

THEMES ON WOMEN

STUDIES IN AFRICA:

PERSPECTIVES FROM NIGERIA



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Women and Political Participation in Ado LGA, Benue State: A Study of the 2011 and 2012 General Elections

John Tor Tsuwa, PhD and Edwin Ochoga Ochoga

Introduction

Democracy to us means the power of the citizens to decide who rules them and how they are ruled. This implies that democracy guarantees the rights of men, women, youths and adults in a society irrespective of their sex and status in the society to participate in the decision making process. To expand the frontiers of our discussion about democracy, we consider the submission of Soludo (2005:28) who views democracy as a form of civilian-led governance in which all citizens have fundamentally equal rights, votes and privileges; where citizens enjoy liberty and freedom; where the ultimate legitimacy of actions, choice, appropriations, and decisions rest with the citizens' supreme or through their representatives elected by ballot.

This suggests that democracy principally promotes equal opportunities, rights and privileges for both men and women irrespective of family, religion, culture and social status. Tsuwa (2010:80) argues that democracy is central in modern world but democracy makes sense only when it guarantees freedom, liberty and economic emancipation of the citizens who are usually mobilized to decide on who governs their democratic life through periodic elections. At the centre of democracy is the principle of participation which is tied to the ability of the individual to make a choice or make choices on who should be in charge of the state apparatus of distributing the largess of the society to the various segments of the society. This freedom to make choice manifest in elections were the citizen has the privilege to empower or disempowered a person or group of people to occupy positions that afford him/them the opportunity to perform the task of governance

on behalf of the generality of the people. Core democracy is therefore anchored on the electorates which it is designed to transform their life's so as to enhance their self actualization.

In Nigeria, the 1999 constitution provides in Chapter 6 Part 2 section 177 the qualification of a person to be eligible to be voted into political offices. It provides that a person shall be qualified if;

- a.) He is a citizen of Nigeria by birth
- b.) He has attained the age approved by that position
- c.) He is a member of a political party and is sponsored by the political party
- d.) He has been educated up to at least school certificate level or its equivalent.

The above shows that, all Nigerian citizens of voting age which is tag at 18 years and above are eligible to express their democratic rights either to vote or be voted for provided they meet the basic provisions of the constitution. They are also eligible to enjoy all the liberties, freedoms and all other privileges that are accrued to them. Here, the "He" in the language of the constitution does not employ the issue of gender or sex. "He" here is for a Nigerian citizen by birth irrespective of gender and sex. This connotes that, both male and female that are Nigerian citizens enjoy the full legal capacity and are eligible to enjoy all what democracy has to offer in form of their freedom to make choice(s).

Despite this provisions as contained in the Nigeria Constitution and the core tenets of democracy which emphasis equal participation and equality in the political process, the reality on ground appears to show that politics in Nigeria has unsex and degraded women. In other words, democracy in Nigeria has made it difficult by its practice for women to actively participate in. According to Grinshaw (1986:37) the role of women in Nigeria has been misconceived. He argues that women are conceived as directly fitted for acting as the nurses and teachers of early childhood; by the fact that they are themselves childish, frivolous and short-sighted. In other words, women are considered as children all their life. The implication of Grinshaw's argument is that, there is a constructed division of labour along gender instead of along productivity and

efficiency. This division of labour has also snowballed into a reconstruction of the identity of who owns and controls the means of production and who also should have access to political power that affords him or her opportunity to control and distribute societal resources.

Automatically, this division of labour has constructed a subordinate status for women in the political process in most communities. With this construction, the men folks seems to assume that men are more suitable for leadership and the overall participation in the political process than women. Paradoxically, women are considered as viable agents of campaign for men seeking political offices. This manifest in the formation of various women groups for the campaign of various politicians. For instance, in the 2011 general elections in Benue state, there existed various women groups such as Suswam Sisters, Ugba Sisters, Daughters of Ugba, Ugba Girls Volunteers, Suswam United Sisters, Akume Girls, Akume Sisters, Suswam Mothers, Ugba Mothers, among others. In most cases, the women and girls groups are considered as those that will expand the horizon of the party (*gbanger Party*) by enticing men with their physique and beauty to support their candidates. Despite this critical role, their power to *gbanger party* is not seen as to include their ability to perform in the capacity of occupying any political position they are able to *gbanger party* for the men to occupy.

