WOMEN’S UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: AN IMPEDIMENT TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt at both bringing to the fore, the nature of women’s under representation in the National Assembly and placing women’s under representation in the national Assembly as an impediment to national development, with a view to evolving antidote to reverse the trend. To achieve this, the imperatives of women’s legislative/political participation in national development and the gender disaggregated statistics on National Assembly representation are laid bare. The paper believes that women’s under representation in National Assembly is buoyed mainly by the unequal gender relations; gender barriers to politics, women higher poverty and lower social status in Nigeria, and the nature of politicking in Nigeria. The paper concludes that proposals that could contribute to strengthening/expanding the political capacity of the women folk; to empowering women politically, educationally and economically; to enhancing their autonomy in household decision-making sphere; to breaking down the gender barriers to politics; and to widening the political space for women are imperative to reverse the situation. The paper recommends for the overall empowerment of women, awareness campaigns, use of quota system, special funding of women legislative/political aspirants among others as means of bringing about more women in the national Assembly.

Gender inequality is vividly seen in all aspects of life in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development [(FMWASD), 2006; United Nations Development Project [UNDP], 2001). One key area this inequality is highly palpable is in men and women’s representation in the national assembly where legislations for the welfare and development of the country are made. The under representation of women in the legislature is one of the key gender issues in Nigeria. Gender issues arose where inequalities and inequities are shown to exist between people
purely on the basis of their being female and male (UNDP, 2001). One of the key principles upon which the Nigeria’s Gender Policy is premised is the recognition of gender issues as central to and critical to the achievement of national development goals and objectives. Fighting inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels is one of the strategic action plans of the Beijing 1995 4th World Conference on Women which was aimed at giving women a voice in national affairs; and bringing gender equity in all spheres of human life in order to hasten and bring about all round development of nations. Hence this paper is entitled “Women’s Under-Representation in the National Assembly: An Impediment to National Development”

The Nigerian National Assembly-the Senate and the House of Representative

In 1999, democracy was highly embraced by all with expected hope that it would deliver dividends and socio-economic development. At the centre of Nigerian representative democracy is the legislature which constitutes a cardinal part of the major pillars of the governance process in Nigeria’s democratic political system. In Nigeria, the legislature is an important institution of government constitutionally empowered to have elected representatives. Thus the legislature is the embodiment of popular power. By virtue of its constitutional responsibilities, the legislature in Nigeria is also the principal institution of accountability and probity. The law making, representative, oversight, and appropriation, are crucial to enhancing accountability, transparency, and due process in the polity.

The Nature of Women under Representation in the National Assembly

Table 1 : Distribution of Female Representation in the National Assembly (2003-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFICE</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Representative</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source* Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC]

The focus is on national and sub-national representation because these are the main cogs of governance and representation in Nigeria. There is inherently a pronounced level of underrepresentation of women in politics when compared with their male counterparts. Women still account for less than 10 % of the total elective positions at the national, state and local government levels respectively.
Nigeria has yet to achieve gender parity in political representation at national level, let alone meet the target it set in the Nigeria’s Gender Policy 2006. Table 1 shows that women’s participation in political and decision making has been dismal. In 2007 General Elections only 07% positions were occupied by women, while the situation in 2011 was not much better with only a marginal increase to 08%. This state of affairs has resulted in Nigeria not satisfying the provision of the Nigeria Gender Policy (2006) that recommends 35% public office for women and the Beijing Platform for Action which prescribes 30% of public offices for women. If Nigeria is to alleviate poverty, overcome corruption, educate children, provide quality healthcare, make neighbourhood safer and create a more stable economic environment, the leadership and energy of brave women will lead the way. (Mutada, 2014) Nigeria ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 13 June 1985, although efforts to operationalize its thirty articles locally have faltered. The country also adopted the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action and signed up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights and, crucially, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (The Maputo Protocol). However, local implementation of these has remained weak, although the essence of these important global and regional declarations was captured in the NGP, launched in 2007. The latter document is unequivocal in its assertion that “Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men dominate all spheres of women’s lives” (Federal Ministry of Women’s Affairs and Social Development, 2006: 6). One area where this is reflected very aptly is in women’s representation. It is in fact a key area in which women’s empowerment has faltered since democratization. The April 2011 elections saw women lose some of the ground they had begun to win back after 1999.

