

GENDER INCLUSIVENESS IN THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL SPACE: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The affinity between gender and sustainable development is based on the realisation that no country can develop with half of its productive population relegated to the background. The Nigerian political space has over the years been characterised by gender inequality and marginalisation which has been largely attributed to the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. The rejection of the gender bills by the male dominated parliament which would have been a landmark opportunity to align the country in the direction of gender inclusiveness and equality towards the actualisation of the sustainable development goals championed by the United Nations is a testament to the lack of commitment and the political will to align with 2030 United Nations agenda. The thrust of this paper is to reaffirm the United Nation position to sustainable development, which buttresses that the sustainable development of any society is a product of the aggregate efforts of all members of the society both men and women.

Keywords: Gender inclusiveness, Gender Equality, Sustainable development, politics, patriarchy,

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space has become a heightened clamour in political discourse following the recent rejection of gender bill by the national assembly. It is worthy to note that this is the fifth time that the national assembly declined to assent gender bills in the last twelve years. The first gender bill, in Nigeria which sought to promote the equality, development and advancement not only of women, but of all Nigerians was introduced to the senate in 2010 by Senator Christiana Anyanwu, but the bill was out rightly rejected at the first reading on the ground the it gave women too much freedom and that it violated Islamic laws (Ugwuede, 2017). The bill was later revised and presented by Senator Abiodun Olujimi in 2016; the revisited bill was essentially a bill prohibit the gender discrimination and to eradicate all violence and discrimination against women in any given situation, but the bill was rejected in the first reading on the 15th of March 2016 on the ground that it violate certain biblical and Islamic principles (Sambamurty, 2016). The gender bill was repackaged and presented to the Senate again in September 2016 by Senator Abiodun Olujimi. The summary of the bill was to guarantee the rights of women to equal opportunities in employment, inheritance, education, properties and land ownership. The bill passed to the second reading and was referred to the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Matters but no public hearing was held for the bill (Sambamurty, 2016). In November 2019 Senator Olujimi reintroduced the gender bill for deliberation; the bill was opposed on the grounds of infringement of Islamic morals and ideologies and the bill was withdrawn (Fakomogbon, 2021).

The latest in the series of rejected bills was in March 2022 when the 9th National Assembly of the Nigerian parliament rejected all the gender bills that were targeted at creating more political opportunities for women and addressing the current gender imbalance in the country's political milieu. The rejection of the bill was described by the executive director African Youth Growth Foundation (AYGF) Dr Arume Salifu as a setback in the vision of promoting gender equity in the political sphere of country (Olorok, 2022). The need to promote gender equality is attributed to the recognition that gender equality is an essential building block for sustainable development socially, politically economically and environmentally (Odeyinde, 2021). The global recognition of the essentiality of gender equity in sustainable development came in September 2015 when the United Nations General Assembly in New York, adopted gender equality as the fifth out of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda expected to be achieved by all countries by 2030 (Komiti & Ekharefo, 2022; Odeyinde, 2021). Gender equality for sustainable development in all spheres of a country whether socially, politically or economically calls for policies, investments, and initiatives that promotes and recognises women's ability, capacity, and knowledge to contribute to development in leadership and decision making positions. Odeyinde (2021) submits that the goal is to recognise and empower women and girls as essential pillars of sustainable development. This implies that when women are empowered, they are equipped to contribute and solve societal challenges that affect them and the society as a whole. The rejection of the gender bill is a testament to the lack of political will of the male dominated national assembly to create an enabling environment for the inclusion of feminine gender in the political affairs of the country. A study by Olusola (2016) on Women's Participation, and Gender Issues in Local Government in Nigeria which was conducted to ascertain the obstacles to women political participation, found out that lack of support from the men, cultural and religious biases, political violence, and the disunity among women were the major hindrances to the better participation of women in the political space. Interestingly, the proposed gender bills which could have pave the way for a more inclusive gender participation in the political affairs of the country was rejected on the grounds of religion and culture. A study by Ake, Bamidele, Olowojolu & Oluboyke (2019) titled Women and Political Marginalisation in Nigeria established that the culture and traditional

