WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: FAULT LINES AND MAINSTREAMING EXCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

The 2015 General Elections in Nigeria showed a decline in the performance of women and this is very troubling given the ground swell and campaign for popular participation by women. Explanation for the factors which constitute impediments to women's efforts at winning elective offices and enduring genuine political representation are legion. But are they adequate to explain what happened to the performance of women politicians at the 2015 General Elections? Why did women representation in elective position dwindle in the 2015 General Elections? It is the contentions of this paper that explanation for their dismal performance should be sought to serve as lessons for women's future endeavour at political representation. I offer in this paper a multi-layered structural, institutional and social explanation, drawing on concrete example of exclusionary politics based on gender relations. The paper contends that the more women agitate for inclusion through their various platforms, the less democratic the spaces for inclusion open to women. What are the fault lines and countervailing factors in women political exclusion in the 2015 General Elections? Deriving from the analysis of evidences gathered from reports on the 2015 general elections, this paper provides answer to this question. It is recognised and as argued in the paper that women's participation can only be effective and meaningful when underlying gender power relations are transformed and women are empowered economically, politically, and socially to achieve sustainable development. It however, recommends that as a temporary measure, legislative quota should be adopted to assist women in their efforts to become relevant politically.

Keywords: Fault Lines, Gender Relations, General Elections, Popular Participation, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigerian women have tried to gain access to political decision-making positions by contesting for elective positions at various levels. Their efforts however have not translated to appreciative gains as subsequent elections since 1999 revealed. Not only has there been marginal gain over the years which in itself is not very encouraging, but a decline in the number of elected female politicians in the 2015 General Elections shows a manifestation of female political disempowerment and this is more worrisome.

Given the ground swell and campaign for popular participation by women in the general elections, the poor performance is indeed very troubling. In the 2015 General Elections, Nigerian women as usual came out and participated in all aspects of the electoral processes. The zeal and vigour with which the few ones who contested for elective positions campaigned and engaged in electioneering demonstrated their resolve to be relevant in governance. But the poor showing at the 2015 general elections makes one to wonder what the problems are. Explanation for the factors which constitute impediments to women's efforts at winning elective offices and enduring genuine political representation are legion (Okwuosa, 1996; Ogwu, 1996; Shevdova, 1998; Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Tibaijuka, 2000; Olurode, 2003; Akiyode-Afolabi, 2008, Quadri, 2013). But are they adequate to explain what happened to women politicians at the General Elections? I asked this question because even with past explanations and possible solutions proffered towards increasing female political participation, increasingly it is becoming an uphill-task for women to gaining influence in politics. If not, the question then is why did women representation in elective position dwindle in the 2015 General Elections?

I wish to offer in this paper a multi-layered structural, institutional and social explanation, drawing on concrete example of exclusionary politics based on gender relations. I will contend that the more women agitate for inclusion through various platforms, the less democratic the spaces for inclusion open to women. Paying increasing attention to women's political empowerment becomes more imperative as women's participation is fundamental to democracy and essential to the achievement of sustainable development and peace. However, women continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, most times as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, prevalent in societies.

What are the fault lines and countervailing factors in women political exclusion in the 2015 General Elections? Can sustainable development be achieved without women's participation in decision making? These are some of the issues the paper seeks to interrogate.

GENDER, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT: A THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

> Gender equality and women's empowerment are not only human rights; they are also imperative for achieving inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. Women's political participation is central to these goals, and political parties are among the most important institutions for promoting and nurturing such participation Clark, (2012 p.ii).

The above quote provides the basis for the discussion on why women must be part of the political decision-making. The attainment of gender equality and the full participation of women in decision making are key indicators of democracy. The participation of women at all levels of decision-making in all spheres of society is crucial for the development of democracy and realisation of women's rights (Mangvwat, 2009). The involvement of women in all aspects of political life produces more equitable societies and delivers a stronger and more representative democracy (Ballington, 2008) where women's issues and their rights are taken as human rights. The inclusion of the perspectives of women and their

participation in politics are prerequisites for democratic development and contribute to good governance (Ballington, 2012).

