



## **Gender Discrimination and National Politics: The Nigerian Case**

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**Abstract:** Women participation in Nigerian politics is crucial to the development of Nigeria and since women constitute a sizeable proportion of the population, neglecting them may mean losing their valuable contribution. Traditional socio-economic and political and cultural structures aid discrimination against women leading to loss of contributions of women to societal development. Raising the status of women through gender empowerment has is considered in certain quarters as vital in the quest towards improvement in living standards and wellbeing of the masses in economies transiting to stability. Despite global efforts to improve the poor conditions of women through numerous conventions and conferences such as CEDAW, MDGs among others, gender discrimination has not ceased. The paper aims at throwing light on gender discrimination, obstacles to gender equality and suggests strategies for promoting effective gender equality and empowerment of women. Using secondary data, from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, the paper found that gender discrimination exists in all variable indicators considered. Current status of Nigerian women in relation to men in the areas of education, income, labor force and share of seats in parliament or level of political participation were considered. Some of the main factors militating against women's effective participation in politics are illiteracy, poverty, money politics, instrument of intimidation, harmful traditional practices and discriminatory cultural stereotypes, violence against women, barriers by electoral process, and religious barriers. It is suggested that more efforts are required by civil society groups and government agencies for greater awareness on gender issues and rekindling efforts of all stakeholders in the quest to formulating policies and programs towards reduction of gender inequality.

**Keywords:** Gender Discrimination, Inequality, Women Empowerment, National Development

## **Introduction: Conceptual and Theoretical Remarks**

Discrimination against the womenfolk in modern society manifests in many ways. They are relegated to disadvantaged position not only in Nigeria but also in many other countries. Discriminatory practices have grave implications for the well-being of women and the economy. Gender equity could act as a veritable instrument for societal development. Traditional socio-economic and cultural as well as political structures aid discrimination against women. Elimination of all types of discrimination against women and the girl-child is essential to enable women's potentials to be realized in the areas considered exclusive only to the menfolk, such as politics. Human beings deserve freedom and equal rights. According to Aung San Suu Kyi (cited in UNDP Human Development Report, 2014)), human beings the world over, need freedom and security to enable them realize their full potential. Raising the status of women through gender equality and empowerment has become vital in the quest towards improvement in living standards and wellbeing of the masses and by extension, transforming the economies to a more stable one. Gender equality is crucial to a meaningful national development.

Gender comprises a range of differences between men and women, extending from the

biological to the social. It refers to socially constructed and socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with females and males (Parpart, et al, 2000). All cultures interpret and elaborate the biological difference between women and men into a set of social expectations about what behaviors and activities are appropriate and what rights, resources, and power women and men possess. But like race, ethnicity, and class; gender is a social category that largely establishes one's life chances. It shapes one's participation in society and in the economy. Therefore, while the term gender refers to men and women, for the purpose of this presentation, gender refers to the condition of women in the context of African societies. In variably development has element of welfare though meant for everyone. Discrimination is the act or practice of treating somebody or a particular group in society less fairly than others, perhaps on the grounds of sex/gender, race, age, group, etc. Discrimination is an unjustifiable negative behavior towards a people based on their group membership. Discriminatory behaviors may include denial of access to common goods or show of hostility towards some people or a group of persons. It is a negative behaviors directed against persons because of their membership in a particular group (Parpart, et al, 2000: 87).

Development as a concept is captured as a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitude and national institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth. It involves reduction of inequality or eradication of absolute poverty among the citizenry. It represents a continuous change involving re-organization, re-orientation of the social, economy and the entire system. It cannot be completed without a colossal radical changes in institutions, social, administrative structures as well as potential attitude, customs and beliefs (UNDP, 2014). While development is usually defined in the national context, its widespread utilization may call for modification of international economy and social system; thus the issue at hand today cannot be discussed exclusive of the African continent. Development as it is today represents a gamut of change by which an entire social system tunes to the diverse basic needs and desires of individuals and social groups within that system and moves away from a condition of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory, to a situation or condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually better. It implies the ability of a nation to expand its output at a rate faster than the growth rate of its population. Overall, economic wellbeing of a population is measured by the difference between their per capita and the rate of inflation (Parpart, 2000: 90).

