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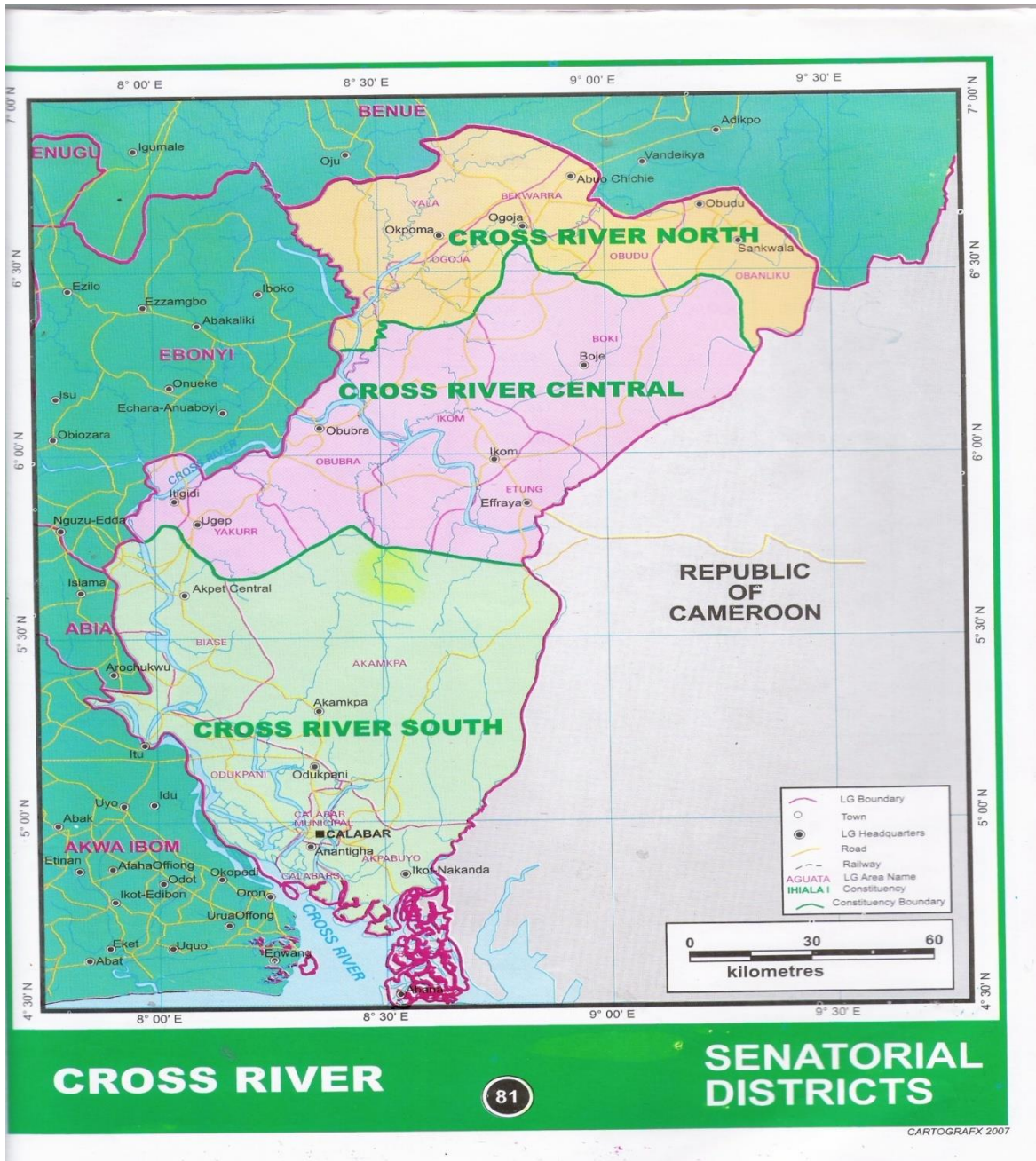
## Introduction

...Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work and eat as much as a man-when I could get to it-and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman...<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of Sojourner Truth<sup>2</sup> as she confronted these contradictions at the 1851 Women's Right Convention in Ohio. Detailing a litany of physical labours and abuses she had borne which did not consider her sex, she challenged the previous speaker a clergyman who had ridiculed the weakness and helplessness of women who should therefore not be entrusted with the vote thus “the man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles, or gives me the best place- and aint I a woman.<sup>3</sup> Sojourner truth's assertion one hundred and sixty five years ago reflects the voices of most women in post democratic Central Senatorial District in Cross River State of Nigeria. Poor, mostly illiterate, they continue to hope that the election processes can be based on justice, freedom, fundamental rights, equality and dignity for all.