It has been argued that, sustainable development is a political concept because it is about good governance, which will be hard to achieve until we get closer to gender parity. As indicated by both theory and evidence, the lack of progress on gender equality may be at the heart of the failure to advance on sustainable development. If women were in more productive and decision-making roles, we could be moving faster and more assuredly towards sustainability in the economic, social and environmental sense (Stevens 2010, p.7).

Good governance revolves around participation, transparency and accountability, rule of law, effectiveness and equity. It is only when all groups in the society are part of the process of managing their affair that good governance is ensured. Women form part of the groups, but often times, they are denied access to position of power and authority in the society. The pursuit of women's development goals can only be meaningful and sustainable when women are in positions of authority, which give them power to negotiate and affect policies that are geared towards the goals. And for the goals of development to be sustained, it must be women centered (recognising the responsibility that women have always assumed for catering to the basic needs of the society) (Raddock 2000).

Women are said to be strongly linked to positive development in education, health and other social sectors especially at the local level. There is therefore the argument that where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development and standards of living are also higher.

Because women comprise more than half of the human resources and are central to the economic as well as the social well-being of societies, development goals cannot be fully reached without their participation. The lack of political power continues to constitute a hindrance to women's development. Women, therefore, must have "both the legal right and access to existing means for the improvement of oneself and of society"(Snyder and Tadesse as cited in Reddock 2000, p.44). It is possible therefore to argue that, increasing number of women in decision-making position and empowering them to affect legislation on gender equality will have a positive correlation with achieving sustainable development. This is acknowledged in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development:

> We recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are important for sustainable development and our common future. We reaffirm our commitments to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decision-making. … We underscore that women have a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development. We recognize the leadership role of women, and we resolve to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and to ensure their full and effective participation in sustainable development policies, programmes and decision-making at all levels.
> (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex,paras. 31 and 45 as cited in UNWomen 2014, p.19).

Though there are divergent theoretical underpinnings of democracy, my intention here is not to go into details about the conceptual and theoretical disputations but to provide its minimal operationalisation and the link with gender. I adopt Schumpeter' procedural definition of Lipset which in simple form gives insights to the understanding of the concept of democracy. Schumpeter defines democracy as that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (1962). According to Lipset as cited in Adhiambo-Oduol (2002 p.63),

Democracy is a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials. It is a social mechanism for the resolution of the problem of societal decision-making among conflicting interest groups that permits the largest possible part of the population to influence these decisions through their ability to choose among alternative contenders for political office… (Lipset as cited in Adhiambo-Oduol 2002. p.63).

Illustrated in these definitions are three important variables: competition, political participation and political liberty. These three provide the basis for women as a group to participate in the process of deciding those who will represent them in decision-making positions. In line with this argument Paxton, Hughes and Painter (2010) posit that democracy is typically represented by at least two dimensions. The first dimension, political rights, exists to the extent that the national government is elected by a meaningful process and parties compete for political for political power. Civil liberties the second dimension, exists when the people of a country have the freedom to express political opinions in any media and the freedom to organise and participate in any political group (Paxton, Hughes and Painter, 2010 p. 30).

These two dimensions provide the justification why women should participate in politics. Nigeria, since her return to democratic rule in 1999 has conducted five general elections including the 2015 general elections. These elections gave people the opportunity to choose their representatives in Federal, States and Local Assemblies for effective governance. Women as a group within this arrangement possess the right to express themselves politically and could aspire to any political office.

Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees that *"every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular, he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his/her interest"*.

This constitutional provision in principle provides equal opportunity for both Nigerian men and women to participate in the political process. Women's political rights are an integral and inseparable part of their human rights, and human rights, are fundamental aspect of any democratic framework (Karam, 2000). Women's efforts to become relevant politically should be seen as part of exercising their human rights.