Development indicates how much goods and services are available for consumption and investment for the average citizens. Gender issues involve women as well as men. Gender equality, therefore, should be seen within a dynamic system of relations embedded in a development process that seeks to empower its actors and gives equal opportunities to both women and men to participate and benefit (NPC, 2001). The report associates poverty to lower economic growth, weaker governance and lower quality of life with gender disparities. According to the United Nations (2004) democratic governance is achieved when women and men are able to influence the political agenda on an equal footing. What this means is that the role of women in political process cannot be brushed aside in the general affairs of national development interest, including politics. Gender equity will tend to guarantee the rights of all citizenry and usher in holistic development. To be frank, it is difficult to achieve development where women are downgraded, discriminated against, marginalized or ignored. While it has been found out that men have dominated the economy and most social institutions, the potentials of women are often under-utilized around the globe. According to World Bank report cited in NPC (2001), the failure to include women in all aspects of life is responsible for the continued underdevelopment of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Theorizing Gender Roles**

Gender roles are orchestrated by gender inequality. Gender roles are behavioral activities associated with sexes in a social or interpersonal relationship in a particular culture. Gender norms are reinforced in defining masculine and feminine identities. The study is based on the premise that gender roles are based on social characteristics of social roles in a society over time which is influenced by many factors. It leads to power relations between men and women and structured by culture which assigned inferior status on womenfolk. It powers access to and control over resources, decision on how to expend these resources. Under this setting women suffer from all forms of disadvantages or denials which affect their health and contribution to development processes. In order to comprehend gender roles very well, there is need to examine some theoretical framework related to gender discrimination. There are several frameworks on gender roles due to the diversity of the concept but two most related to the present paper were described.

The functionalist perspective sees society as a complex system and suggests that gender inequalities exist to maximize social efficiency. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation and broadly focuses on the social structures that shape society as a whole. The functionalist perspective of gender inequality was most

robustly articulated in the 1940s and 1950s, and largely developed by Talcott Parsons' model of the nuclear family. This theory suggests that gender inequalities exist as an efficient way to create a division of labor, or as a social system in which particular segments are clearly responsible for certain, respective acts of labor. The division of labor works to maximize resources and efficiency. A structural functionalist view of gender inequality applies the division of labor to view predefined gender role as complementary: women take care of the home while men provide for the family. Thus gender, like other social institutions contributes to the stability of society as a whole. According to (Ritzer, 2003) functionalism focuses on the structures of society and their functional significance (positive or negative consequences) for other structures. The primary concern of functionalism is the large-scale social structures and institutions of society, their interrelationships, and their constraining effects on actors. The liberal feminism theory, which is based or anchored on the ideals of equality and liberty, has bearing on gender relations. The liberal conception of equality was based on the belief that all humans had the potential to be rational and that any inequality has to be justified in rational terms. The theory argued that the reason women appear to be intellectually inferior was due to their inferior education and therefore were a result of inequality rather than

a justification for it. Liberal feminists are women's subordination as resulting from general norms, rather than from biological sex and aim to change these norms. Liberal feminists focus on equal opportunity for men and women in all spheres of endeavor (Parpart, *et al*, 2000).

### **Rationale of the Paper**

Discrimination against women is becoming an important national and international human rights issue (Cook 1994). Women constitute almost half of the world's population and better status of women is a fulcrum for total participation of women in both governance and development. In Nigeria, the sheer numerical size of women constitutes up to about 49.2 per cent according to 2006 population and housing census (NPC, 2009). For a sustainable development of a nation therefore, the women potentials must be optimally harnessed. While the pursuit of gender equity remains strongly embedded within the framework of fundamental human rights and gender justice, investments in women are now recognized as crucial to achieving sustainable development for transiting economies of Africa. In most traditional African settings, women are adversely affected in several ways. These include deprivation of the women of quality education and decent training, poor healthcare, female circumcision, underage marriage, and limited access to productive resources and political power. While Karl Marx

noted that the inferiority nature of women was a function of men's chauvinistic nature to perpetuate their domination over women, Agbalajobi (2010) points out that the increasing domination of women by men has been the cause of women not succeeding in gaining power. All these could engender lower quality of life and culminate in limited productivity and hinder economic efficiency and developmental growth. Therefore, all efforts to promote and improve African women's status deserve utmost attention and support. The conquest begins with proper insight into the situation and that is what the paper aims to achieve.

According to the UNDP Human Development Report (2014) figures for all developing nations, there is greater disparity in African men and women status and potential for development. For example, most women still lack access to education, employment and income-generating opportunities, information, and parliamentary representations as indicated in Table 1 of the Appendix. Women's low political power is a reflection of their poor participation and representation in politics. The table shows that gender disparities vary across all the regions of the world. The share of seats in parliament varies across the regions of the world. For population with at least secondary school education and labor force participation rate, females had lower rates compared to men among all the regions of the

world. The observations are in consonance with earlier studies and reinforce the calls for drastic intervention in order to reverse the trend in gender discrimination and boost economic development. Current status of Nigerian women in relation to men in the areas of education, income, labor force and share of seats in parliament or political participation were considered, excluding other areas such as women's access to credit, property ownership, among others due to paucity of data.