It is wont to argue here that, it is the desire to eliminate this constructed identity which has led to the marginalization of women in the political process that numerous efforts have been designed by civil society organizations including the United Nations to change the identity of women especially as it concerns their participation in politics. Prominent among such is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW. This Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and it was authoritatively ratified and became part of international law in 1981. Since then, it is expected of every country to domesticate this multilateral treaty. In spite of these efforts to increase women's consciousness, the proportion of women in governance is still lower than men. This could be what provoked Enemu (1999; 226) to argue that:

women constitute half of the world population and have contributed significantly to the well-being of the human race. In Nigeria, for instance, women, have always played five key roles-mothers, producer, home manger, community organizer, and social, cultural and political activist. Despite their large number of roles and crucial functions, division of roles between the male and female sexes as prescribed by most cultures, assigns the subordinate position to women. As a consequence, women have for long suffered various forms of discrimination, inequality, exclusion and violence.

It is against this intense feeling of marginalization of women as expressed above that this chapter examines the extent of women involvement in the political process in Benue state with particular focus on the 2011 general elections and the 2013 local government elections. The chapter samples the situation in Ado Local Government Area to drive home its major arguments.

Conceptualizing Political Participation and Women

It is pertinent to examine some theoretical or philosophical underpinnings of the relationship between democracy and political participation and vis-a-vis the concept of women. Political participation is an integral component of liberal democracy. As practiced in the ancient Athens, democracy according to Anifowose and Enemu (2005) is characterized by three distinguishing features; that supreme power was vested in the 'ekklesia', this is the assembly of all male citizens in which each had the right of participation by discussion or voting, the permission of freedom of speech, and all political offices being open to all citizens.

This implies that democracy as an ideology and movement recognizes inherent social diversities in political societies. Adejo (2006:2) contends that democracy is a principle and a value. It is a principle or value which makes particular institutional arrangement democratic because they provide the litmus test of how democratic the institutions are in practice. He further asserts that just as was the foundational situation in ancient Athens, the principles of modern democracy are:

- Popular control over public decision-making and decision makers and
- Equality of citizens in the exercise of that control.

Thus, women and other eligible citizens would only have control over public decision-making and decision makers through their participation in political activities. According to Dahl (2003:103), political participation is simply the exercise of influence. Thus, we can deduce that the influence as contended by Robert Dahl may include individual political involvement such as voting during elections, canvassing for votes, financial contribution for political party, participation in public decision-making among others.

This chapter aligns itself with the above definition and therefore, conceptualized political participation to be the involvement of eligible male and female citizens in political party's organization and activities (i.e. canvassing for members, campaign work, campaign contributions, executive meetings among others.), voting at elections, vying for elective positions, lobbying for political appointments and occupying political offices. It is within this conceptual lens that we wish to study the level of involvement of women in the General Elections of April 2011 and the December 2012 Benue State Local Government Elections in Ado Local Government Area.

On the other hand, the term women is taken here to be adults who belong to a sex that have the biological makeup to bear children and have the biological responsibility to perform the functions of wives and mothers in their respective homes beside their public lives.

Methodology

It is pertinent to explain how we have obtained the information/data used in this essay. The authors were part of the persons trained by the Benue State coordinator in the methodology workshop to study the 2011 elections under the sponsorship of the Electoral Institute. Our task was to monitor pre and during elections issues in Benue State as specified by the sponsor. Basically, two instruments or techniques of data collection were used. These include

unstructured interviews and observation. The interview was meant to get aggregate view of women on their involvements in politics as it relates to pre- election matters. While the observation was to personally find out issues that affect women during elections.