Central Senatorial District is one of the three senatorial districts in Cross River State. This senatorial district like all others in Nigeria was carved out during Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's tenure as military Head of State for equity purposes. It was hoped that every state will not have more than three senators at the upper chambers.<sup>4</sup> Central Senatorial District is made up of six Local Government Areas that make up the eighteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) in

Cross River State. These LGAs include Yakurr, Abi, Obubra, Ikom, Etung and Boki. For political allocations, these Local Governments have six local government chairpersons and their vice chairperson. They have ten constituency seats in the state house of assembly made up of two in Yakurr, one in Abi, two in Obubra, two in Ikom, one in Etung and two in Boki. The National Assembly is divided into two houses, the House of Representatives and the Senate. For the House of Representatives, the area has three seats made up of Yakurr/Abi, Obubra/Etung and Ikom/ Boki and one senatorial seat for the area.



Source: Nigerian Atlas of Electoral Constituencies, INEC 2008.



## CENTRAL SENATORIAL DISTRICT MAP

Source: Nigerian Atlas of Electoral Constituencies, INEC 2008.

It is important to situate women's public presence in historical perspective and to trace historically how these women have fared before the present democratic dispensation that started in 1999. In the area there have been democratic ideas of accountability and representation defined in terms of "affinity of ruler to ruled, and where two major pre-colonial governance religion and mythical ancestry also played a pervasive role and were invoked to counter abuse of power by rulers."<sup>5</sup> There were other checks and balances on the exercise of power reinforced by social structures in these communities. They included council of chiefs, age-grade associations, warriors' bands and secret societies. For the women, it was their role as groups and as representatives of groups in community matters that have been often been mentioned in interviews. The *ekpa* society was one of the most dreaded and influential women's society in most communities in central senatorial district. This society was known to generally exerted strong influence in the affairs of their communities, intervened and imposed sanctions on offenders whenever the village constitution was violated, served as checks and

balances to most community decisions taken by men. But above all, they were greatly dreaded by the elders who did everything to avoid confrontation with them.<sup>6</sup>

There was also in Abi a women's group which was organized as leagues and initiated projects for the community. These twenty six women organizations spread out in the four Agbo Clan settlements of Itigidi (7), Adadama (6), Igbo-Ekurekwu (4) and Igbo-Imabana (9) existed between the period 1600-1960.<sup>7</sup> There was the *Babane Ekpache-Nkomer* a women organization in Ikom which according to Patience Erim and David Imbua:

Was in 1832, headed by a female chief, Mrs Achi Agbor. She was in 1832 succeeded by Ma Regbu Amba, another female chief. Among the functions of *Babane Ekpache-Nkomer* (is) the resolution of misunderstandings among the women folk which could lead to the breach of the peace in the community if left unresolved, and by promoting marriages within and outside their ethnic boundaries, the organization provided the basis for intra and inter-group understandings in Ikom area.<sup>8</sup>

Thus prior to the advent of the colonial government, authority was very largely represented by certain native societies to which the chiefs and all important men belonged. Women also had their societies as mentioned above. Although the basic political set up in the area was based on the single patrilineal descent group traced from the father, there were exceptions. There was the double or dual descent which had the matrilineal and recognition was equally accorded to both parents at each generation. This was practiced in Yakurr, Abi and Obubra as well as some parts of boki. Matrilineal took patrilineal in the inheritance of moveable property (livestock and currency) while patrilineal rights related to immovable property including houses, land and the like.<sup>9</sup>

All this change during the colonial period as the single male centered political system replaced the dual political system and left women out of public life. It phased out all their associations and made women unpopular. This colonial stance of relegating women was buttressed in 1923 when the delegation from the Lagos Women League appealed for position in the civil service. The chief secretary of Nigeria responded to these request thus "it is doubtful whether the time has arrived when women could be employed generally in the clerical service in substitution for men. In future they may be employed as telephone operators, counter clerks or

book binders.”<sup>10</sup> As if this was not enough in appointing the warrant chiefs no woman was considered. This was in contrast with the colonial era when there were both male and female leaders. To make matters worse most of these warrant chiefs were outcast, renegades and disrespected people who lost it with the people when they embraced western culture. These warrant chiefs were arrogant and imprudent in carrying out their duties without a concern for traditions or the peoples’ feelings. So the communities on their own part did not see any reason why they were appointed since they were not the village heads or the people they held in high esteem.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the disregard for the women’s enviable social responsibilities the colonial government failed to realize that “women were reasonably independent of their husbands and there was no common budget for a man and his wife, rather both the husband and the wife contributed for the upkeep of the household.”<sup>12</sup> The economy of the area was based on agriculture which absorbed everybody as land was and is still the bases of existence so women focused their attention fully to farming. The land tenure system never favoured women fully in the area of study since as noted earlier that the title deeds of matriclan were moveable property hence women had to depend on the goodwill of their husbands, brothers, uncles and male children if widowed for farmlands. The women took advantage of the colonial legal enactment especially the “Road and Creeks Proclamation” of 1903 and the “Road and Creeks (Rivers) Ordinance of 1930”<sup>13</sup> which took men away from the homes and the farmlands for days to perform “odd jobs like the construction of roads, bridges, courts and rest houses or to be made to carry loads for the colonial officials to distant places.”<sup>14</sup>

