

ENHANCING WOMEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

Ashipu Igbo

Abstract

Political participation is the constitution right of every Nigeria, irrespective of sex, ethnic, religious or socio economic background. Although, some Nigeria women are active outside the home, especially in the labour market and economic advancement; they are yet to compete on equal basis with men on political participation. This has led to a male dominated political arena since Nigeria independence. Thus, lack of or inadequate political education has created this gender gap. When provided, political education will stimulate, reinforce and sustain an appreciable political education will stimulate, reinforce and sustain an appreciable political consciousness in Nigeria women. This paper highlights the meaning, objectives of political education, current status of political participation, problems and advances strategies to enhance participatory behaviour of women.

Introduction

The level of political participation is not uniformly distributed thought out a given population. Generally, an individual's degree of participation depends on class structure, income level, occupational status, educational qualifications, and level of political socialization. (Haralambos and Herald 1980). For instance, men are most likely to have higher levels of participation than women due to their superior attainment in economic, social and educational sectors. The implication of this is that, the low economic and educational status of women limits their opportunities for broader participation (UNICEF, 2001). Those factors are reinforced by ingrained cultural attitudes which marginalize the role of women in the decision-making process in the local community or on wider political stage.

The preceding ascertain points to the fact that women are constrained in their effort to

understand the world around them; this include political awareness. This lack of political awareness is not peculiar to Nigeria, even in advanced countries this lack of political consciousness is just being awakened and attended to by women themselves. However, to provide equal opportunities for women to participate actively in the political decision making process, the need for women political education cannot be over emphasized. This is based on the premise that education is a veritable instrument for change and development in any human society irrespective of gender.

What is Political Education

For a country embarking on social and economic transformation, political socialization is indispensable. In other words, political education is essential for the survival of any political system. American democracy has endured and continues to survive because the citizens are brought up to love America and the American dream. This is achieved through conscious political education and indoctrination. Nigeria women can equally be exposed to and immersed in the Nigeria way of life if they are politically socialized and indoctrinated.

On the basis of the above, political education is viewed as a process of mental liberation which breaks apathy and the culture of silence of the vast majority of Nigerians, and empowers them to participate effectively and meaningfully in the process of nation building (Enejere 2001:47). This definition underscores the fact that political education should aim at building a virile democracy where the masses are conscious, vigilant and organized and in which social injustice and poverty are dominated. In a related definition, Sambo (2001:59), defines political education as a process of inculcating in

the citizen political beliefs, norms and values of a system. In essence, the definition anchors on those worthwhile political values and beliefs that stimulate and promote political participation of all citizens. An important lesson from this definition is that political education should also involve the unlearning of some of those beliefs which perpetuate a system of discrimination. In order words, any form of political education that is worthwhile should de-emphasize gender stereotype that perpetuate powerlessness especially that of women.

Objectives of Women Political Education

The Nigeria woman like her counterpart in any democratic country is imbued with a sense of patriotism and has the capacity to contribute her quota to the task of nation building. In order to achieve this feat, political education for women should embrace a broad programme of action that will liberate them from the current political morass, ignorance and apathy. Indeed, such programme is to create a wholly new political culture. Essentially, the political education for women should aim at:

1. increasing woman's level of awareness or understanding of political issues,
2. increasing the capacity of rural women to understand the importance of political power and the need for them to participate in public affairs,
3. educating women on the causes of mass poverty and how to combat it,
4. to educating women on the dangers of political apathy and ignorance,
5. educating women on their rights and duties citizens,
6. educating and mobilizing women to appreciate the value of electoral process and to participate in it,
7. educating women on the dangers off unjust traditions, gender stereotypes and practices.
8. mobilizing the women to gain the crusade against corruption,

9. mobilizing rural women to participate and appreciate women organization that chart the cause of women,
10. educating women for capacity building for personal development,
11. mobilizing women to acquire functional literacy necessary for advancement of knowledge on national issues,
12. mobilizing women to aspire for and assume political offices and,
13. educating women on the constitution and electoral laws.

Current Status of Political Participation

Globally, the low level of political education of women has dramatically underrepresented them in the halls of government. Even though, women participation in politics has improved worldwide, Shaefer (2001), believes that, sexism is still the most serious barrier to women interested in holding offices. This means gender discrimination is still an impediment to political participation by women.