practices of subjecting women to male dominance has hindered gender inclusiveness and equality in the Nigerian political space. The patriarchal characterisation and nature of the Nigerian society is a driving force that is visible in all facet of the society especially in leadership and politics. Ebunuwele (2020, p.166) note that the “*patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society which is characterised by the masculine domination of politics, power, authority, inheritance, and even social pedigree has sorely created a great power imbalance to the detriment of the women gender*”. The Patriarchal system is so entrenched in the society that attainment the 35% affirmative action to foster gender inclusiveness in the political space which was formulated in 2006 by the National Gender Policy (NAP) has become an uphill task.

It is on this premise that this study evaluates gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space taking cognisance of the issues and challenges hindering the actualisation and buttressing on the opportunities available for gender inclusiveness to be a reality in the country. This study adopts the library research method to generate data for this study; drawing on empirical studies to situate the study.

Statement of Problem

On the first of March 2022, the 9th National Assembly of Nigeria echoed a resounding ‘no’ to all the gender bills that were targeted at creating more political opportunities for women and address the current gender imbalance in the Nigerian political milieu. The rejection marks the fourth time that national assembly declined to assent gender bills in the last six years. This recent rejection of the gender bills generated a lot of outcry and criticism from well meaning Nigerians. Governor of Rivers State Nyesom Wike who issued a statement through his media aide Kelvin Ebiri during the inauguration of the Ahoda-Odiemerenyi-Ihugbogo-Odieke road project in Ahoda-East Local Government Area of River State described the rejection of gender bills as a big embarrassment to the Nigeria women (*Ripples Nigeria, 2022*). Governor Godwin Obaseki of Edo state also express his dissatisfaction stating that the National assembly missed a golden opportunity to redesign the country’s political landscape by enshrining landmark legislation that promotes inclusion (Aliogo, 2022). The Civil Societies Organisations (CSOs) equally expressed their displeasure stating that the men in the national assembly have taken the country backwards (Uthman , 2022). This development is coming 27 years after the Beijing declaration of 35% affirmative action for women on political representation and 7 years after the inauguration of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development goal in 2015 by the United Nations. This is an attestation of how deep the issues of patriarchy and gender inequality has eaten deep in to the fabric of the Nigerian social, economic and political existence. It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to look at these issues that are even reflected in the socialisation of children in the society. At the socialisation level male children are groomed for headship and leadership and the female children are trained for homemaking. Solbes-Canales, Valverde-Montesino & Herranz-Hernández (2020) conducted a research on the socialization of gender stereotype related to attributes and professions among young Spanish school age children. The finding of the research indicated that children had already internalised traditional gender roles at their tender age, the boys already seem to be aware of the expectations surrounding masculinity and the girls were already assigned attributes associated with femininity and womanhood. Etobe, Ikpi, Ezikeudu & Etobe (2015) assert that during socialisation children learn the language of culture as well as culture roles in the society. This suggests that socialisation process in the Nigerian society which is characterised by masculine domination headship, leadership and authority is one of the greatest challenges of gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political sphere. In a similar vein, Etobe et al (2015) attribute the socialisation process as bane of gender inequalities in Nigeria. This is because from a tender age the cultural and patriarchal system has ingrained leadership and headship in the male offspring and homemaking to the female offspring. Therefore asking the masculine gender to allow women in to the reins of decision making, power and leadership is somewhat a break from the norm and the status quo.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the world is changing and need to break away from the putrid gender narrative and include women in leadership and decision making led to the Beijing declaration of 35% affirmative action for women on political representation in 1995. The 35% affirmative action was formulated by the United Nations to promote gender inclusiveness in politics, leadership, holding public offices, and decision making positions in the society.

Despite the Beijing declaration of 35% affirmative action for women on political representation, of which African countries such as Rwanda, and Congo have keyed in to; Nigeria which is the acclaimed giant of Africa that is supposed to be making great strides and leading the way for other African countries to follow, has not been able to attain the 35% affirmative action to foster gender inclusiveness in her political space

The objectives of this study were to;

1. Examine the issues of gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space
2. Evaluate the challenges of gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space
3. Highlight the opportunities available for gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space.