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA

Political participation as one of the key elements of democracy provides the justification for inclusion of marginalised groups such as women and youth in electoral competition. Participation of women in politics will be meaningful only if the process is just, fair, permissive and level playing ground is guaranteed for possible ascension of women politically.

Politics has strategic importance for women because the ultimate success of women's movement will rest heavily on effective use of the political process (Lynn, 1978). Women's ability to effectively use the political process to get to political positions may increase their representation in elective positions and effect public policies. However, it is very clear from Nigeria's experience that the political process is male dominated and men influence the process more than women.

Momodu (2003, p.48) submits that the issues of women's political participation and representation in politics and governance should be seen from four perspectives: access, participation, representation and transformation. Access to political institutions, participation (which includes control of power within such institutions), quantitative and qualitative representation and the end result will be social and political transformation in the polity. Women's political empowerment can be enhanced when these four conditions are fulfilled.

The view that women in politics matter is sustained by three reasons: First, politics is an important arena for decision making. Individuals who hold official positions in government get to decide how to allocate scarce resources, such as tax revenues. Politicians make political decisions that may help some people at the expense of others. Decisions by politicians often affect people's individual choices by encouraging some behaviours and outlawing others. Second, political power is a valuable good. Politicians hold power over other social institutions, such as the family…, third, holding a political position is to hold a position of authority (Paxton, 2007). Women in positions of authority and power can influence decisions on issues that bother on women and impact positively on the lives of female gender. When women do participate in governance, there is a greater chance that policies will reflect more closely the needs of all citizens. Women and men bring different perspectives to decision-making, and a lack of women in government limits the effectiveness of the state and its policies and diminishes its representational quality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2008). As observed earlier in this paper, increasingly, women's full participation is recognized as central to policymaking particularly those policies that affect women's lives. The three pillars of sustainable development — economic, environment and social — are relevant to discussions of gender equality and empowerment in the society (*my emphasis*). However, according to UNWomen (2014), the social pillar of sustainable development — and its emphasis on equity and equality — is the most politically-sensitive of the three dimensions and thus the hardest to address. It involves confronting negative social trends such as growing income disparities, rising unemployment, and a persistent gender gap.

Can we then argue that men cannot adequately represent women's interests, needs and concerns in the legislature? There are substantive women's issues such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, women trafficking amongst others that require women's perspectives and orientation towards addressing them.

Integrating women in the political process provides women with the opportunity to discuss women issues facing challenges. Empowerment relates to the degree of representation in deliberative bodies and is often measured by the percentage of women in the Legislature (Beer, 2009). The number of women in the legislative house can determine the extent to which women's issues will attract the attention of policy-makers.

Dovi (2006) provides at least seven distinct arguments why female representatives are necessary. The role model argument, the justice argument, the trust argument, the increase participation argument, the legitimacy argument, the transformative argument, and the overlooked interest's argument. Each of these arguments, according to her, points to a different function that representatives can have in democracies and I quote in *extenso:*

> The *role model* argument contends that having female representatives improves female citizens' self-esteem. The role model argument captures how female representatives can "mentor" other females… The *justice argument* contends that fairness demands that men and women be present in roughly equal numbers in the political arena… The justice argument suggests that the need for female representatives is tied to citizens' sense of fairness. *The trust argument* focuses on the past betrayals of historically disadvantaged groups by privileged groups. Given the experiences that women have had with men claiming to represent them…The *increased participation argument* contends that participation rates respond to the number of women in office. Having more women in office will raise the number of women who vote, lobby, and get involved in politics… *The legitimacy argument* contends that the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions varies with the number of representatives from historically disadvantaged groups…Evaluations of representative institutions are based on who is present… *The transformative argument* contends that the presence of women allows democratic institutions to live up to their ideals… the *overlooked interest's argument*. According to overlooked interest's argument, democratic deliberations and

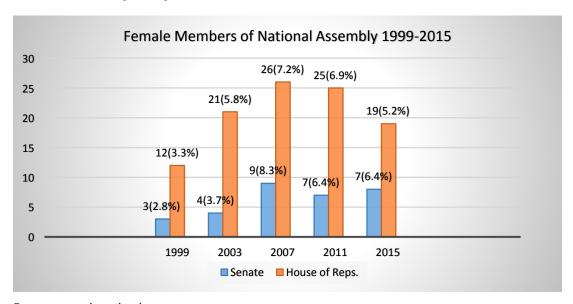political agendas can be improved by having female representatives in public office (Dovi, 2006, pp.16-19).