The women took over the running of the home as well as well as the farmlands and with the promotion of the cultivation of especially palm produce and cocoa as cash crops in the area some women carved a niche for themselves. In Yakurr for example where palm oil and kernel oil extraction had been the activity of women, the likes of mma Okpata (1892-1960) and Ma Okio Ofem (1910-1980) had excel in the palm oil and palm kernel business as their trade spread across geographical barriers.<sup>15</sup> in the same vien cocoa which was introduced by the colonial government into Etung, Ikom and Obubra in 1920 saw women like Mma Agbor Esijie, Ma Ojong Mbeh-Etta, Ma Amba Nkang, Ma Getrude Njar and Ma Agbor Mbeki excel in the production and exchange and like their male counterparts they were able to also sell dry cocoa beans to the United African Company.<sup>16</sup>

The Ikom and Yakurr examples could not be replicated in Obubra because as a dense rain forest zone it was made up of high forest characterized by some trees of economic importance such as iroko, mahogany, ebony, red iron wood etc. the economic advantage provided by this forest cover was evident in the colonial

Forestry Ordinance and Regulations in 1906. Between 1916-1928 the ordinance led to the constitution of 10 Forest Reserves in the former Ogoja Province. The 717 square kilometer Okpon River Forest Reserve in Obubra territory was among the 10 forest reserves.<sup>17</sup> With this ordinance in place land for cultivation became insufficient since the economy was tied to land. Whenever the women tried to show their dissatisfaction the government of the day used force to restore order. By 1932 the ordinance was relaxed and some land returned to the owners but the restriction on free felling of trees was not removed from the returned land. This meant that apart from insufficient land for farming, the women in particular could not get firewood for cooking.

The colonial government satisfied with its policies and the structures put on ground to make its government work entered the closing month of 1934 convinced that their policies had been accepted. But Obubra women did not see this ordinance improving their economy base hence:

over 1000 of them held two days violent demonstration, requesting for the removal of cement boundary pillars used in demarcating the reserves. The women refused to be intimidated by truck loads of police re-enforcement from Enugu. Instead they attacked the village heads, destroyed their properties, accused them of selling their lands for reserves to the Forest Department. Peace was only restored when the government promised to look into their grievances.<sup>18</sup>

Among all groups in the area during the colonial era, it was the women that lost most especially in the political sphere. This was so as the single political system replaced the double or dual political system and left women out of public life. This 1934 Obubra Women's Revolt was the climax of women's response to colonial suppression and repression of especially their economic and political rights. Despite this epoch making event women's participation in the democratic struggle for a just did not result in corresponding political power nor have their interest and concerns been included in the democratic agenda in the post-independence Central Senatorial District. An examination of the policies and politics of post democratic Nigeria reveals that the fruits of these struggles are not shared equally. With the above background one wonders why women in Central Senatorial District have not advanced forward in politics since their inability to succeed in their struggle and access to power has continued to shape their oppression.. put differently does post independence Central Senatorial District still see women in the same eye the colonial government saw women and which was aptly captured by Nina Mba thus:

Women were considered unsuitable for the rigours of public life hence they were not allowed to vote, to contest election, to sit in parliament or to be employed in the civil service. The British administrators worked for a government in which there were no women at any level and therefore they did not expect or wish to find women involved in government in Southern Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

To attempt an answer the next section of the paper discusses the background to elections in Nigeria of which Central Senatorial District is a part.

### **Background to Elections in Nigeria**

Democracy in Nigeria or anywhere else is a form of government whereby all the people settle their affairs through free discussions. The appropriate setting for this was the traditional method of conducting affairs through free discussions in most Nigerian communities as “the elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree...”<sup>20</sup> With independence, Nigeria became too large to accommodate all people coming together through free discussion to settle their affairs, hence some modifications were required to settle everybody’s affair. To achieve this aim, the government of the day is made up of representatives of the people. To truly represent the people’s interest, these representatives must be freely chosen by the people from among themselves. It is at this stage that elections come in, since free elections are the essential instruments of representative democracy

In Nigeria, the purpose of general elections then has been to elect these peoples representatives and these elections have been organized on political party basis. In this context, the electorate is offered a choice between contending parties from which to elect not so much representatives as to elect representative parties. The history of elections in Nigeria since 1959 shows that they have not been genuine since the government in power had always made up its mind who would be the head of government and as such figures allotted to meet this desire. An example to buttress this colonial legacy was the 1959 elections in which Harold Smith a colonial officer noted that:

the various constitutional conferences in London which led up to independence were not as significant as they appeared, because the elections were rigged and the coalitions between NCNC and NPC formed even before the 1959 federal election results were known. Hence the Governor General called on Sir



Abubakar Tafawa Balewa to form a government even before the results of the 1959 elections were concluded.<sup>21</sup>

This meant that Nigerians did not have the opportunity to choose those who ushered them into independence and this colonial legacy that was to be quitted when it introduced election falsification into Nigeria has not been reversed since what we have had at best has been electoral nominations. Elections and the process of selecting those who ultimately govern are among the critical aspects of political process. The manner and method adopted for elections in the country has been crucial for the stability of the nation. Nigerian elections have been characterized by post-election crises especially in 1964, 1979, 1983 and 1993. It has not been ascertained that the electoral process is solely responsible for these crises yet the system has had some bearing on the acceptability or otherwise of the election results. An examination of the electoral system practiced in the country seen through the specter of 1959 to date show that the essential features<sup>22</sup> of the Nigerian electoral system are similar to those practiced in democracies that operate the multiparty or restricted party system. In such democracies, elections provide legitimate means of changing government smoothly, but in Nigeria elections are usually followed by charges of rigging, tensions, instability and in some cases military coup d'état.<sup>23</sup> All the federal elections held between 1959 and 1983 were "rigged" according to those who lost them or "free and fair" according to the winners.