This paper is framed on the Stuart Hall Representation Theory and the Glass Ceiling Theory. Stuart Hall representation theory is a theoretical postulation that addresses the representation of women in the media and political space. Omachi & Adejoh (2022) assert that the theory talks about the representation of stereotyping, discrimination, hegemonic, dominance and sidelining the female gender in the media realities. Hall's theory of representation advocates for effective representation of of media and cultural realities (Hall, 1997). Although the theory was originally postulated as a media theory, it has evolved, to accommodate the representation of women in the political space. Nugroho (2020) posits that Hall representation theory has spackled the famous narrative of political representation especially that of the feminine gender. Nugroho outlined four stages of political representation; first reduced internal conflict, second creating a mutual consensus, third is reach of public space and the fourth is the evaluation of the previous stages. Glass ceiling theory on the other hand theorises the invisible social and gender barriers that prevents or limits women from ascending to top positions in the society. The glass ceiling theory is attributed to Marilyn Loden in 1978 who coined the phrase glass ceiling to describe the limitations that women experience in their career aspirations. The term glass ceiling was also used in 1984 by Gay Bryant in her book titled "the working woman report". The concept of glass ceiling was later popularised by the wall street journal in 1986 on an article discussing the invisible barriers that women face in corporate hierarchies that hinders them advancing pass certain positions in their careers (Lewis, 2019). These theories were deemed relevant for this study because the Stuart Hall Representation theory addresses the issues of stereotyping, discrimination, patriarchy, dominance, and the sidelining of women in the society while the Glass Ceiling theory beams the spotlight on the invisible cultural, political and social barriers that limits the advancement of women in corporate and political institutions.

ISSUES OF GENDER INCLUSIVENESS IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

Study by Olonade, Oyibode, Idowu, George, Iwelumor, Ozoya, Egharevba & Adetunde (2021) titled understanding gender issues in Nigeria: the imperative for sustainable development, established that gender inequality is one of the major prevalent issues in the Nigerian space. The study notes that gender inequality have penetrated all facet of the Nigerian society. Olande et al (2021) posit that gender inequality is visible in education, family, economy, governance and other social institutions, emphasising that women participation in national economy is 11% as compared with the 30% for men. The world global gender gap index data of 2021 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) has ranked Nigeria 139th position out of 153 countries making this the country's worse ranking since 2006 (Ayodele, 2022). The gender gap

index tracks the progress towards gender parity across four dimensions; economic opportunities, education, health and political leadership and Nigeria ranked low in all dimensions especially in the dimension of political leadership (Ayodele, 2022). Ayodele (2022) attests that Nigerian women have the lowest proportion of female law makers in the African continent with just 6% of seats in the national parliament held by women in comparison to an average of 15% held across the Sub-Saharan Africa and Rwanda's 61.3 % and 38.5 % representation of women in the lower and upper parliament respectively.

Olande et al (2021) attribute gender inequality to gender constructed norms and roles in the patriarchal African society. The patriarchal Nigerian society have assigned the positions of dominance and authority to the men, with roles of fatherhood, headship, and leadership which are all symbols and positions of authority and domain of power; while the women were assigned the supporting and helping positions with roles of motherhood, helpmates and homemakers. Ebunuwele (2020) posits that the Nigerian patriarchy which is characterised by the masculine hegemony of domains of power and authority has created lopsided positions and appointments to the detriment of the feminine gender. This dominant trend has over the years, assumed male superiority while women are perceived as weak, subordinate and inferior (Olande et al 2021). The many attempts by women to break away from this norm have proven to be an uphill endeavour. Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon (2019) attributes this to the fact that in most nations of the world especially developing nations where patriarchal values are prominent, despite the call for gender equality the male leaders continue to resist the attempts that challenge the power and authority they hold; noting that men who feel their masculinity is threatened have the tendency to react with hostility towards other social groups or towards the change. Awofeso & Odeyemi (2014) assert that having tasted political power and found it appealing, the male gender continued to consolidate its position by fencing out their female counterparts from the mainstream political activities where the real power lies. Women were strategically, excluded from domain of true power and authority on the basis of religion and culture reduced to the second fiddle offices of 'deputy' and 'vice' (Awofeso & Odeyemi 2014). The media is not left out as Rayan (2013) notes that the media continues to cover female politicians in gendered terms, focusing on their marital status or appearance and emphasizing stereotypically "female" issues like education and healthcare. By forcing female candidates into these roles, the media may be undermining women's credibility in other important issues, like foreign policy and military affairs. Inequality and stereotyping in media coverage and reportage has continued to perpetuate the narratives of masculine domination in leadership.