The society recognises the value of women as voters in a democratic process, yet they are perceived as incapable of governing hence their limited acceptance to ascend the pinnacle of decision –making and participate in the power structures.

A systematic analysis of women's political participation in Nigeria since 1999 when the country returned to democratic rule, reveals the same pattern and trend of engagement and outcome. The National Assembly in 1999 had three (3) (2.8%) female Senators and twelve (12) (3.3%) female House of Representatives members. In 2003, four (4) (3.7%) and twenty-one (21) (5.8%) female members were elected respectively into the Assembly. In 2007 the National Assembly had nine (9) (8.3%) female Senators and twenty-six (26) (7.2%) female members of House of Representatives. In 2011, the National Assembly had seven (7) (6.4%) female members and twenty-five (25) (6.9%) female members in the lower House. In 2015, the National Assembly has seven (7) (6.4%) female members in Senate and (19) (5.2%) female in the House of Representatives. These are presented the table and graph below:

Female Members of Nigerian National Assembly 1999-2015

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

Source: www.inecnigeria.org

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The marginal increase of women in the National Assembly since 1999 as the table and graph above depict is very insignificant. This has attendant implications for governance. The argument has been that few women in political decision-making authority will not be able to influence policy especially those that have gender implications. The few women in most cases are unwilling to challenge patriarchal structure of authority and domination. According to Guzman (2004) this explains why women access to positions of authority, when they are in a minority, is not necessarily a recipe

for greater co-ordination of the interests of women as a whole, and it also explains why they run the risk of having their true needs subsumed into the interests associated with their membership of a particular class, ethnic group, or culture.

The presence of female representatives can contribute to "the feminization of the political agenda" that is the articulation of women's concerns and perspectives in public debates as well as "the feminization of legislation" that is public policies are desired to take into account their effect on women (Dovi, 2006). Most gender issues in a male dominated parliament are either overlooked or get predominantly the male gender perspectives to addressing them. In most cases, the female law maker(s) had to lobby their male counterparts to see reasons why a particular gender bill should be passed.

WOMEN POLITICIANS AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION IN 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2015 general elections saw women lost some of the grounds they covered in 2007 and 2011. (Indeed it meant a reverse of the gains made especially in 2007). The poor showing and the dismal performance of women in 2015 general elections left many questions begging for answers. What has suddenly changed? Were women politicians not adequately prepared for the challenges of electioneering in 2015? What form of engagement did women have in the political process? To what extent were gender issues integrated in the electoral process in order to achieve gender inclusiveness in 2015 general elections? How did political environment impact on women' participation in 2015 elections? Attempt to providing answers to these questions reveals the major fault lines and the daunting challenges confronted by women which curtailed their ability to navigate through the murky water of politics in 2015.

Constraints to Nigerian's women participation in politics and their persistence failure at attaining the pinnacle of political decision-making are continuously being interrogated in order to provide solutions. Some scholars and researchers have stressed the role of gender norms and practices as well as patriarchy, structural challenges and financial constraints (Mangvwat, Ibeanu and Mahdi, 2009; Olurode, 2013; Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013; Pogoson, 2013). Moving beyond the rhetoric of the challenges however is the need to examine specifically how they impact on the electoral performance of women in 2015. I proceed by discussing the political environment of the election.