The Nigerian scenario is not different. In spite of the fact that Nigeria has embraced gender mainstreaming, it is evident that gender inequalities are still persistent. Recently, it was estimated that one Nigerian woman for example dies from complications of pregnancy and childbirth in every 10 minutes. This implies that about 144 women lose their lives within a day and a total of 1,728 within a year (UNICEF, 2009). This revelation in recent times shows that the situation has not changed at all or much.

### **Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Movement**

In the pre-independence era, women took active role in political struggles against the hegemony of the colonialists. For instance, in Aba, women staged an uprising popularly called the Aba Women's Riot in 1929, with one of the leaders being Margaret Ekpo. It was a fierce demonstration of the strength of women's group in response to bad

colonial governance. In fact, the women's protest was both a political and economic agitation against the colonial authorities. Similarly, in Western Nigeria in 1946, the Abeokuta Women's Union, led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti also protested against discriminatory taxation and British high-handedness in taking away the powers women had over the markets. Yoruba women's political efforts equally led to the dethroning and banishing of the King, Ademola 11 from Egbaland. Other legendary women are Queen Amina of Zazau (Zaria), Princess Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin, Henrietta Lawson, Hajia Gambo Sawaba, Keziah Fashina, Oyikan Morenika, Kofoworolu Pratt, Flora Nwakauche and Janet Mokelu.

More recently, women that have made impact and those that are still in governance are Kofo Bucknor-Akerele, Kema Chkwe, late Dora Akunyili, Mobolaji Osomo, Oby Ezekwesili, Ngozi Okonji-Iweala, Ndidi Okereke, Patricia Etteh, DIazani Allison-Madueke, among the few others. However, in spite of these seemingly considerable gains in public life, discrimination in political and economic affairs has not ebbed in the Nigerian public domain. Statistics on the various gender and related aspects have confirmed the above assertion - See Tables 2 and 3 in the Appendix.

Deploying statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2008), it is observed that despite significant global increases in

enrolment ratios in education, women's education status is lower than men's enrolment. With respect to the mean years of schooling and expected years in school, women have 4.2 and 8.2 as against 6.3 and 9.8 for men respectively. Men are by far higher in gross national income per capita (6,594) compared to female (4, 068). Women's share of seats in parliament was 6.6 as at 2014 and labor force participation rate for male (63.5) also higher than that of female (48.1). A critical look at the trend of seats held in National Assembly by gender over a period of years, from 1999-2007, according to Table 3 shows an increasing trend though highly insignificant across the three periods and for all the strata namely, Senate, House of Representatives, State Houses of Assembly and Local Government Councils respectively. The implication of this is that women participation in politics is still very low and by extension their developmental contributions are lost. Whereas women have been granted the right to vote and support their husbands/party, they have not been given permission socio-culturally to contest election. According to Azuh (2014), the cultural and social values bestow the final authority on the man or husbands in the households, furthering discrimination and subjugation of women.

In some parts of the world, women have demonstrated a very strong political support for men with

respect to mobilization of votes for the latter. Only a handful of women have made beautiful impressions in public life or reached the pinnacle of power/decision-making, such as President Corazon Aquino in Philippines, Chandrika Kumaratungu in Sri Lanka, Indira Ghandi in India, Margaret Thatcher in United Kingdom, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Sirleaf-Johnson in Liberia, Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany; among few others. Despite the global efforts to improve the poor conditions of women through numerous conventions and conferences such as International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City (1975), with a resolution to promote equality, development and peace in the world, followed by the UN Decade for Women, which aimed at creating awareness on the marginalization of women, Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) intended to guarantee women's equal rights with men in all spheres of life, including education, employment, health care, suffrage and marriage, as well as the International Safe Motherhood Initiative, in Kenya (1987), and the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, that stressed the importance of gender equality, International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), 1994, the lot of women in social and public life remained unimpressive.

There have been other women advocacy programmes, including the ICPD programme of action, which established the rights of couples and individuals to attain the highest standard of reproductive health, which was defined as including sexual health and FP. The conference reiterated the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents, and stated that the promotion of the responsible exercise of these rights for all people should be the fundamental basis for government and community-supported policies and programmes. The Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, a platform for Action aimed at enhancing the world community's commitment to gender equality (Folarin and Udoh, 2014). Also, in 2000, 189 countries around the globe pledged support to gender equality and female empowerment as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of integrated development objectives that together define the basic minimum conditions for a decent existence particularly on improving the status of women and men alike. The United Nations MDGs have a timeframe for the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women. In fact, less than 1000 days into the lifeline for achieving the MDGs, there is no clear evidence that most developing countries, including Nigeria have

made any remarkable achievements in that respect.