Challenges of Gender Inclusiveness in the political Space

There are several challenges that women face in their quest for inclusiveness in the political space can be divided in to four broad categories which are structural challenges, cultural challenges, financial constrains and internal gender challenge. The structural challenge emanates from how the political system of the country is structured. A study by Pogoson (2011) titled Gender, political parties and the Reproduction of patriarchy in Nigeria: A reflection on the democratisation process, 1999-2011 established that political parties in Nigeria are a reproduction of patriarchy. This is a valid position because at the structural level pivotal positions in the political parties are dominated by the masculine gender. The party structure is a crucial factor in the quest for an all gender inclusive government because political parties are an essential component in the actualisation political gender equality, because they provide the basis for representation in governance. This makes political parties central to the advancement of women's participation in politics because play a central role in recruiting and endorsing candidates for election at the national, state, local and parliamentary levels which simply means they are the pathway for women's entry into the political arena (Pogoson, 2011). Most political

parties in Nigeria have a position of ‘woman leader’, who leads the women’s wing of the party at local government, state and national levels. Men understand that by creating a women’s wing, they effectively define what women can aspire to. It is a way of saying politics is a man’s game, but women may be adjunct or auxiliary members of the party. Naturally this move excludes women from core decision-making processes. (Pogoso, 2011). Okoosi-Simbine (2003) in Pogoso (2011) notes that the marginalisation in the gender structure of political parties which favours the men is one of the major challenges of gender inclusiveness in the political milieu of the country.

Ironically political parties understand the importance of women in voting and winning elections and the maximise this advantage but it comes to maximising the opportunities for women to function in the political space down play the importance of the feminine gender in the seat of governance and decision making. In a similar vein, Uwa John Dauda & Oyindamola (2018) posit that interesting to note that society recognises the value of women as voters in a democratic process, yet they are perceived as incapable of governing. This bias has limited women’s opportunities to ascend to the pinnacle of decision making and participate in the power structures, this has fuelled the poor and inequitable representation of women in the political sphere (Uwa et al, 2018).

Poor representation of women public space is another challenge of gender inclusiveness in the political space. Women represent half of the country and voting population yet they occupy less than average positions in the political space (Pogoso 2011; Makam 2013, & Eniola 2018). A study by Eniola 2018 established that the poor representation of women in the parliament accounts for reason why issues and bills that pertain women and are not given the needed attention and assent in the parliament. In a similar vein, Uwa et al (2018) equally assert that majority of gender issues in a male dominated parliament are either overlooked or get predominantly downplayed by the male parliamentarians who address women issues through a masculine lens. This is also evident with the rejection of all gender bills that were target at addressing the current imbalance in the country’s political sphere. Statista (2022) established that women’s participation the in Nigerian political space are incredibly low highlighting that there are only a less than average women in the national assembly.

Table 1: Gender Representation in the National parliament in Nigeria from 1999-2019

Year	Male	Female
2019-	440	29
2015-2019	438	31
2011-2015	438	31
2007-2011	435	34
2003-2007	445	24
1999-2003	454	15

Source: Statista 2022

Another dimension to the poor representation of women in the public space is the glass ceiling effect that women face in political participation. Brechenmacher & Hubbard (2020) assert that women face both formal and informal barriers in political participation, which includes the inequitable process of nominating the male candidates for major positions and leaving supporting roles for women.