In this discourse, we are interested ascertaining the actual level of women involvement in politics. This is whether they are card carrying members of political parties, whether they are executive members of political parties, whether they contested for positions in the elections, or whether they vote. All these information can be obtained with the aid of post-election survey questionnaires. Therefore, regarding the methodology, this paper, owes much to the experience and information gathered from the pre and during election survey conducted by the authors.

Apart from the above method of data collection, and to give the paper a balanced data, we used of questionnaires for the post election survey. Thus, we randomly administered 200 questionnaires to women in Ado Local Government Area to obtain answers for the problems stated above. For the purpose of this methodology, women here connotes female from the age of 25 and above. In other words, the questionnaires were administered only to women who have attained the age limit to vie for elective positions or lobby for political appointments. We believed that if this methodology is achieved, the paper would critically reveal issues associated with women involvement in politics in Ado Local Government Area in particular and Nigeria in general

Women and Political Participation in Politics in Ado Local Government Area

Ado Local Government Area is one among the nine local governments in Benue South Senatorial district, otherwise known as Zone C. The area is located on 7.8 ~p N 7. 65~p E latitude with the population of 38973 according to the NPC figures of 2006. There are five districts namely, Agila/Apa, Igumale, Ulayi, Ijigbam, and Utonkon. The local government is completely a rural area with predominant population as farmer, civil servants and petty traders. The data obtained was presented and analyzed into simple tables on the basic themes of age distribution of respondents, marriage status, educational qualification,

occupation, distribution of political offices and reasons for women participation in politics or not.

Table1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
25-35	39	19.5
36-45	47	23.5
46-55	63	31.5
56-65	49	24.5
Above 65	2	1
Total	200	100

Source: Field Work, 2014.

Table 1 on age distribution among the women respondents above shows that young women between the ages of 25 and 35 have little or no interest in politics, particularly, to be actively involved at the level of being registered members of a political party and possibly vies for elective positions. Perhaps, the reason for this decline or political apathy of interest could be that women within this age bracket are probably fresh in marriage and as such their husbands would not allow them to be deeply involved in politics because of the erroneous misconception of immorality the society has towards women in politics. Women in this age category are also expected to concentrate on child bearing instead of being political activists. The irony is that, women in this age category are energetic and they can effectively cope with the hustle and bustle nature of politics in Nigeria than the older categories.

Women from the age of 65 and above had steady decline of interest in politics due to health challenges associated with age. Table1 explains this pattern clearly. It appears that the age category of women that had intrinsic interest in politics is between 36 and 64 years. In spite of their marital status, we have observed that they constituted the large number of register members of political parties in the area and even hold party executive positions at both local government and wards levels. The reasons why this age category of women are deeply involved in politics was discovered to be that, these women are by no means fresh in marriage and majority of them had stopped bearing children, some of them are widows and divorcees. Also, husbands of the women in this category

are grassroots politicians. Be that as it may, their age and circumstances in marriage placed women in this age category in more advantageous position to be actively involved in politics than the young women category.

Table2: Marital Status of Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	29	14.5
Married	159	79.5
Divorced	12	6
Total	200	100

Source: Field Work, 2014.

Table2 indicates that majority of women from the age of 25 are married and so their participation is thus reduced to only voting at elections. This reductionist tendency among young women is capable of developing and inculcating the culture of phobia and apathy towards politics among women.

Table3: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Qualifications	Frequency	Percentage
Non Formal Education	51	25.5
Primary School	89	44.5
Secondary Sch.	33	16.5
NCE/OND	18	9
HND/First Degree	9	4.5
Total	200	100

The 36 and 64 years category of women who have the passion to be active in politics but as shown in table3, most of the women in this category had no former education while majority of them stopped at the primary school level. We have observed that since Ado Local Government is a bilingual community, expression with the use of English language during political functions, was identified to be one among the challenges women in this category face in their involvement in political activities. While those with NCE, OND, HND and first degree, are mostly found to be teachers and local government civil servants, who are legally restrained from being partisan but have only the right to vote at elections.

Table 4: Occupation of Respondents .

