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Gender Imbalance in Nigeria's Legislature: A Peep into the 7th and 8th Assemblies

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ABSTRACT

Marginalization of women in politics is very apparent most especially in Africa, where women are deemed by many as having no business with politics. In Nigeria, the above statement is also a fact when one considers the number of female parliamentarians in the country's National Assembly. Ever since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, there have not been a substantial number of women in the legislature when compared to the number of their male counterparts. In the 7th and the 8th assemblies the problem still persisted. Howbeit, there are several factors responsible for this issue and these factors are what this study tries to look at. But before that, this paper looks briefly at the 7th and the 8th assemblies. To achieve the above however, secondary data is purely used.

Keywords: Gender, imbalance, Nigeria, legislature, 7th, 8th, assembly.

Introduction

The parliament is, as a matter of fact, one of the most potent and important organs of the modern government. Some countries operate a unicameral legislature while others run the antithesis which is bicameral legislature. As a nation operating a bicameral parliament or legislature, Nigeria has a National Assembly with two Houses. The Upper House of the National Assembly is called the Senate while the Lower House on the other hand is called the House of Representatives. The Senate is composed of one hundred and nine (109) elected senators with a president as the head, while the House of Representatives presently consists of three hundred and sixty (360) elected members. Both the senators and the House of Representative members are elected for a four-year term based on the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. However, there is a serious issue of gender imbalance in the membership of the country's parliament which, of course, is caused by certain factors. The factors responsible for this imbalance are what we shall be discussing after we have seen the composition of the 7th and the 8th assemblies.

The 7th National Assembly

The Nigeria's seventh National Assembly was inaugurated on Monday, 6 June 2011. Both the members of the Lower House and the senators at the Upper House were elected from the six geopolitical zones that make up the entity called Nigeria. The President of the Senate then was David Mark and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tambuwal Waziri Aminu. However, there was an issue of unbalanced gender in the membership of this assembly. Despite the fact that women represent about half of Nigeria's enormous population (which was above one hundred and sixty-three million in the same 2011 according to PopulationPyramid.net), only seven (7) women were elected into the Senate and only twenty-six (26) into the House of Representatives (see Bolanle, 2018). In fact, not only was the number of women in the parliament small, they were also not among the key officeholders in the parliament. None of them (except Hon. Mulika Adeola Akande who was the House Leader) occupied the following key positions in the parliament: Majority Leader Senate, Deputy Majority Leader Senate, Minority and Deputy Minority Leader Senate, Chief Whip Senate, Deputy Chief Whip Senate, Minority Whip Senate, Deputy House Leader, etc. Nonetheless, the seventh National Assembly came to an end on 6 June 2015.



The 8th National Assembly

The eighth National Assembly kicked off on Tuesday, 9 June 2015. The eighth Assembly consists of three hundred and sixty (360) members at the Lower House and one hundred and nine (109) Senators at the Upper House. In the Senate, fifty-nine (59) out of a hundred and nine senators were elected on the platform of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) while forty-nine (49) were elected on the platform of the main opposition party – the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) (see Wikipedia, 2019). Dr. Bukola Saraki is the immediate ex-President of the Senate, with the Deputy Senate President as Ike Ekweremadu. The Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Deputy Speaker of the House were Rt. Hon. Yakubu Dogara and Yusuf Sulaiman Lasun respectively. According to a paper titled “Gender Mainstreaming in Nigeria: The Cross-Cutting Issues”, the Senate had 94.5% male senators and just 5.5% female senators.