The structure and culture of patriarchy is an age long challenge in the journey of gender equality the political sphere of the country. A study by Awofeso & Odeyemi (2014) titled Gender and political participation in Nigeria: A cultural perspective; established that Nigerian political scene has been characterised by patriarchy, asserting that gender political inequality and women’s political underrepresentation in Nigeria over years are pervasive. Patriarchy which is

simply the power, ruler-ship and dominance of masculinity over femininity is evident in all spheres of the society. The institutional rule of masculinity perpetuated by the African and Nigerian culture has enshrined the dormant position to the men and relegated the supporting position to the women. Pogoson, (2011) explains that patriarchy explains how societies control women, who must constantly fight for their rights and sometimes struggle just to survive without being threatened by the power and domination of men. This explains why the structures and inner caucuses of the political parties and governance are mostly male dominated with women constituting a smaller percentage.

Financing a political campaign is another challenge of gender inclusiveness in the Nigerian political space; this is due to the reality that politics in the country is capital intensive. Oluyemi (2016) asserts that vying for political positions in Nigerian requires huge financial backup and Nigerian women who seek these positions cannot afford to meet the financial obligations, noting that despite the wavers giving to women aspirants by some of the political parties, majority of the female cannot level up to the financial strengths of their male counterparts. This is attributed to the fact that money has always been seen as major factor in the game politics, along with the relative absence of financial empowerment of women. Uwa et al (2018) attest that one of the major challenges that women experience in participating, contesting and winning elections in the country is finance as the money politics and power play in the Nigerian political space effectively scheme women out. This was evident in recent the “monetisation” and “dollarization” of the 2022 party primaries by All Progressive Party (APC) and People Democratic Party (PDP) two of the major political parties in the country.

The internal gender challenges emanate from the internal issues and that have plague the feminine gender. A study by Eburnewle (2020) titled women in leadership: a feminist perspective asserts that the age long issues of betrayal, competition, rivalry, suspicion and mistrust that have characterised women’s relations have influenced how women perceive and interact with one another which has led to a lack of solidarity among women. Furthermore the social stratification of women based on education, status, religion, tribe, ethnicity and even marital status has led to a lack of solidarity and cooperation among women (Ebumuwele 2020). The lack of solidarity has limited and hampered gender inclusiveness in the political space as women as are not united enough to stand unanimously with one voice to fight for themselves and put forward women in positions of power who will be able to push for their interest in the political space. The general narrative that the few women in power are not doing enough to bring other women in to the positions of power but empower other women to keep them afloat has not help to foster solidarity among the feminine gender (Eburnewle 2020). The narrative that women don’t necessarily support other women has become a prevalent statement both in the political and social spheres of the Nigerian society. Cooper (2016) contends that women sometimes do not help other women not necessarily because that is their intention but because they tend to respond to sexism by distancing themselves from other women.

The internal conflict among the feminine gender has also led to a women is lack of mutual consensus among women. Nugroho (2020) highlights that without mutual consensus effective political representation cannot be attained. The lack of mutual consensus among the feminine gender due to social and cultural stratification has encouraged the lack of gender inclusion in the Nigerian political space because women have not be able to unite as a group and mobilise themselves for political participation and for their voices to be unanimously heard from the grass root to the national level.