Occupation	Frequency	percentage
Farming	140	70
Trading	33	16.5
Civil Service	27	13.5
Total	200	100

Looking at table 4, it is clear that the 70 % of the respondents who are farmers are the women without formal education and at most primary education. This is an indication that their occupation can determine the level of their involvement in politics; hence it is believed that economic power is tantamount to political power.

Table 5: Should Women Participate in Politics

Reponses	Frequency	Percentage
Should	3	1.5
Should not	197	98.5
Total	200	100

Source: Field Work, 2014.

In Table 5, the majority of the respondents with 98.5 % strongly agreed and advocated that women should be actively involved in politics, while insignificant responses of 1.5 % discouraged women's participation in politics for reasons best know to them. In spite of this overwhelming advocacy, table 6 has it that out of the 200 respondents only 7 women contested in the elections.

Table 6: Did you contest any Position in the Elections

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	7	0.5
No	193	96.5
Total	200	100

For the outcome of the contest, Table 7 indicates that 3 out of the 7 who contested won the elections (all councillorships).

Table 7: Outcome of the elections contest

Outcome	Frequency	Percentage
Won		
Did not win	200	100
Total		

Source: Field Work, 2014.

From this data, one may be prompted to ask what has kept the majority of the respondents (women) from vying for elective positions in the last, House Assembly, Local Government Chairmanship and Councillorship elections.

Table 8: Obstacles affecting Women Participation in Politics

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Marital status	33	16.5
Education	47	23.5
Finance	72	36
Cultural belief	22	11
Political factors	26	13
Total	200	100

Source: Field Work, 2014.

Table 8 answered this question in affirmative, pointing out marital status, educational qualification, finance, cultural belief, and political factors as the main obstacles discouraging and preventing women involvement in partisan politics. Thus, the analysis of these menaces and its interface with women involvement in politics would form the focus of the next section.

Table 9: Distribution of Political Positions in Ado L.G.

Positions	Male	Female
L.G. Chairman		0
Vice Chairman	1	0
L.G. Secretary	1	0
Elected Councillors	1	1
Supervisory Councillors	9	0
Advisors & Special Assistants to Governor	5	4
House of Assembly	8	0
Political Parties L.G exco	1	13
Total	20	18
	46	

Source: Field work as at July, 2014

Discussion of Findings

By virtue of their biological makeup, women are naturally imbedded with inherent potentials of planning, organizing, mobilizing and they are also known to have enduring spirit and kind attitude towards people. These virtues are what women often use to build and sustain their homes. Paradoxically, these attributes of women which are the basis for the development of the family unit ought to be transcended beyond the individual homes to the larger society; particularly at the level of governance for women to prudently allocate resources reflecting the wishes and preferences of the electorates. Unfortunately, based on the data, it is evidently shown that the extent of women involvement in politics is predominantly found only to be the exercise of voting rights. Beyond that, such as being registered members of a political party and vying for elective positions remain the missing link we have identified. The irony is that the system which allows this massive acquisition of knowledge turns around to place limitations on the scope of its utilization. In this way a woman who has political ambition and capacity is stopped from fulfilling this desire by her husband because of the simple fact that she is a woman and must not be seen at some places at certain times. Where a woman proves a bit assertive and cannot be easily stopped, the men turn around to ridicule her husband, calling him, 'woman wrapper.' The whole idea is to place the man on the offensive so he can curtail his wife. His success ensure that the wives of those ridiculing him are also curtailed.

This contention still remains an obstacle for women, even the educated ones. Sometimes they are compelled to choose between marriage and their political ambition. With this barrier, it was discovered that the few women deeply involved in politics are those whose husbands are either politicians or are widows or divorcees. Marital status ought not to be a barrier for women participation in politics but the society has erroneously developed the impression to systematically disfranchise women not to benefit from the game of politics and enjoy the beauty of liberal democracy; and thereby relegated women only to voting at elections. To reiterate this position, Udegbe quoted in Enemu (1999:227) affirms that:

in women involvement in politics, it is also important to note that a lot still needs to be done for women participation in politics to transcend beyond mere voting at elections, lobbying for political appointments and other political endeavors that can give them substantial influence in the Nigeria political system. Thus, the following recommendations are made based on the research findings.

