as the first female speaker in 2011 (though later removed) and Mulikat Akande was elected as majority leader in 2015 respectively. This is a reflection of the fact that women have remained marginal in legislative activities and leadership positions.

Another means of assessing the contributions of women in Nigeria's NASS is to examine their role in committees of the legislature. It is a common knowledge that the functions of the legislature are carried out through various means as specified in its standing rules. One of such means is the legislative committees which consist of small groups of Members of Parliament, MPs constituted by parliament to carry out specific tasks including close examination of matters which ordinarily would be impossible for the entire house to do (Hamlai, 2010; NDI, 2006; UNDP, 2005). Indeed, scholars have established that a major advantage of the committee system among others is the fact that, it allows for in-depth examination of issues which would have been cumbersome for the entire chamber to do; facilitates legislative expertise and; provides opportunities for the public to participate in the legislative process (NDI, 1996; Patterson, 1982). Thus, it represents an avenue to test the impact of women in the legislative process. Presently, the NASS has 67 Standing Committees in the Senate and 96 in the HoR. Out of these numbers, women are Chairpersons of five of Senate committees (Diaspora and Civil Societies; Environment; Foreign Affairs; Trade and Investment and; Women Affairs) while 3 women were vice chairpersons. Also in the HoR, eight committees were headed by women (committee of Foreign Affairs; Aviation; Science and Technology; Women Affairs; Women in Parliament; Diaspora matters; Drugs and Narcotics and; Electoral matters) while six of them were Vice Chairperson. When compared to the number of women lawmakers, these numbers seem to be far from being commensurate. This reflects the marginal role of women in the NASS.

Added to this is the performance of women lawmakers. While the former Speaker of the HoR, Hon Patricia Etteh may have been removed on allegations of corruption, there have been scores of achievement by some other women in the NASS. For example, Hon Abiko Dabiri was known to have sponsored and

champion the cause of passing the Freedom of Information Bill. So also were her proactive steps as Chairperson of the Committee on Diaspora while in the House. Similarly, Senator representing Lagos Central in the Senate, Oluremi Tinubu is known to have among others, proposed an amendment of 2004 Labour Act which contains clauses militating against the ability of women to find and engage in honest work. The bill tagged SB 229 has passed through second reading in the Senate (Senate Hansard, 30th November, 2016).

Fluctuating Fortune? The Role of Women in the NASS

From the preceding analysis, it is apparent that the role of women in Nigeria's NASS can best be described as fluctuating. This is because, though their presence in the Assembly has been on the increase, except in recent times, their performance has had mixed effects. The increasing prominence of women in the NASS can be explained within ambit of local and international developments. For instance, there is increasing global activism for women rights and increased participation in politics in general. Some of the notable efforts include Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 and other international conventions. There is no doubt that the series of international efforts have impacted positively on the Nigerian society in terms of women participation. Commenting on the global tide, Decker (2010) observed that:

In recent years around the world, there has been significant progress in women's participation in politics. More and more women are seeking to transform politics itself, and women's groups are focusing on efforts to increase women's representation on the ballot to reinvigorate political accountability. Today, there are more women in government than ever before... The proportion of women parliamentarians at the national level has increased by 8 percent ... to the current global average of 18.4 percent (p. 12)

However, this is not to suggest that all countries have been on equal pedestal as far as women representation is concerned. Indeed as Decker (2010) noted that, as far as women representation in parliament is concerned, only 8 countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Netherlands, Germany and South Africa) have achieved the so-called 'critical mass' of 30% representation advocated at the Beijing Conference. But on a global average, the impact of the Beijing Declaration could be seen in the fact that the percentage of women parliamentarians increased from 11.3% in 1995 to 12.9% in 1999. This has been on the increase till date.

Deliberate government policies in Nigeria and determination to uphold international standards could help explain the increasing prominence of women in parliament and politics in general. As a signatory to many international conventions on the need to protect the right of women and make them politically active, the Nigerian government seems to have become more

conscious of this need. Aside from Chapter Four of the 1999 Constitution which granted all forms of rights on the basis of equality of all gender, several Acts have been passed by the NASS to ensure adequate protection for women in all facets of life. For instance, the attempt to amend the Labour Act, 2004 in order to remove discrimination against women (SB229) in seeking gainful employment was an attempt to protect the rights of women.