Generally, global statistics have shown that women are underrepresented in the various political positions. For instance, in 1999, there were only 67 women in the U. S. A. Congress. They accounted for 58 of 435 members of House of Representatives and 9 of the 100 members of the senate. According to the report, only three states had female governors (Centre for the American Women and Politics, 1999).

In Europe during the same period, Belgium had 12% of females in national legislatures, Greece 6% Poland 15% Germany 26.7%, Croatia 5.8%, Estonia 12.% and so on. It is only Sweden that had highest number of 43% (inter Parliamentary Union 1999).

The picture is equally gloomy in Africa. In 1999, in their national legislature, the proportion of women shows that Senegal had 11.7%, Guinea 7.9%, Cote d' Ivoire 4.6%, Zimbabwe 14.7% South Africa 25%, Cameroun 12.2%, Morocco 0.6%. Chad 16.4% Sudan 8.2%

Kenya 5%, Angola 9.5% and so on (Shaefer, 2001).

The Nigeria situation has slightly changed since 1979, though marginally. For example, female representation in the National Assembly was about 3.4% after the 1999 elections. Specifically, there were 4 women in the House of representatives in 1979, and 13 in 1999 (out of 360 members. In 1979, there was no female senator, 1 in 1983 and 3 in 1999 out of 109 (Ityavyar 1999).

At the local government level, there were 5 women out of the 301 L. G. A. as Chairpersons in 1979. In 1999, the number increased to 9 out of the 774 L. G. A. This in effect means that the number of representations has declined from 1.7% in 1979 to 1.2% in 1999 (UNICEF 2001). The situation is the same for the various State Houses of Assembly. In 1979, only 12 females were elected into the 19 State Houses of Assembly. In 1999 elections, the same numbers of female members were elected out of 36 State Houses of Assembly.

Out of the 50 ministers during Shehu Shagari's administration in 1979, only three were women. Between 1999 and 2000, Obasanjo had only 6 women as ministers out of 46. This represents just about 13% of ministerial posts held by women. Unfortunately, no female has ever been elected as a state governor in Nigerian. On the whole, between 1992 and 1999 only two females were elected as deputy government. In spite of the gloomy picture painted above, there has been a steady increase in the number of females who hold political offices since 1999. There is however, dearth of statistical data to how the proportions. Be it as it may, the truth remains that the low levels of education, skills, economic resources and self esteem, etc have and women to assert themselves in the political arena and challenge the cultural biases.

Problems of Political Participation

There have been legal frameworks and institutional declarations that guarantee women's suffrage and participation in political affairs in

Nigeria. This has been reinforced by expansion of educational opportunities for women that have empowered them economically, ushered them into professions and Senior Civil Service cadre. Despite these advances, what is most striking is that politics and public life remain to this day, overwhelmingly a man's world. In other words, although Nigeria women vote almost the same proportion as men, they lag behind in holding political office, even when compared with other countries of the region (UNICEF, 2000). Several constraints have been identified to militate against women political participation. Some of these are recurrent and resistant to change; others are emerging and susceptible to change as the country evolves politically.

A fundamental constraint to women-advancement in politics is the low level of educational attainment. Illiteracy is a predominant social problem in Nigeria that impacts more on women. Even though female or girl child education has been deliberately encouraged by successive governments in Nigeria, poverty, ignorance and religion, etc. act as impediments to the realization of mass literacy for women. Illiteracy breeds conservatism, inferiority complex, immobility and low self-esteem, excludes and secludes women from decision making process including politics.

More generally in Nigeria, women face an array of barriers to their full participation in various aspects of social life, due to extended cultural attitudes. Certain cultural institutions like the Purdah, Sharia and early marriage practiced in parts of the country limit women's rights and opportunities to advance beyond family settings. Indeed, Purdah based concepts and practices still impose some limits on the participation of women in social life. However, there are indications that in some parts of Northern Nigeria, the practice of extreme Purdah has considerably lessened due to changes in education, economy and cultural influences.

Besides, the idea of the superiority of men is also embedded in all Nigerian cultures. It is within this cultural context that gender roles

are defined and women participation declined or precluded in certain key spheres reserved for men. The pervasive general role of women is a productive one, with the associated child rearing and home management. Though this attitude is shifting ground, it is still prevalent in illiterate and conservative cultures.