Post-colonial literature on Nigeria political environment has argued and truly that there has not been any marked departure both in its essential characteristics and in the minds set of its operators from the repression of the Nigerian citizens since the colonial times. For instance, from a general postulation on the colonial environment from which Nigeria emerged Frank Fanon labeled the national bourgeoisie of colonial states as "cynical, poor substitute of their erstwhile colonial masters who created them,"<sup>24</sup> and particularly for the Nigerian context the study of the nationalist struggle had shown that it was "by the educated elite for the educated elite."<sup>25</sup> From its journey to democracy from independence, Nigerian political class have substantiated the above assertions since our present day circumstances after seventeen years of uninterrupted democracy has shown that "...the democratization occurring does not appear to be least emancipatory. On the contrary, it is legitimizing the disempowerment of ordinary people who seem to be worse off than they used to be because their political oppression is no longer perceived as a problem inviting solution, but a solution endowed with moral and political legitimacy."<sup>26</sup> Rather than freedom and prosperity to the masses especially women oppression, repression and the denial of the most fundamental rights of freedom without which democracy cannot grow have been the order of the day. Okpeh O. Okpeh<sup>20</sup> has summed up the contending issues in Nigerian elections and

electoral process which have provided the background to the manner in which elections have over time been conducted in Nigeria. But because of the peculiarity of the women question, some of the issues that affect them are peculiar to them as women. D.P.Sha on the other hand summarized elections in Nigeria thus:

Elections in Nigeria are marred by the poor administration and organization of the electoral process, poor communication of election results, control over voter registration, poor funding of elections and institutions in charge of elections, rigging, the manipulation of ethnicity and religion to influence electoral outcomes, the excessive use of money during electioneering campaigns and the influence it has on electoral outcomes. The regimes these elections produce use the same instrument described above to rule. The quality of governance is badly affected as these regimes remain unaccountable, non-transparent, non-responsive and irresponsible.<sup>27</sup>

### **Sixteen Years of Democracy and Women's Participation in Central Senatorial District of Cross Rivers State**

From the background given above, it is obvious that the emphasis of the history of electoral politics in Nigeria had always been on the stability of the polity and not so much on the inclusion of women for equitable representation. Hence the vital connection between elected and electors needed to constitute a representative democracy has been missing. That is to say the political responsibility of the elected public office holder, their accountability to the electorate and the sanctity of the electoral process all remain elusive since it has been dominated by men. The transition to democracy from 1999 introduced the contentious question of women participation to the already myriads of challenges confronting the electoral process. These began with the United Nations declaration of the Decade for Women in 1970s, the growing awareness of women as stakeholders in development, the clamour for liberal democracy and good governance worldwide and the role women's political participation will play in ameliorating especially their socio-economic and political status for the development process.<sup>28</sup>

From 1999 till date women in Central Senatorial District have not seen the implementation of the affirmative action as appended to by the government. Even with the 35 percent affirmative action for women who have represented a positive trend in other areas. This dispensation has seen more women especially from the

study area prevented from exercising their right to participate politically because of the general bottlenecks in the electioneering process. This means that women have not had a voice in what happens around them and to them, hence have remained powerless in the face of the political oppression and repressions facing them. This becomes more worrisome since their will to replicate the colonial resistance of fellow women have been destroyed by abject poverty and unfriendly government policies. The whole essence of the creation of the three senatorial districts since 1999 was for the purpose of equitable representation and also to encourage participation at that level. As one respondent put it “our federal system has allowed all sections of the country to be carried along and to get represented.”<sup>29</sup> This context of representation has not included women representation which does not mean anything to most people in the area. What we see is the under representation of women in spite of the massive support given to various political parties under associations like market women association, women organizations etc.

There is no doubt that these women express a desire for a democratic polity based on equity, fairness and justice, but at the same time, since the level of political will needed to ensure the realization of this objective has not taken firm root in the country’s political culture, the women have resorted to apathy. Field interviews revealed that low female participation can be linked to the belief that the outcome of their votes will not impact on the outcome of their lives, as has been the case over the years. Other reasons for apathy are discussed below.