The political environment of 2015 elections could not have been said to be relatively peaceful and permissive for active involvement of women in the electoral process. Politicking and nature of electioneering took a dangerous and fearful dimension. There was outright and fierce campaign of calumny, hatred and various forms of hate speeches on the part of candidates' supporters and candidates themselves. This was not expected as the struggle was between a ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) on the verge of losing and a coalition of main opposition parties, All People's Congress (APC) that was bent on rescuing power from the ruling party. Ayisha Osori's comment on the political environment captured its very dynamics:

> The context of the 2015 election (sic) is linked to the history of Nigerian politics, the civil war, decades of ethno-religious strife and the unfortunate reality that politics is a lucrative business. For the first time since Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999, the major opposition parties have come together in the fashion of Kenya's National Rainbow Coalition. This has immense bearing on how much success female politicians can achieve during the elections, considering that the consensus and compromise were cobbled together by various parties, and only a few women are involved (Osori, 2015).

Palpable fear, tension, imminent crises and violence were rife in the air of the political environment before the election. In anticipation of widespread electoral violence, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All People's Congress (APC) signed the "Abuja Accord" which called for peaceful election and the effective management of the outcome in hope of curbing election-related violence (Safir & Alam, 2015). All pointing to the fact that crisis was imminent. The significance of this for women was a conscious and deliberate avoidance of electioneering activities and staying much at the background in the process, and therefore leaving enough space for men to carry on. This manifested in the statistics of women that came out at different levels to contest for elective positions. Only one (1) female presidential candidate contested the 2015 elections. Eighty-seven (87) female candidates contested out of three hundred and eighty (380) for governor and deputy governors (22.9 percent), one hundred and twenty-two (122) out of seven hundred and forty-seven (747) for Senate (16 percent) and two hundred and sixty-seven (267) out of one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-four (1774) candidates for House of Representatives(15 percent). The table presented earlier shows the percentage of women that eventually won in the race.

Though the election was adjudged free and fair however, at the end, violent activities were reported in certain quarters. A few cases will suffice for the point being made here. The Chairman, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Chidi Odinkalu was reported in "The Nation" of March 31, 2015 to have observed that:

> The voting process was not without some challenges, including pockets of violence and security breaches. From different parts of the country, there have been incidents, reports and allegations of various forms of violence, including some reported attacks by extremists in some parts of north eastern Nigeria designed to frustrate the exercise of the franchise. Some highlights include: Acts of violence resulting in fatalities have so far been reported in in Akwa Ibom, Borno, Bauchi, Edo, Gombe, Lagos, Osun, Rivers and Yobe States. "At the end of yesterday (Sunday), the number of persons reported killed in these attacks and incidents is over 50…" (Chidi Odinkalu, 2015).

In another report by Chukwudi Akasike in The Punch Newspaper of March 31, 2015 was a streaming headline "Police fired tear gas at protesting APC women". According to him:

> Policemen on Monday fired teargas at protesting women, who were marching to the office of the Independent National Electoral Commission in Port Harcourt. … The women who were clad in black attire and chanting solidarity songs … were stopped by heavily armed policemen at the Waterlines axis of the River State capital… As they tried to move forward, a tear gas canister was fire at the side of some of the protesting women, development which immediately forced the women to retreat. More teargas canisters were fired as the women scattered in different directions… (Chukwudi Akasike, 2015).

In another development, prior to the elections The Nation Newspaper of Tuesday March 7, 2015 reported that: Pro-Jonathan OPC on the rampage through Lagos: "Lagos, Nigeria's business and financial engine-room, was yesterday groaning under a crippling protest by the militia group, Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC)… The protesters got traffic stuck for hours, smashed cars, harassed motorists and disrupted business in many parts of the city".

A strong female contender for the seat of governor in 2015 elections in Taraba State Aisha Jumai Alhassan was reported to have reacted to the electoral process in Taraba. In her words, "The combined governorship elections in Taraba were characterised by violence, massive rigging, ballot snatching and abuse of the card readers in substantial parts of the State by the PDP and their allies…" (Alhassan, 2015).

Expectedly women could not play and survive in the harsh environment of Nigerian politics and the consequence is their continuous marginalisation and political disempowerment.