Put differently, there were only seven (7) women senators in Nigeria’s 8th assembly who were: Princess Stella Oduah, Uche Ekwunife, Monsurat Sunmonu, Fatimat Raji Rasaki, Oluremi Tinubu, Rose Oko and Binta Garba (see Nairaland Forum, 2015), while there were only fifteen (15) female out of the three hundred and sixty (360) members of the House of Representatives. These women were: Hon. Nnenna Elendu-Ukeje, Hon. Sodaguno Festus Omoni, Hon. Nkiruka Chidubem Onyejeocha, Hon. Rita Orji, Hon. Eucharika Azodo Okwunna, Hon. Evelyn Omavovoan Oboro, Hon. Beni Butmaklar Langtang, Hon. Omosede Igbinedion Gabriella, Hon. Stella Obiageli Ngwu, Hon. Fatima Binta Bello, Hon. Aishatu Jibril Dukku, Hon. Olufunke Adedoyin, Hon. Ayo Hulayat Omidiran, Hon. Khadija Bukar Ibrahim, and Hon. Asabe Vilita Bashir (see NAIJ.com). Very importantly, the eighth National Assembly came to an end on 9 June 2019.

Factors Hindering Women’s Membership in the Parliament

Generally, in Africa, the number of women involved in politics is quite low when compared to the rate at which women participate in political processes and governance in other parts of the world like Europe and America. There are several factors responsible for this. They include:

- **Gender discrimination:** There is discrimination on the basis of gender in terms of membership in the Nigeria’s National Assembly in particular and Nigeria’s politics in general. Although the 1999 amended Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria gave equal political, economic, social, cultural, religious and civic rights to all citizens of the country regardless of gender, we are yet to see this in reality, especially in politics. Historically, after Nigeria’s return to democratic rule in 1999, there were only three (3) female senators in the Senate out of its one hundred and nine (109) members. In the year 2007, the number increased to eight, but reduced to seven in 2011 (i.e. in the seventh National Assembly). In 2015, the number moved back to eight. In the House of Representatives in 1999, only twelve (12) out of the three hundred and sixty members were female. In 2003, 2011 and 2015, the number of women in the House were twenty-one (21), twenty-six (26) and nineteen (19) respectively (see Uzoanya and Awodipe, 2015 cited in Bolanle, 2018).

Further, things were this way also as a result of the patriarchal realities in some Nigerian (and African) communities. “We all know that traditions, customs, sexual stereotyping of social roles and cultural prejudice” in many societies/communities “continue to militate against enjoyment of rights and full participation of women on an equal basis with men in national development of Africa” (see Gender Mainstreaming in Nigeria: The Cross-Cutting Issues). Also, it is on the basis of these patriarchal realities of most Nigerian cultures that the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari said, while on a state visit to Germany, that his wife belongs to his kitchen and the other rooms. This presupposes that the activities of women should not go beyond the confines of their husbands’ “kitchens” and “other rooms”. Fapohunda (2017) on his part noted that gender stereotyping is so entrenched in the Nigerian culture and it is frequently imperceptible.

Also, women have been viewed as weaker vessels to men. The emotional and psychological stress that is attached to maternity has been seen by some as the reason why women should be “excluded” or given less or peripheral political positions. In affirmation, Awajiusuk (2015:99) cited in Bolanle (2018) worded that “gender has over the years, portrayed women as weaker sex. The concept of gender represents the woman as one who is superficial with mainly fashion, beauty and little for deep thinking”.

Table 1: Percentage of Women in National Assemblies of Few Selected African and Latin American Countries and what they rank in the World

Country	Percentage of Women in Parliament	Rank
Argentina	35	10
Brazil	8.6	121
Cameroon	8.9	120
Chile	15	74
Democratic Republic of Congo	12	92
El Salvador	16.7	65
Ethiopia	21.9	38
Ghana	10.9	103
Kenya	7.3	128
Mexico	25.8	26
Nigeria	6.4	135
South Africa	32.8	15
Venezuela	18	56

(Information gotten from "Human Development Report" by United Nations Development Fund (2006) in Umukoro, N. (2014:8)

From the table above, it could be seen that the Nigerian state ranks 135 (out of the 154 countries presented by UNDF) with a percentage of just 6.4 women in its National Assembly. This, in essence, goes further to reveal the level of gender discrimination in Nigerian politics.