Factors Influencing Women’s Participation in Politics

A perusal of literature for example Waziri (2014), Mutada (2014), Oladeye (2011), Salihu (2011), Irabor (2011), WRAPA (2004), and Ityavyar and Ityavyar (2002) indicate the paramount role of the following factors in influencing women participation in politics in Nigeria:

i. Low level of education especially in the north. A key requirement is completion of secondary education; hence, up to half of women seeking political national Assembly slot failed to qualify for elections
ii. Lack of capacity in political and interpersonal skills and knowledge;
iii. Financial constraints; Female candidates lack resources for registration fees to establish campaign structures, etc. This issue leads to ineffective campaigns;
iv. Reproductive roles: women need to be home in the evenings and at night to feed and care for their children. This has the effect of preventing female aspirants from attending night and evening meetings and therefore cannot be considered;
v. Cultural attitudes: Women need husband permission to attend meetings or be involved in any activity outside the home. As a result, some female candidates sacrifice their political ambition to avoid domestic problems;

vi. Political environment: Fear of intimidation, physical assault and name calling; whisper campaigns and innuendos about moral standing. This has the effect of heightening withdrawal of candidates who put their reputation before a political career;

vii. Registration regulations are complex; candidates are required to submit tax declaration. Many of the female candidates especially in the north do not have bank accounts and fail to qualify.

viii. Socio-cultural factors: For example, patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society which has over the years put women in a subordinate position in the traditional household setting and national politics.

ix. Poverty among women: Poverty leads to weak capacity for effective participation of women in politics. Inability to match the spending power of her male opponents is seen as the greatest challenge Nigerian women face in politics. In recent times, the Women for Change Initiatives [WCI] and other stakeholders have decried the capital intensive nature of politics in the country which in her view contributed in no small measure in limiting the number of women for elective offices. For example, the presidential nomination forms for Peoples Democratic Party [PDP] and the All Peoples Congress [APC] are N22 million and N27 million respectively. These huge amounts are not gender friendly.

x. Hostile political environment. Nigeria’s politicians many at times employ, violence, killing and maiming of political opponents in order to win elections. Women by their nature, are indisposed to political violence. This factor makes majority of women to avoid veering into politics.

The Imperatives of Female Legislative Representation in National Development

National development here entails the full utilization of a nation’s human and material resources for the satisfaction of various human wants. It has been argued that the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women’s social, economic and political status are essential for the achievement of transparent, and accountable government, administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning (United Nations, 1993). Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible. In this respect, women’s equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women.
As more women become more politically involved, institutions will become more responsive to the needs of all citizens. By helping women become participating members of a democracy, one can mitigate conflicts before they begin (Women for Change Initiatives, 2011). If more women are assisted into legislative houses and into other political offices, it would further promote good governance as well as improve the lots and opportunities of women and children and the less privileged because women are more sensitive and usually kind-hearted (Mutada, 2014).

Women participation in the politics and in particular, the national Assembly is justified both on the grounds of equality and on the view that women should be elected because they bring different perspective to bear (United Nations, 1995). Women’s participation in politics is of strategic importance, not only for women’s empowerment but because it has wider benefits and impacts (British Council, Nigeria, 2012). The literature on representation derives from Philips’s seminal work on the Politics of Presence (1995). It suggests that disadvantaged groups can obtain fair representation only if they are present in elected assemblies. Women as well as men should be represented at decision-making levels – locally, regionally and nationally – particularly in areas where crucial resources are allocated. The evidence suggests that allocation is more effective and efficient, and ultimately produces superior human development outcomes, in countries where women are more broadly represented (British Council, Nigeria, 2012). It is argued that men and women allocate resources differently, and that women tend to favour a redistributive agenda, and to spend more on children’s education, social services and health (Clots-Figueras, 2011; Miller, 2008; Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2007). This is not a simple issue of causality; but much of the welfare state theory in capitalist democracies suggests an association between gender representation and social spending (Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2007). Much of this work shows that an increase in the number of women elected into office at different levels changes the way resources are allocated in favour of areas that enhance human development spending (Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2007). Once elected, for example, women can participate in decision-making by chairing influential committees that oversee key areas of resource allocation. (Bolzendahl and Brooks, 2007).

Some analysts find that intra-state conflict is less likely to occur in states that achieve gender equality in political representation (Caprioli, 2005). The reason for this is that ethnic mobilization is more likely to develop where there are severe gender inequalities, since gender relations contribute crucially to the shaping of group identities, in ways that influence the dynamics of inter-group conflict. In other words, ethnic nationalism is essentially patriarchal and operates more effectively where gender inequality is greatest. Studies indicate that ethnic identity is particularly important for Nigerians (Stewart, 2007).