The low economic status of women limits their opportunities for broader participation in the society. A good number of Nigerian women are poor. This is compounded by the consequence of child bearing and rearing especially in cultures that encourage many children. The pangs of child bearing and rearing, repeated pregnancies, domestic chores, etc sap the health of women and further limit their participation. Since political life demands both time and energy, most women cannot cope with both political and family obligations.

The existing women organization that chart the cause of women are sometimes weak, prejudiced and fractionalized. In other words, women themselves often constitute cogs in the wheel of their progress. Instead of being in the vanguard against social injustice, they often constitute themselves into aristocratic groups forging, selfish and parochial motives. This has led to the formation of multiple but weak, feeble and fragile associations that are often not focused. Indeed, illiterate and rural women are highly discriminated against by elitist women who dominate the organization. Thus, there is class struggle within the rank and file of women groups. The problem of women is sometimes, women themselves.

Lack of access to media limits the opportunities of women to advance in all ramifications. Due to poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, many Nigerian women do not have access to Newspaper, radio, television etc. among literate women, only few of them read newspapers or listen to radio or watch television. When they do, limited time is spent. Thus, the weak position of women in the household and the time constraints on women resulting from their burden of work in and outside the home are

though to be important additional factors affecting women's access to the media.

The activities of NGOs, international agencies and government institutions have not created significant impact regarding cultural shift in attitudes to gender roles. These initiative are often stunted by discontinuity or bottlenecks of government. Sometimes, corruption by individuals retards the realization of the objectives. All these impinge on efforts to advance the cause of women.

Strategies to Enhance Women Political Education

An important way to overcome women powerlessness is through politics education through which women will familiarize themselves with their rights, duties and obligations. Besides, it will create political awareness and consciousness among them. Therefore, the strategies to achieve this feat should be practicable, functional and achievable. The strategies will be discussed in two fold viz:

Contents

- a. Participatory democracy. This should focus on women's right to be involved in the political decision-making process at all levels of government (local, state and federal). What is to be learned should include, freedom of association, voting, free choice, political aspiration etc.
- b. Teaching democratic values. Emphasis should be on the a acquisition of such values like patriotism, transparency, accountability, equity, justice, free and fair elections, good governance, etc.
- c. Teaching the constitution. Women should be exposed to all aspects of the country's constitution. To achieve this, the constitution should be translated into local language in simple ways that even illiterate arid rural woman will digest with maximal ease. Emphasis should be laid on constitutional rights of citizens, functions of government at local, state and federal levels.

- d. Electoral guidelines from the Independent Electoral Commission, State Electoral Commissions and political parties should be taught to women in an intelligently honest way. Women should be familiarized with issues that border on qualifications for elections in respect of age, educational qualifications, working experience, membership of political parties, tenure of office and so on.
- e. Teaching traditional and cultural practices that impede political participation. Women should understand these cultural stereotypes that militate against their advancement like men's superiority over women, purdah, prolonged confinement when husbands die, child bearing, early marriages and so on.
- f. Functional literacy. Provision of attainable and affordable adult literacy is advocated. Simple citizenship education on the rule of law, census, consensus, civil duties, mass mobilization, local cultural norms, etc.
- g. Propagating women organizations. Functions, organs, cost, qualifications to hold office, need for co-operative society and so on, should be included when teaching women the formation of their associations.

Methods of Disseminating Information

- Workshops, seminars, conferences, Discussion and lectures using languages that women will understand are advocated.
- Using educational material like:
 - i. Write ups
 - ii. Radio
 - iii. Posters
 - iv. Flyers
 - v. Public address system

Mass education

- i. Using local newspapers published in local languages
- ii. Using literate women to disseminate information to women-at local, ward, village, age grade and family levels.

- iii. Occasional talks on women and political participation.

The mass media

- i. Radio phone-in programmes ii. Television documentaries iii. Chat shows
- iv. Community radio stations

Women meeting to include:

- i. Marketplaces
- ii. Church premises
- iii. Town halls
- iv. Co-operative society office

Conclusion

Women possess the potentials and capacities to contribute positively to national development. However, certain cultural and institutional constraints have imposed limitations to their participation in the affairs of the country. Through political education, women would be able to jettison those impediments and advance to participate and contribute to nation building.

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Ashipu fgbo
Department of Psychology,
Federal College of Education,
Obudu.