### **The Nature of the Nigerian State In Relation to Elections and the Women Question**

The nature of the Nigerian state is crucial to elections and the question of power. Power as a relationship between the state and the citizens, amongst citizens themselves especially women needs to be interrogated and redefined. Citizenship both from the liberal and civic republican context has come under scrutiny. While liberal citizenship view all people as autonomous individuals who are the bearers of rights in the natural rights tradition, civil republication on the other hand view political action as an integral aspect of citizenship. Citizenship is universally applicable to all the inhabitants confined within the border of a specific nation state by birth or through naturalization that confers certain rights such as the rights to vote.<sup>30</sup> This definition transcends the particular and difference, but on a closer look this universal applicability has come under attack by feminist since it applies to an abstract exclusive disembodied individual who is a male. This exclusive embedded in the concept is demonstrated through the general acceptance of the divide

between the public and the private sphere and thus women's private sphere has limited their participation in the public as good citizens.<sup>31</sup>

R. Lister sees citizenship as not only an outcome but also a process and distinguishes it into status and agency. As status, it is indicative of right bearers and as agency, it refers to participation in civil society especially through grassroots activities. She argues that while participation and obligation are the basis of the liberal and civic republican concepts of citizenship, civil and political rights are embedded in both.<sup>32</sup> Lister's argument is significant since she attempts to collapse the opposition between the individual and the community that distinguishes the liberal and civic republican concept and includes individual rights and participation, as well as the relationship between the two. So that women can be seen as active citizens rather than merely the passive inhabitants of the private sphere.

On their part, W. Savas and B. Slim<sup>33</sup> as well as Kathleen Jones<sup>28</sup> expand the concept of citizenship further to include notions of identity and locale. Kathleen Jones expands it further to include civil minded actions that move away from formal participation in voting to other forms of participation in other arenas by people from different spheres. In this context, citizenship apart from just being a relationship between the state and its subjects, it now includes community politics and grassroots activism. It is at the point of the inclusion of community politics and grassroots activism that the women of Central Senatorial District fit in since this is their immediate local and it is at this level they have been able to participate in politics as women wings of political parties and have been incorporated into political parties from their associations as female farmers and market women. But even at this level, the women have still been excluded from engaging in power relations. For Kathleen Jones's inclusion to benefit women therefore, a re-interpretation of the relationship between the state and its subject especially women will be welcomed.

Drawing from the post-structuralism analysis of the state, feminist like R. Pringles and S. Watson<sup>34</sup> have argued that the state needs to be viewed as a historical product of a collection of practice and discourse since the state is a series of locales where interest are constituted and not merely represented. These interests, which are articulated, constructed and maintained within the state and which takes place through discursive struggles within different locales of the state result in policy outcomes that prevents the state from acting as an entity. This tallies with D. Dahlerup<sup>30</sup> argument that the state rather than being a unified power block, it is a conflict of interest and to understand women's oppression and subordination to men, we need to understand the role the state plays in establishing, sustaining and systems. It is in this inherent construction of the state as a multiple and competing sites in which power is vested, that power relations

that determine women as citizens and subject are organized<sup>35</sup>. In these sites, there are ceaseless struggles and confrontations in which power relations are strengthened, transformed and reversed. It is also in these sites that women's participation in the construction of citizenship through being involved in discourse struggles surrounding legislation and policy arise.

Wendy Brown calls these sites the 'bureaucratic dimension of state power,'<sup>36</sup> where power is expressed in institutional arrangements and discourse through hierarchical and proceduralism as a cult of expertise- what Foucault has called "disciplinary power."<sup>37</sup> She argues further that neither state power nor male domination is unitary. As the state and male domination do not have the same source of power, hence there are multiple dimensions of male power and female subordination. To understand these sites, we turn to Foucault's definition of power as a "strategically situation in a particular society."<sup>38</sup> What is therefore seen as the outcome of state action such as laws and policies is "the terminal form of power."<sup>35</sup> He notes further that what precedes the terminal forms of power is most important and it is in the inter-relationship between these sites and discourse that women's interests are constructed.<sup>39</sup>

The extent to which the struggle for power shapes the struggles of the oppressed is a defining feature of democracy and an integral means of accessing the success or failure of a democratic initiative. In Central Senatorial District in particular and the Nigerian state in general, the experience from 1999 has been that of the overwhelming and unchecked development of political machinery which has been characterized by unchecked abuse of power resulting in continuous oppression and repression by the masculine state. This has not only impoverished the state but especially the women as it was in colonial times. Claude Ake captured this aptly when he said that:

In colonial Africa, there were two features of state power, its absolutism and arbitrariness. As if to underscore its arbitrariness of power, the officials of the colonial state showed hardly any interest in transforming domination to hegemony.... Since the colonial state was for its subjects, at any rate, an arbitrary force, it could not engender any legitimacy even though it made rules and laws profusely and it propagated values. At independence, the form and function of the state in Africa did not change much. State power remained

essentially the same; immerse, arbitrary, often violent always threatening.<sup>40</sup>

The history of the 1979 constitution which was reviewed and updated to get the 1999 constitution has not favoured women's popular participation neither have their needs, concerns and human rights been integrated. The 1999 inter-party committee that was set up to review the constitution remained the same as that of the colonial era since the pattern for power creation was still very centralize at the national level and that level has continued to determine the locus of power by constituting those that enact or amend the constitution.<sup>38</sup> As a result, women's interests are constrained as constitution making has become the preserve of powerful few- politicians and the ruling elite, making the exclusion of women systematic. An example of these systematic exclusion embedded in the constitution is the privileging of peoples place of origin over residency and amplifying this through the application of the federal character formula rather than citizenship and capacity. Federal character confines all other disparities to ethnic and geo-political integration only and not gender. This negates the protection of women's concern under Section 42 of the 1999 constitution and this significantly minimizes women's participation and access to policy and decision making.