At the national level, there is the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of 1999, Criminal Code and Penal Code Laws of Nigeria, Customary Laws and practices and the police Act, as well as several policies such as National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), National Population Policy, National Policy on Women, National Policy on Sexuality Education in Schools, Nutrition Policy, Universal Basic Education Program, Micro Credit Scheme, National Policy on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, National Policy on HIV/AIDS, towards bridging the gap in gender. All these policies aim at reversing the gender bias and marginalization of women. But what has been the case? The need to improve the status of women and eliminate gross inequality is no longer the issue, but how to implement the laudable local and global policies and initiatives in order to bring social justice to the deprived and vulnerable group.

### **Gaps in Gender Equality Drive**

There exists gender imbalance in developing countries. Several direct and related policies have not been translated to anticipated equality and development. While so many governments accented to the numerous treaties, yet the implementation aspects have not been effective, leading to little or no impact on the set objectives. Treatment of women is yet to be



fairer. Many of these policies on poverty reduction, fertility reduction, maternal mortality reduction, etc can be more effective if bold steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women and or reduction on the discrimination against women. In fact if there is a bottom-up approach, which encompasses grassroots participation in the decision making process, the interventions affecting gender issues might be less and its unintended consequences drastically minimized.

It can be noted that majority of related indicators are unfavorable to women: child health maternal health, HIV infection, rural-urban residence, early marriage, household headship, literacy, man-hours at work, wages, income, employment, means of production, senior positions, and parliamentary seats . The law and rights of women is another aspect where gap exists. The overriding influence of custom and tradition on statutory laws and the admixture of both are especially obvious. For instance, the non-discrimination clause in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is not taken into cognizance when executive policies are being formulated. All statutory laws should have uniform impact on closing the existing gaps in gender issues such as property inheritance rights, divorce, reproductive health rights, discrimination against women and harmful cultural practices can really

make a big difference for gender concerns

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite barriers that impede gender equity and encourage gender discrimination, some suggestions that may aid in the realization of the equity drive are important.

Firstly, government should reinvigorate its political will and efforts towards promoting gender equality and women empowerment through reshaping the legal and institutional framework to hinder gender discrimination. The legislative system should remove impediments to gender equality and reform laws that discriminate against women, such as laws and cultural practices or laws on inheritance, labor market participation, discrimination in certain job opportunities and employment policies.

Secondly, educational opportunities should be given to girls and boys equitably through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and more so, particular attention should be accorded in areas that provide women with better market skills.

Also, there is need for the reform of labour laws and regulations with the view to realignment with the new development model and new gender agenda. Again, the media should assist and expose the evil of discrimination, violence and crime against women, unjust cultural and traditions in both English and local language services.

Women participation in Nigerian politics is very crucial to the development of Nigeria and since women constitute a sizable proportion of the population, neglecting them may mean losing their valuable contribution. Despite this, the divide of gender roles *vis-a-vis* between both sexes as prescribed by culture will only exacerbate inequality. Gender discrimination or

disparities were found to exist in all variable indicators considered. In fact, in traditional Africa, a married woman is considered as the legal property of her husband. Ideally, a real democratic system should allow voluntary individual participation in politics, without any sentiments about gender, to optimally benefit from the potentials of women in Nigerian social and political life.

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## **Appendix-Tables**

### **Table 1 Gender Disparities**

Region	Share of seats in parliament		Pop with at least secondary edu		Labor force participation rate	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Arab States	13.8	32.9	46.4	24.7	73.2	
Europe and Central Asia	18.2	70	80.6	45.5	70.2	
Latin America & the Caribbean	25.3	53.3	53.9	53.7	79.8	
South Asia	17.8	28.4	49.9	30.7	80.7	
Sub-Saharan Africa	21.7	22.9	32.9	63.6	76.3	
Least Developed Countries	20.3	16.5	27.2	64.0	81.6	
World	21.1	54.2	64.2	50.6	n76.7	

**Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2014**

### **Table 2 Gender Disparities-Nigeria**

Indicator	Female
Male	
Mean years of schooling 6.3	4.2
Expected years in school 9.8	8.2
Estimated gross national income per capita 6, 594	4, 068
Share of seats in parliament	6.6
Population with at least some secondary school education -	-
Labor force participation rate 63.5	48.1

*Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2014*

**Table 3 No of Seats held in National Assembly by Gender – 1999, 2003, and 2007**

Senate	1999	2003	2007
Male	106	105	100
Female	3	4	9
House of Representatives			
Male	348	338	332
Female	12	22	28
State House of Assembly	939	933	913
	21	34	53
Local Government Council			
Male	6,532	8,698	1,576
Female	80	270	164

*Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2008*