- **Religious Factor:** Religion is also a powerful factor that militates and mitigates women's participation and involvement in Nigeria's political process. Orthodox Christianity, Islam and most traditional religions in Nigeria preach women's submissiveness to their husbands, and highly support men's rulership over their families, clans, villages, states and country. The truth is that if at all women were to get involved in politics, these religions note that their involvement should not go beyond holding peripheral political positions. Hence, Bolanle (2018) writes:

"The two major religions in the country (Christianity and Islam) preach that women should be submissive and by implication are not expected to be leaders, further enhancing their political marginalization".

Expressing her humble and scholarly view on this, Oloyede Oluyemi, in a paper titled "Monitoring Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria", states that:

"Both Christianity and Islam do not accord women much role in public life... However, they (women) are not to be seen in public domain. And so, it is a challenge to women participation in politics, more so, women found in the corridor of politics are not often religious in practice".

- **Fund or Economic Factor:** Politics generally is very costly, but it's "costlier" in Nigeria. Vying for political offices in Nigeria is like climbing Kilimanjaro for men talk more of women. In other words, contesting for political offices in the country is mountainous and a herculean task for men who are deemed more financial buoyant than their women counterparts. In short, most Nigerian women do not have the financial wherewithal to contest for political positions. For example, to register and obtain a form to vie for Senatorial and House of Representative seats cost 4 million Naira and 1.5 million Naira respectively (for PDP), while that of APC's Senatorial and House of Representatives forms were 7 million Naira and 3.85 million Naira respectively for the 2019 general elections (NAIJ.com, 2018). But this does not end there because campaigns had to be carried out, and billboards, posters, and fliers printed, and all these requires huge amount of money. During elections, it is a ritual in most places in Nigeria that if voters are not properly given handouts, and electoral officers well bribed, there is every tendency that one might lose in such places. On the basis of this monetization of Nigerian politics, the assumption of the National Assembly seats by substantial number of women becomes a mirage in Nigeria.
- **Attention and Time:** Politics requires an input of huge amount of time. Put differently, politics is time consuming. In essence, political matters and issues call for maximum and rapt attention. Most oftentimes, politics demands a lot of locotion and travels which

could take one off home and family for days, weeks and even months. Politics also involves organization and attendance of myriads of meetings, seminars and symposiums some of which run from dawn to dusk. Based on this, some see it in Nigeria as unideal for women, especially married ones, to abandon their homes and families for such a long period of time or to keep late nights. This thus constitutes a kibosh to women's membership into the National Assembly in particular and their involvement in politics in general.

- **Stigmatization:** Just like people with HIV/AIDS are viewed or treated as nobodies by many in different societies, so are women involved in politics viewed/regarded as reprobates by some persons in the Nigerian society. Sharing the same view on this matter, Oloyede Oluyemi words "women aspirants who venture into politics" in Nigeria "are looked upon as shameless and promiscuous". Thus, in an atmosphere of stigmatization, many women found it difficult to vie for political offices in the country.
- **Violence:** Violence characterizes Nigerian politics. The rate of violence and brutality in Nigerian politics is too high that not every woman can withstand it. In support of this assertion, Bolenle (2018) remarked that Nigerian politics is marred by political violence and intimidation of both voters and candidates during elections, further hindering women's participation.

Conclusion/Recommendation

The rate of women's membership in the Nigerian National Assembly and their involvement in Nigerian politics when compared to that of men is quite insignificant and unappealing; however, this ought not to be so. Therefore, in order to bring this pathetic situation to an end and/or to reduce it dramatically and drastically, all the above barriers that hinder women's participation in Nigerian politics should be carefully examined and eliminated. In addition, Nigerian women should try and get rid of "inferiority complex", and begin to see themselves as equal gender to their male counterparts. They should also learn to eschew political apathy. In other words, they should stop being apolitical, and also learn to support their fellow women who vie for national assembly seats and other political positions in the country whether at the national, state, or local level. Lastly, gender equalization should not end at the slogan level; rather the section 17(1) of the Nigerian constitution which states that "The State social order is founded on ideals of Freedom, **Equality** and Justice" should be implemented to the full and to last in order for women to get involved in the political processes, and vie and occupy different political offices (the parliament inclusive) in the Nigerian state in a substantial figure.

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