An example will clarify the implications of the concept of indigeneity on women's quest for power. In 2007 elections into the Cross River State House of Assembly, Mrs. Edema Ezem, who is from Constituency 2 in Obubra Local Government Area, but married to a non-indigene from Delta State was discriminated against. She was told in her husband's constituency that she was not an indigene (based on blood relation) so she could not be allowed to vie for any political position to represent her husband's constituency. When she went back to her place of birth to vie for a political position, she was told that by marrying out, she had lost her indigeneity.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the emphasis of the constitution on registration of political parties and party membership as the only basis for political ascendancy, which the government purports "it relied on party leaders" who are mostly men, further puts barriers on women who are denied meaningful participation within the existing political parties. It is based on this structure that we readily understand the under representation of Central Senatorial District in the policy making process within the period under study. The manner in which indigeneity has been entrenched in the constitution has emphasizes parochialism at the expense of citizenship. There is a need to redesign citizenship status to give emphasis to residency as a way of building a strong and united country.

Citizenship that emphasizes blood and birth are restrictive and do not promote a good country.

### **The Electoral System**

Given the electoral results from 1999 till date in the CSD it is difficult to agree that there is a strong correlation between democracy and women's political empowerment. The foundation for any election is an accurate voter register which reflects the makeup of the electorate from elections to elections. This in itself has been a challenge to INEC since it still has been unable to provide accurate register for elections due to inaccurate maintenance of voter register.<sup>42</sup> Because of this limitation, INEC has disenfranchised female and male voters alike who though qualified to cast their votes cannot because their names are not on the voter register.

Democracy thrives on participation and inclusion. For all the elections that have taken place between 1999-2015 with major changes in the leadership and governance, most women and men especially in the study area still see Nigerian democracy as "them vs us."<sup>43</sup> For women, in exercising the right to vote they have not been able to identify with their right to stand for elections, become candidates and get elected. And they know that the restriction to participate is embedded in the way the electoral system and procedure are conceived and operationalized. The failure to confront this systemic barrier has limited women's ability to participate. But most importantly is the lack of transparency in the electoral process which has inhibited the effects of dealing with especially women's exclusion from political participation. This should be linked with the state of political consciousness, inadequate clarity of election information and the low level of political consciousness resulting from years of oppression under male led institutions.

Voting remains a critical activity particularly if viewed from the background of suffragist struggles since women's rights to vote have never been automatically conceded. Electoral politics therefore remain a basic indicator of democratic politics. As S. Hassim argues "electoral politics are important in a democracy especially for subordinate, under-organized and numerical dispersed groups (such as women). Electoral participation is an important measure of the extent to which individuals can exercise their citizenship rights."<sup>44</sup> Thus, as long as gender space is concerned, the right to be voted to public office is a vital space in the electoral process.

## **The Nature of Political Parties**

Political parties as the building block of democracy are an important institution and component of democracy and competitive electoral process. The traditional literature<sup>45</sup> has assigned to political parties the job of interest aggregation and articulation for the purpose of capturing political power as a means to an end – the end of governance. Since it is the political powers that produce the candidate, set the parameters of issues and agenda within which elections are to be contested. In Nigeria, political parties since independence fall short of this pious projection. Rather what is available are parties as “legal associates of individuals whose primary mission is the capture of state power for self-aggrandizement,”<sup>46</sup> this in turn breeds exclusionism especially of minority and most importantly women viewpoint. Political parties lack continuity and are not consistent in their programmes as political leaders are not committed to their parties but rather to their class interest. When they disagree on sharing formula for money and appointments/positions, they demonstrate their inconsistencies by cross carpeting from one party to another with no clear cut explanation to their followers who have no choice but to decamp with their leaders. The outcome of this is that Nigeria has had so many parties that most of the women are confused between what has been and what is now.

For example from the four parties of pre-independence through the First Republic period, to the five during the Second Republic, to the two decreed parties of the aborted Third Republic under General Ibrahim Babangida, to General Sani Abacha’s cloned five parties and General Abdusalam Abubakar’s three parties and the Fourth Republic record of fifty parties. For the nations context, as these parties congregate and fragment so do their visions and ideologies and their capacity to transform the country. But for most of the women in Central Senatorial District, they are still in the second republic as Madam Theresa Ikpi demonstrated this during oral interview. “My daughter my party Nigerian People’s party (NPN) na em still d rule. D only thing be say dem the change face of president. Now dem no dey kuku gree us go vote again because dem dey cause trouble.”<sup>47</sup> When it was mentioned to her that between the second republic and now so many parties had developed, she remarked that “my pikin but no bi d same people and the same things dem dey promise since dat time till today? Wetin make dem different?”<sup>48</sup>

Central to the issue of the interface between democracy and the electoral process is the extent of democracy in the parties themselves. The parties have not demonstrated democratic tendency in the selection of the party leadership and in running the parties. Till date, oligarchy rather than democracy has been the rule of the game since political parties are often the preserve of the rich and powerful in the society. These parties lack broad views in the process of developing party



policies and internal elections are undemocratic. The founding principles of the party are difficult to grasp, the introduction of new and fresh voices have been lacking. Hence these parties lack an organic linkage with the mass of people especially women.