Lack of Internal party democracy in political parties impacted negatively and contributed to the thwarted political ambition of most women in 2015. Political parties are key to women's participation in politics, as it is political parties that recruit and select candidates for elections and that determine a country's policy agenda (Ballington, 2012). Parties are the 'entry gatekeepers' into the main stream politics. The stage at which the party gatekeepers actually choose the candidates is perhaps the most crucial stage for getting women into office (Ballington, 2004). Political parties have continued to err in the area of recruiting women for elective competition. Nigerian women are usually disenfranchised right from the level of recruitment for elective positions by political parties. Male candidates are given preference over female as evidence of parties' disposition towards fielding female candidates for general elections has revealed. As I argue elsewhere, the character and the mode of operations of parties in Nigeria run contrary to the basic principles of democracy and the resultant effect is the inability of women to cope with the kind of politics played by parties and their subsequent alienation (Quadri, 2013). The case of Chris Anyanwu, a former Senator in the 7th National Assembly illustrates my point. Anyanwu lost in the primaries in the race to the seat of governor in Imo State. In a special interview in Saturday Sun Newspaper of June 27, 2015 while responding to a question on who stopped her in the race, according to her:

> It was the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) elite, including the women PDP elite who felt a woman shouldn't dare contest for governorship. So it's the elite who arrange things such that however you come out, they tie you and shut the door against you. It started with the PDP national chairman handling over the entire delegates list to my younger brother Emeka Ihedioha because he is a big player at the federal level. So it was like going for an election and the people who will elect you are now appointed by your competitor (Anyanwu, 2015).

For this woman, the whole episode could signal a temporary or a permanent break from politics depending on how she chose to respond to her ordeal. This act is not peculiar to contest for gubernatorial seat and PDP alone. Other political parties are also perfect in the act of selecting 'anointed' candidates for general elections. According to the Chairperson, "Women in Politics Forum", Barrister Ebere Ifendu (2015) "there is no genuine internal democracy in the parties and candidates are handpicked, when one scales party primary, he or she has scaled the most hurdle". Internal party selection processes as Nwosu (2015) observes should normally be subject to competitive elections among party members, but they relegated instead to the preferences of party elites, who manipulate the results in favour of their preferred candidates.

In the absence of democratic political culture within political parties and in the political system, parties may not be able to function as spring-board for active political participation and engagement. The inability of parties to practice internal democracy has continued to limit the opportunity of women politically and this was the case with some women in 2015 elections who eventually lost out in the game.

The extent to which gender issue was integrated into the political process in 2015 also calls for a critical analysis in order to determine how gender inclusiveness was put to effect in the general elections. The Umpire in the electoral process, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has shown its preparedness to incorporate gender issues in the electoral process prior to the elections. It was reported that INEC declared its readiness to address the age-long inequality and gender imbalance in the nation's politics (Famutimi, The Punch April 15, 2014). This, the Commission tried to

demonstrate by establishing Gender Desks across the 36 States and FCT and the launching of INEC Gender Policy. The objective of INEC gender policy is to integrate gender awareness into the electoral process and encourage gender equality within political parties and in the identification of candidates. Circumstantial evidence shows that INEC could not really interfere in the affair of parties especially as it concerns ensuring that parties adhere strictly to their gender policy guidelines in selecting candidates for election. Orji (2015) was quick to observe that INEC limited control of the electoral process has been demonstrated in the process of candidate selection by the political parties. As observed earlier parties threw all cautions to the wind by flouting all regulations and principles concerning internal democracy.

Not too far from this argument is the issue of women's prominent role as voters but at the same time they are found not too suitable to stand for elective positions. Salihu (2015) rightly observes that politicians need members - voters, followers, praise singers and endorsement. Women most time play these roles satisfactorily but are seldom considered for important positions at the height of decision-making. A case of 'special treatment' accorded women voters in some centres to facilitate their participation in the 2015 elections will be highlighted as reported in the Nation Newspaper of April 29, 2015. In a joint agreement and to increase the participation of women (albeit in voting) the men and INEC officials in Ward 004 on Mojisola Street in Ifako-Ijaye Lagos ,allowed women to be accredited and vote without having to join long queue during the elections. Describing the gesture as "strategic" one of the voters Mrs Badmus remarked:

> I did not spend more than 10 minutes during accreditation. Our men understood the importance of women in an election process and nation building. Our role doesn't only stop in making sure our families are properly taken care of, we must join hands to make our country better for our children's sake

Another voter Mrs Ayeni at the same polling unit said:

> … the centre made it easy for us. They eased our work a lot. As I came to the centre, I was told to go to the front that women have been given special privilege today to do their accreditation and vote. We are grateful to the men in this area for such initiative: the gesture encouraged lots of women to come out as you can see today.

While this gesture of men in this particular case is commendable, it would have been pleasing to know that the special privilege accorded the women in a matter of voting is also given in a matter of choosing candidates to stand for elections and also applicable in electoral processes. Aisha Jumai Alhassan did not get such special privilege in her race to the Government House in Taraba. Instead she had to square up with the forces that were at play during the election. Has she succeeded in the race, Aisha Alhassan would have been the first duly elected female governor in the country. Alhassan in the 2015 gubernatorial election was already leading in the race and was almost winning when the table was turned against her. A re-run of the election in the state dashed her hope of becoming the governor of the State. In this case there was no special privilege given.

Women in 2015 elections more than before faced formidable obstacles and were besieged with challenges of which discrimination was more at work. This forms part of the reasons why despite women's numerical advantage and massive participation in voting, the political offices held by women is very insignificant when compared to the men's. Women according to Odumakin (2015) are still faced with the numerous challenges that have contributed to their being marginalised from mainstream politics. She observes that there is growing awareness and resolve by women to influence the decisions that affect their lives and their families, the political economy, social environment and the structure of the nation still define women's participation and representation (Odumakin, 2015).

The other challenges that women faced in 2015 elections as they tried to assert themselves politically include the failure of parties to implement their gender policies. Almost all the parties either deliberately or by error of omission did not adhere to the principle of gender parity in political representation. Parties where women are given prominence and female candidates are allowed to contest the general elections are the less known ones. A good example is the KOWA party (a relatively new party that was registered in 2009) which featured Professor Oluremi Sonaiya, the only female presidential candidate in the 2015 elections. In the 2015 presidential election, Mrs Oluremi Sonaiya total vote was 13,076 out of total votes of 28, 587, 564 (www.inecnigeria,org).

The evidence in 2015 elections revealed that no meaningful progress has been made in mainstreaming gender into national politics and legislation. An effective legislation on Quota and other forms of affirmative action could assist women in their challenge to be relevant in political decision-making. Unfortunately, as Safir and Alam (2015) rightly observe, Nigeria lacks a formal quota system, which in certain contexts can serve as a mechanism through which to increase women's political participation. This lack of a quota combined with cultural and structural factors pose often insurmountable barriers to women's political participation.

It is expected that the existence of International Instruments such as The 1979 UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) Strategic Objective, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Declaration would provide the needed pathway to address the issue of gender discrimination. These international instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory emphasize that member nation who signed and ratified these documents put in place necessary mechanisms needed to eliminate gender discriminations and promote women's course generally. Consequently, Nigeria developed her National Gender Policy to address the issues. It is therefore to be taken for granted that political parties and all laws guiding the electoral process should reflect the principles and objectives of these instruments and seek to implement them accordingly.

The question is what change will be required to create opportunities for transforming gender roles? What are the institutional changes that will manifest in form of rules and regulations to govern the electoral processes?
The questions are germane because the more the Nigerian women tried to grapple with and to surmount the various challenges they confront in their efforts to attain the height of political decision-making, the harder it becomes to achieve the feat. The socio-cultural, political and economic barriers against Nigerian women politicians at every election seem to gather momentum and conspire to hinder the progress women could have made. Providing an unfettered ground for these barriers is the political environment characterised by electoral violence and insecurity, money-politics, intolerance and gender-discrimination.