Deliberate policies of political parties deriving from their consciousness about women participation in politics may yet explain the increasing prominence of women in parliament. For instance, the Constitution of the Peoples' Democratic Party in Chapter 1 Section 6 Subsection 7 emphatically provides for 35% of women representation in nomination for party offices. Similarly, in Subsection 5, the party declared its support for the emancipation and participation of women by encouraging their representation at all levels. Similarly, the Manifesto of the All Progressives Congress (APC) declared *inter alia* that it shall ensure that the rights of women are protected as enshrined in the party's Constitution and promote the concept of reserving a minimum number of seats in the National Assembly for women. Although all these may not have been attained, but there is a progressive movement towards attaining such.

Local activism deriving impetus from happenings elsewhere is yet another factor in the increasing prominence of women in the NASS. There is no doubt that several NGOs have emerged in Nigeria since inception of the current democratization some of which have their exclusive focus on women's right and enlightenment on the need to be involved in decision making. These include the Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics, Women Rights Initiative and Women Development Network among others. All these organisations are involved in the organization of workshops and seminars in order to build capacity of the women folk. But as all these are happening on a positive note, there are, however, some factors that evoke pessimism about the role of women in politics generally. To this extent, they tend to limit the increasing profile of women in political representation.

Legal constraint e.g. the swearing – in of a female judge from Abia State was stalled by the fact that she is not truly from Abia State but married to someone from Abia State. Therefore, she is not qualified to represent Abia State going by the provisions of Section 2 of the Federal Character Commission, FCC, Act. Although this Section as well is inconsistent with Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution and is an action within the judicial realm, but it is a pointer to the kind of challenges which improper or inconsistent constitutional provisions poses to women participation in politics.

Related to this is that such discrimination it is a reflection of cultural inhibition and profound discrimination on women. This is because, if not that a woman is married out to someone outside her place of origin, the question over where she hails from would not arise in the first place. Thus, unlike the male folks, the patrimonial tendency of many African countries, including Nigeria, constitutes a threat to increasing participation of women in the political process. This perspective was given further elaboration by a female politician in Nigeria thus:

We face lots of challenges; our men won't allow us to spread our wings and we really want to fly...if you are a married woman, the marital problem is there were they tag you a prostitute, but it is not so. They give us bad names and there is the financial constraint (quoted in Decker, 2010).

Poor performance of some women in position of authority constitutes another factor. A keen observer of Nigerian politics will discover that the phenomenon of corruption is a common denominator of all organs of government. Although it may be difficult to say which arm is more corrupt, but the legislature, being the arena of representation, has been worst hit of most corruption cases. Both in the Senate and the HoR, hardly has there being a leadership change (except leaders that vacate office due to expiration of the legislative term) which is not informed by allegations of corruption. Little surprise, therefore, that the first female speaker of Nigeria's HoR, Hon Patricia Etteh, was removed from office due to allegations bordering on misappropriation. This scenario cast a shadow on the ability of women in position of responsibility to act different from some of their male counterparts by upholding the values of probity and accountability. Indeed, Nigerians were quick to dub the corruption allegation as "*Etteh Gate*" with the snag that 'what a man can do, a woman can do better' implying that if men are corrupt, a woman can be more corrupt. This sarcasm cast huge doubts on the level of trust in women as being more meticulous than their male counterparts.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of women in the NASS and some of those factors that contributed to the fluctuating fortunes of women in parliament. It realized that fortunes of women in the principal positions of NASS is not a function of which party is in power but rather, it reflects the patrimonial tendency of each party and the larger society in general. For instance, women have not been occupying top leadership positions even in minority parties. Their marginalization in the NASS extends to holding top leadership positions in the legislature. However, their presence has also been significant in the sense that to some extent, they have been able to bring to the fore issues concerning women. Consequently, their fortune in the NASS can be tied to the existence of some politically exigent factors that include global and local

activism, state policy, party policy, legal and cultural factors, and others. In order to increase the fortunes of women in Nigeria, it is expedient to sustain and improve on current efforts that ensure access to representation. This may be through a system that eliminates discrimination that favours women or it may come through legislation to advance the course of women.

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