Opportunities for Gender Inclusiveness in the political Space

There have always been opportunities for gender inclusion in the Nigerian political space coupled with the fact that notable women such as Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Senator Abiodun Olujimi, and Late Professor Dora Akunyili have displayed a great leadership and decision making skills and competences in the political sphere of the country. In a similar vein, Okpara (2014) asserts that historically and contemporarily women such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Chief Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Professor (Mrs.) Grace Alele-Williams and Ngozi Okonjo Iweala have exhibited an excellent capacity in leadership positions. The 1995 United Nation Beijing declaration of 35% affirmative action for women on political representation became a worldwide opportunity for nations of the world to embrace gender inclusion in the political space. Furthermore, the United Nations gender equality as a part of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) became a global blueprint for countries all over the world to embrace as a guide in the quest for national sustainable development. Komiti & Ekhareafu (2022) assert that the Sustainable Development Goals became the wakeup call for action for all nations of the world; developed, developing and underdeveloped to unite in a mutual global cooperation recognising that development must go hand-in-hand with strategies that reduce gender inequality, better education, improve health, foster political inclusiveness, and spur economic growth. Some African countries such as Rwanda and Congo took advantage of the opportunity and adopted the gender equality blueprint to foster sustainable development. For instance the Rwandan government adopted the gender equality blueprint and legislated for a 35% affirmative action for women in the political space. Other domestic legislations which Rwandan government adopted in addition to the 35% affirmative action for women include laws that protect women and support gender equality. In 2008, the Law on Gender Based Violence and the Labour Law was created to protect women and children. The law provides for equal pay for work of equal value, sets the minimum age for employment for men and women alike at 16 years and protects young people under the age of 18 from the worst forms of labour. It also provides protection for pregnant and nursing mothers and makes provision for maternity leave for women working in the formal sector (Abbot & Malunda, 2016).

As mention earlier, the Nigerian political space has always had the opportunity of incorporating gender inclusive and gender sensitive laws and policies and in the constitution and governance. The rejected genderbills in the last twelveyears were are all a prime opportunity to mark a gender inclusive historic landmark in country but these opportunities were rejected because of the lack of political will and the reluctance of the male dominated parliament to share power with the gender that the Nigerian patriarchal culture has allocated a supporting and homemaking position to. Yusuf & Olatunji (2020) contend that an inclusive parliament have the capacity to strengthen civic engagement and democratic participation in governance. Furthermore, gender inclusiveness in the parliament and the political sphere as a whole will ensure equity in governance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Gender inclusiveness in the political Nigerian sphere is feasible with the right commitment coupled with the right political will to make it a reality. The Rwandan political space is a testament that gender inclusiveness and equality can be a reality in the African political milieu with the right commitment. This study therefore recommends that the Nigerian government a leaf out of the Rwandan political storybook and take practical steps to incorporate gender inclusiveness in its constitution and political space. This is because the development of any society is a product of the cumulative effort every individual and members of the society. In the journey towards sustainable development, gender equality is nonnegotiable because both male and female genders have their quota to contribute to national and sustainable

development. It is therefore imperative that the Nigerian political space have the political will to work towards actualising the United Nation 2030 agenda for gender equality and sustainable development goals.

Moreover, Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon (2019) contend that Nigeria is also a signatory to many international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but the country has repeatedly failed to effectively set a legal framework to eliminate gender discrimination and foster gender equality. Abbot & Malunda (2016) attested that Rwanda made a strong commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women, and incorporated laws promote the rights of women, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). A study by Burnet (2018) titled Rwanda: Women political representation and its consequences established that Rwanda has become a global leader in terms of expanding women inclusion politics both in African and the world. Burnet (2019) noted that in 2008 Rwanda became the first country in the world to elect a female majority in parliament. Ake et al (2019) equally attest that 48.8 % of seats in Rwandan lower house of parliament held were by women in 2003. This gender inclusion feat was possible because of the commitment and political will of the country to make gender parity and the affirmative action of the Beijing declaration a reality. Since the 1995 Beijing declaration of 35% affirmative action for women, Rwanda as a county adopted numerous laws to promote gender inclusion and the protection of gender right. In a bid to promote gender inclusion and party the Rwandan government introduced a gender quota system in her constitution in 2003. The system set a 30% of parliamentary seats for women (Burnet 2019; UN Women 2018). In addition, Abbot & Malunda (2016) highlights that Rwandan Constitution generally provides for gender equality in line with international laws and noting that progressive inheritance and land laws give women equal rights with men to own and inherit property, including land, and to the joint ownership of property in legal marriage has to be registered in the joint name of both spouses and all legitimate children have to have their interest recorded on the land title. The Rwandan gender equality success story is a testament that the gospel of gender equality and inclusiveness is possible both in the Nigerian and African political space with the right commitment and political will.

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