Government should include rural women in any development programmes it is embarking upon. This will enable women especially those in the rural areas to have economic base; which will in turn improve their level of political participation. Government at all levels and Civil Society Organizations should intensify effort in area being committed to public enlightenment to encourage women to come out like men and participate actively in politics. This campaign should be geared towards the need to remove every form of unhealthy encumbrances on women involvement in public life.

Hence it is believed that knowledge is power and as such government and Non Governmental Organizations have to devise pragmatic approaches to encourage girl child education. This is necessary because every form of inequality is rooted in educational inequality between sexes.

Also, in as much as some political parties have made nomination forms free of charge for female aspirants, there is need for the culture of money politics to be de-emphasized and replaced with personality and integrity of contestants. As a follow up, the Federal and states electoral bodies must be allowed to operate in accordance with the rules of engagement. While internal democracy should be upheld by political parties to choose party's flag bearers based on the wishes and preferences of the members rather than the decisions of the party leaders cum goodfathers.

Finally, women should understand that political power cannot be gotten on a platter of gold, thus they have to struggle to acquire it. This can only be done when they participate in political activities instead of isolating themselves from it. As a matter of necessity, women have to shun inferiority complex and have confidence in themselves by believing that they can do what men can do, even better.

Conclusion

This chapter has explicitly demonstrated that women involvement in politics in Ado Local Government Area is insignificant as compared to the proportion of men in active politics. The situation in this local government is a reflection of reality in contemporary Nigerian political system and other developing countries of the world. It was established that nature did not bio-programmed women to be politically subjugated by men, rather the society carefully used culture and denial of education to construct a wall of marginalization so as to keep women behind in public life. To be sure, these cultural beliefs aim at the discouraging women from active participation in politics and thereby keeping them indoor; while the educational denial leads to economic disempowerment and consequently result to economic dependence.

Studies have shown that women are naturally passionate, caring, kind and fair in attitude. Nigeria of today needs women to be at the helm of affairs to translate these noble virtues into concrete reality for Nigerians to get the needed dividends of democracy. Apart from the factors discussed above, it was discovered that in Nigeria, women do not participate in politics for number of reasons. Dahl (2003:105) explains the rewards to be:

direct gratifications from involvement government include the sense of fulfilling of obligations as a citizens, the pleasures of social interaction with friends and acquaintances, heightened self-esteem from contact with important persons or access to inside information, the excitement of politics as a game contest in which a participants side may win or lose, and so on. For many people, however political activity is good deal less gratifying than other outlets. (ii) Women are less likely to get involved in politics if they feel that there is no much difference in the alternatives (political parties) before them. (iii) women are less likely to get involved in politics, if they think their input would not significantly change the outcome. In other words, women exclude themselves from politics if they feel that their votes (participation) would not be counted to change the outcome of the elections. (iv) Women are less likely to get involved in politics if they feel that their

educational background (knowledge) is adequate to be effective in public life. (iv) Women are less likely to get involved in politics because of fear of having conflict with other participants.

Thus all these factors we have just examined also can work in reverse. We have equally observed that women are more likely to become active in politics if they; (i) consider the rewards to be substantial, (ii) think the alternatives (political parties) are the best, (iii) believe that the system will allow the rules of engagement to take prominence, (iv) accept their state of knowledge and seek for improvement, and (v) feel that politics will be free from violence. The notion that women are exclusively reserved as wives and mothers for the purposes of marriage, procreation and family, not politics, is barbaric, because a classical advocate of democracy and egalitarianism, John Locke argues that 'all men are by nature equal' he never recommended that women are lower than men. It has evidently shown that the level of women political involvement still lower among women than men. Whether because of discrimination, women's own attitude, family responsibilities, or all of these, the fact is that the prize honest women pay for keeping silent and not getting involved in politics is to be ruled by dishonest men.

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