The quickest and most assured way of increasing women's political participation is through legislation and affirmative action. Legislative quotas can serve as a temporary measure.
Quotas are a means of guaranteeing that members of an electorate group, such as women, are included at a prescribed minimum level in representative institutions, whether as delegates, candidates, or elected officials (Ballington, 2012). This seems to be a workable option as all the impediments against women's political empowerment continue to defile every solution proffered.
According to Inglehart and Norris (2003), the women's movement in many nations have emphasized the need for equal opportunity and affirmative action strategies through reforming institutional barriers, removing structural

biases, and altering the rules of the game to get women into positions of elected office. A particularly effective means to do this has been the use of quotas in the selection of female parliamentary candidates (Inglehart and Norris, 2003 p. 7). Acceptance of quota to increase the number of women in Legislature for women's representation have increased women's representation in some countries like Rwanda, South Africa, Nairobi and Senegal among others and could also be used in Nigeria to affect gender roles and placement of women in the political society.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that Nigerian women still have a long way to go in attaining the pinnacle of political decision-making. Given their poor performance in electoral politics since the country's return to democratic rule, it is apparent that women struggle to get relevant in political leadership continued to be hindered by certain factors. Patriarchal structure which manifest in 'male-model' of politics, lack of internal democracy in parties, the political environment within which women compete, the nature of politics in Nigeria which is akin to warfare, funding of running election campaign and other electoral sundries which most female politicians find excruciating, politics of 'god-fatherism' which tends to excludes some women and favours certain categories of women (daughters and wives of prominent politicians), societal attitudes (often negative) towards female politicians which are borne out of ingrained perceptions of gender roles and women's position in the society have all conspired and continue to work against women in their pursuit of political power. Few women in decision-making positions cannot adequately guarantee effective representation of women's interests and issues. I wish to reiterate on my earlier argument that, the pursuit of women's development goals, can only be meaningful and attainable when women are in positions of authority, which give them power to negotiate and affect policies that are geared towards the goals. The lack of political power continues to constitute a hindrance to women's development. Women's active participation in decision-making facilitates the allocation of public resources to investments in human development priorities, including education, health, nutrition, employment and social protection (Pathania, 2017).

The outcome of the 2015 general elections revealed that Nigerian women still have many hurdles to contend with and therefore cannot rest on their oars. The impediments to their political empowerment are constantly at work, therefore women must devise possible means of surmounting them. This is because women's political leadership is critical not only for good governance but may engender policies that will determine women's development goals and sustainability. If they are to affect legislations, they must be at the height of political decision-making. It is however, unfortunate that Nigerian women have continued to run round in circle when it comes to the issue of effective participation that could translate to enhancing their political power and consequently their development.

I have examined those critical fault lines in the 2015 general elections. Some of them echo the general and common barriers to women's inclusion in electoral process, while some specifically spotlight on those issues peculiar to the 2015 elections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigerian women as a matter of urgency must begin to evaluate past elections with the goal of critically examining why they faltered in those elections. *Albeit* there are common factors that hindered women in coming out strong and successful in the past elections, at the same time each election is unique and bears its own elements for success or failure. For instance, 2007 general elections saw an upsurge of women organisations (both national and international) creating

awareness and educating women on the values of popular participation and reasons why women must participate in politics. The resultant outcome of this engagement was the increase in the number of female Legislatures at both Federal and State Levels. The 2015 general elections saw INEC coming out with its own Gender Policy, meant to integrate gender awareness into the electoral process. But to what extent were its objectives implemented in the 2015 general elections?

It becomes an imperative for women politicians to start now to begin to devise strategies of overcoming the barriers to their political empowerment. Getting empowered politically will help women achieve and sustain their development goals. Women must gear towards action to combat those constraints against their political emancipation. They must organise themselves, continually educate and create awareness of the importance of voting more women into political decision-making leadership position. Nigerian women need to be aggressive in pressing for the implementation of the three important Gender Policies in all electoral process in future namely; Nigerian Gender Policy, Political Parties Gender Policies and INEC Gender Policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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