In the study area, the parties have not included women in the party hierarchies except restricted to the position of women leader. This position makes her a member of the executive and not a member of the working committee where all critical party decisions are taken. When she is allowed to participate in the working committee meetings, it is difficult for her to score a point in overturning these male dominated parties. The parties have women organizations or co-opt the already existing one especially the market women's association as part of their campaign train. These organizations have been mere vehicles for the state to control women's participation and make it impossible for them to shift loyalty to any other party. The dominant party mobilizes them on its own terms and has often used these medium to provide the regime with a base, rather than use it as a way for women to gain representation within the system.<sup>49</sup> There have been promises to meet the demands made by women, but when these elections are over, these parties drop these associations until such a time they are needed. The case of Mrs. Monic Tawo who was vying for a seat in the Federal House of Legislature to represent Boki/Ikom constituency in 2003 showed the failure of her party/male politicians to give consideration and attention that her campaigned deserved. Her person and the issues she advocated were not treated as key concerns within the context of the wider party interest. Hence at the delegates elections were she was to emerge as the flag bearer, the all-male delegates voted for a third term running male candidate whom both constituencies attested to his lack of performance.<sup>50</sup> What readily comes out here is that the male competitor found it easy to succeed in politics because he previously had access to power and he abused his position of power to make money and gain access to resources that he later converted into political capital to guarantee his continuous hold on power. This has resulted in the recycling of the same faces who have been deaf to the pleas of the women to assist empower them and especially get jobs for their children. Political parties have been known to systematically eliminate women through political primaries, the times of meeting, through manipulations and pre-determined outcomes of primaries. Although they promise to support females to get nominations, they do not keep to their words and they refuse to respond to complaints of discrimination and outright injustice especially by female aspirants

Nigerian political life has been characterized by a violent culture. This is a reflection of a society generally since it emerged from prolonged repression from the colonial era. Political violence is an issue that has bedeviled the electoral

process but women have been hard hit. Thus when political representations are decided through violence, manipulations, widespread electoral abuses and money, women rather than compete or come out to cast their votes have remain at home with their children. At the home front, some women have been threatened with withdrawal of family support, they have been beaten, hospitalized, thrown from their matrimonial homes, had their voters card stolen, grabbed or destroyed by husbands, sons and male relatives because of their attempts to either cast their votes in a different party or support a female candidate.

### **Party Supporters, Voters and Female Politicians**

Between the periods under study, tokenism has constituted women's election/appointment to decision making positions. These women chosen on the basis of party loyalties have had their interest as female politicians coterminous with that of their male colleagues who appointed and elected them. For the women appointed for executives positions, they are not only under obligation to protect the interest of their immediate and extended constituencies but also to uphold the overall policy direction of the government in which they are called to serve. For the elected women, constituency representation has not been restricted to the locality that voted them even when the basis for their being chosen for elective position have been based on the conditions of marrying from your community or Local Government of origin. With these enormous task of balancing these various roles/interest, nothing has been done to enhance their personal skills. Women agenda competes for relevance and only becomes a last resort only after ethnic identities have failed to secure them the advantage they desire.

As party supporters and voters, research discovered that women have provided support but have never determined the real direction of the party politics. This is as a result of their circumstances as women and obstacles within the party. The only times that females have determined the direction of Peoples Democratic Party politics have been when the first ladies have sought to intervene through their special positions as spouses of the governors in power. Some examples will abound. In 2003 during Governor Donald Duke's second term in office, the First Lady, Barr. Onari Duke used her position to selected Esther Ayomobi to represent Constituency 2 in Yakurr in place of her husband because of some domestic violence. In 2014 Local Government Area elections, the wife of the Governor Barr. Obioma Liyel Imoke used her position as the First Lady to persuade the party to put an affirmative action policy in place of either electing women as

Chairpersons of their Local Government Areas or Vice Chairpersons, as well other political positions in the Local Government Areas. These positions have improved women's representation in the area since for the first time Yakurr, Obubra, Ikom, Etung and Boki Local Government Areas have women as Vice Chairpersons, while Abi Local Government Area has a woman as the Chairperson.

These first ladies have opened doors for women which had been previously closed, and by placing the gender question on the public agenda, it is hoped that new opportunities for gender equity struggles are being created in the patriarchal Central Senatorial District. With this noble contribution, it is worthy of note that not all first ladies are negatively motivated as most narratives<sup>51</sup> will have us understand. Their encouragement /promotion of women into positions of power no matter how dubious the motives help to provide access to political skills and resources that will enable the pool of women politicians to become more competitive in the thrust of campaigning.