Coming home to Nigeria, it justified both on the ground of equality (Waziri, 2014). Legislative priorities reflect women’s interest in social policy especially issues
of particular concern to women. Enhancing the capacity of women to represent their parties and serve the public as elected officials allows women to participate in and more effectively influence legislation and policy making. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains under represented in the political arena. Waziri (2014) advanced reasons why women should be visible in parliamentary politics to be:

i. Women must be equal partners in the process of democratic development. As activists, elected officials and constituents, their contributions are crucial to building a strong and vibrant society. It is therefore essential to support women around the world;

ii. Women are particularly effective in promoting honest government. Countries where women are supported as leaders and at the ballot box, have a correspondingly low level of corruption;

i. Women are strongly committed to peace building, as they often disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflicts, and demonstrations.

Women’s aspiration to participate in governance is equally premised on the following ground: that women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Secondly that all human beings are equal and women possess the same rights as men to participate in governance and public life. The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law. According to the World Bank (2001) high rates of female participation in government are associated with lower levels of corruption.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, one can infer that the under representation of the womenfolk in the National Assembly stands to be an impediment to national development.

**Conclusion**

The paper has vividly shown that women are under represented in the National Assembly and this stands to impede national development. Proposals that could contribute to strengthening/expanding the political capacity of the women folk; to empowering women politically, educationally and economically; to enhancing their autonomy in household decision-making; to breaking down the gender barriers to politics; and to widening the political space for women would be desired to reverse the situation.
The Way Forward

The situation cannot remain unchanged. Efforts should be made to reverse the situation. The following are suggestions/recommendations for consideration to improve the situation.

- Overall empowerment of women is recommended to break down the myriad of political, economic, and cultural challenges bedeviling women’s delve into politics. Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedoms including those of choice and action to shape one’s life. Women empowerment has been defined to encompass women having a sense of selfworth, access to opportunities and resources, choices and the ability to exercise them, control over their own lives, and influence over the direction of social change (United Nation Information Network, 1995). It implies control over resources and decisions. It is the process and the result of the process whereby powerless or less powerful members of the society (here women) gain greater access and control over materials and knowledge, resources, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and subordination and transform the institution and structures through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated.

- There should be awareness campaigns by political parties, women groups, non-governmental organizations state and local governments and communities to mobilize women to join politics to represent their various constituencies. In this vein, women politicians should negotiate gender parity through intensifying campaigns for balanced gender representation; organize awareness programs that attract women to government through various groups; building a Coalition of NGOs and Grassroots women associations that coordinates the support and advocacy for women aspirants. There should be female political role models who of course are established women politicians who would be playing mentoring role and providing capacity building training to young or aspiring female politicians. Female political office holders should build intergenerational linkages through the mentoring of a critical successor generation. Women groups should also ensure grass-root mobilization in favour of female candidates; and providing budding female politicians with training and support;

- There is need for the introduction of quota system by political parties to ensure that women have a reasonable representation in the national Assembly. A 25% representation could be a starting point. The practice of the quota system assists in reducing the low-level of women participation in politics, a veritable solution to male dominated patriarchal society. This technique would contribute in no small measure in improving female intention to participate in Nigerian politics. Women groups should consistently demand accountability for gender specific commitments in various political party constitutions and other existing laws and policy framework to make quota system in gender political representation a reality. Women in politics should partner with the media and take advantage of existing platforms as part of measures to achieve this. Independent National
Electoral Commission [INEC] should in line with its gender policy strongly encourage political parties to comply with their commitments to ensuring adequate women representation in the national assembly. Political parties should take concrete steps to implement the commitment that they have made to expand the space for women’s emergence as candidates beyond 2015. Non-governmental organizations should continue to monitor and document women’s experiences across the different levels of engagement in the electoral process value chain at the primaries and ward congresses. In so doing, it would be easier to identify problem areas and to address them in future.

- There should be special funding of women legislative/political aspirants. In this vein, women groups should take up the challenge of getting more women for elective offices by sponsoring them as well as seeking sponsors for them. This is the norm in the developed world. This initiative had been undertaken in 2011 by the Women for Change Initiative who set up Trust fund to help offset the campaign costs of female aspirants no matter their political parties.

References


Mutada, D (2014): Poor Female representation in Politics *The Guardian* Dec 1 pp67