### **Women as Candidates**

For the women, the struggle or battle has been "on several fronts." They are not only attempting to engender the perception of the masculine state, but also the perception of their fellow compatriots. In this case, women are not only still struggling to convince the broader society why it is important for them to have a voice and the difference that could make, they are still struggling with party structures that cannot allow them into decision making party positions apart from women leader position which in most cases is an executive arm of the party and not in the working arm of the party where all critical decisions in the party are taken. This inability has made it difficult for them to bring about a democratic structure, which is perceptive and responsive to their demands and needs as women.

This multifaceted approach has made the process of engendering the electoral process as well as democracy long-term, slow to impact and often exacting to its adherents especially in the face of political violence, repression and oppression. The male centered Nigerian state has not failed to reflect their larger values in the implementation of their dominant norms. These norms and values have tended to render women's struggle to engender politics an uphill and complicated task especially as the opponents to the gender agenda are in the most dominant institutions of power. The case has been made for Nigerian male centered state because of the military governments which has held the reins of governance so long and not welcomed civilian participation.<sup>51</sup>

The paper seeks to differ from this point and argues that long before the military, Nigeria's immediate post-independence attempts at governance show that the fruits of the colonial struggles have not been shared equally. Democratic theory from Locke had its root in the separation of the public and private. The assumption underlying the separation of the private and the public is of huge importance to the understanding of the masculine structure of the state, women's inability to penetrate and hence their apathy in the electioneering process. This political theory, while appearing gender neutral by mainstreaming a division between private and public life as central to liberal democracy, it maintains a division between men and women where only men can be abstract individuals.<sup>52</sup> The political has therefore been defined as masculine which makes it hard to incorporate women on the same terms as men and thus excluded many of those activities that women are involved in as not political. Thus, there exists a marked tendency for women to participate less than men in politics especially as one ascends higher up the echelon of power.<sup>53</sup>

This notion of women as minor when it comes to elections and other political process has been sustained in the area since 1999 till date as the number of women in policy making show. The gendered nature of electoral process in the Nigerian context is shaped by the socio-economic context. Women constitute the poorest in the study area and the gender impact of the different dimensions of poverty and deprivation is reflected in education, access to productive asset, health and employment which has impinged on the way women participate in the political process such as elections hence, fewer women can compete. Although it seems that women with requisite education and resources are qualified for political competition, they confront a glass ceiling in politics as a result of institutional factors combined with patriarchal political culture. One would think that the idea of quota, zoning as well as its twin federal character was adopted to produce competitive forces which emphasize merit, qualification and experience to lead the nation.

Since it is accepted that zoning as a policy of inclusion has contributed to stabilizing our fragile nation, giving everyone a sense of belonging.... It has led to compromise that ensued the primacy of mediocrity, rewarding the worst prepared or the least threatening, and not the most competent for leadership at all levels.<sup>54</sup>

But the reverse has been the case for the nation as women have not benefited from the zoning formula. The question of quotas has had little efficacy not to mention women's affirmative action, a percentage kept for women in positions. One will

suggest that the issues related to women must become constitutional since in a country like ours it is still not a guarantee that it will be taken seriously. The issue of tokenism has not been able to place the Nigerian women in the national scheme of things? The words of Professor Ali Mazuri when he sought to establish a distinction between political visibility and centering and political empowerment will help demonstrate the realities of tokenism. He noted that

a woman can be the center without being empowered, a woman can be liberated without being either centered or empowered.... The strategy of redemption needs to go beyond liberation and beyond centering towards genuine power sharing between the two halves of the Black World, male and female.... In real life, motherhood leaves the African woman at the center but not necessarily in power.<sup>55</sup>

This is where the issues of power and politics come to play since this is where the issues of centering without empowerment can be redressed. The redefinition of power in this context will mean the inclusion of the gender dimension in the diverse political playing field and scene which will have to be open to create space for women and incorporate them.

## **Conclusion**

The activist, Negro illiterate Sojourner Truth and the colonial women ought to provoke as well as inspire us as they did not shy away from bold gestures to make their points, as these women have shown that right from its foundation women rights cannot be negotiated but fought for. Apathy to the electoral process from which we get the representatives to speak for us will not help women get represented. Women must like our predecessors determine to speak up and fight every oppression, repression and denial till their voices are heard. Since “all the hallmark of colonialism are sadly still here with us; deepening inequality, high-handedness of the rulers, unjust wages, control of resources by a tiny clique, corruption, collusion between the oppressors and out traditional rulers and so on.<sup>55</sup> Thus, “If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Our image of her changes as a new perspective presents itself but she was a slave, illiterate, bearing children into slavery, abolitionist and women rights advocate, charismatic preacher advocating the western migration of newly freed blacks, womanly, Africanist and manly.

<sup>3</sup>E. Flexner and E. Fitzpatrick. *Century of Struggle*, p. 85

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