

A Philosophical Case for Proportionate Representation of Women in Governance in Africa: The Nigerian Example

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Abstract

Women have greatly contributed beyond family issues to world affairs in governmental and nongovernmental organisations. This piece therefore argues that there is a need to have more openings on the table of decision and policy formulations especially considering the numerical strength and of course the unique perspectives of the women folks to issues of policies that are of course important and crucial in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through synergies predicated on socio-economic empowerment of women; there has been emergence of various associations of women with relevant impacts on the quality of gender sensitive decisions and policies and the overall improvement in greater participation of a significant part of the population in the political process that has direct relevance for the society. The examples of such in countries where greater percentage of women participate in the political process are illustrative of the potential benefits of this intervention for the political context in Nigeria. Added to this, the admirable results that are manifest in the activities of some women in government in the contemporary times in Nigeria is also a pointer to this agenda. With conscious effort in harnessing the gains of such organised groups and greater participation of women in governance, one can guarantee a steady march towards greater days of good governance urgently needed in Nigeria. This paper presents a unique philosophical case by examining the potentials of women against the backdrop of the socio-cultural construct that defines the roles attributed to women; it does this by desk research with data sourced from books, journals and the internet. This theoretical work concludes by drawing attention to perceived emerging trends of choice Africans are likely to be making in the future as regards the demands of responsible and responsive governance in Africa which the womenfolk promises and what practical steps to be taken to realising such.

Key words: gender, empowerment, development, governance, women.

Introduction

The woman talk has not been given adequate response in the political sector in many parts of Africa. One has noticed enlightened discourses seeking a greater social and political space for the woman, though fraught sometimes with emotive claims and counter claims ought to remain a front burner issue in societies where good governance is lacking. This is important because of the evidences of the many benefits and advantages that greater participation of the women folk in the political context has for the policy decisions and good governance deliverables. This present exercise sets out to present a philosophical case towards constructing a formidable base in view of equitable and qualitative participation of women in politics as a proviso for good governance and corruption - free system. The theoretical framework is informed by the fact that when one operates within the context of sexist bias and racial bias it is often the case that the best of such persons emerge against all odds. Women generally operate in a male dominated world and the urgency of their desires to perform optimally is the case as has been experienced in different parts of the world where the participation of women in the political space is encouraged. Sometimes, it is said that if an individual has a case to be decided by a woman judge; there is the assumption that such a judge would give the judgement without fear or favour. This is without prejudice to the fact that corruption is not gender sensitive; while noting that, the exclusion of women is in itself corruption of a sort. However, there is a perceptible view informed by practical experience than theoretical research that women in charge of some positions of authority have justifiably done well; given more of such opportunities then, women would do well in contributing their quota to the development of the nation. After all, it is only when we value and preserve the potentialities of men and women alike that holistic development can occur. In the present exercise, the paper will look at governance in Africa using Nigeria to exemplify some instances of how women who have distinguished themselves in public offices provide useful benefits of multipronged kind for a country in dire need of good governance. The potentials can be harnessed in view of accountable and responsible leadership challenge urgently needed in Nigeria. In doing this, the paper will highlight a significant point that it is difficult and much harder to influencing women to give into corruption due to some amorous tendencies (for social and cultural reasons amongst others) that seems to be the bane of their male counterpart in leadership positions at various levels in Nigeria.

Men Dominance and Women Marginalisation in Politics and Governance

That the men folk dominate the political scene is no news and is an incontrovertible fact that reeling out data will be bothering the reader with unnecessary lines. What is needed is for the reader to take a panoramic look at the various political structures of government in history or even in the now across Nigeria and undertake a simple mathematics to compare the percentage of men as against the women. This is revealing as it is so obvious that the number of women as against that of the men is lopsided to the advantage of the men folk and so when one claims that the women folk is marginalised and dominated by the men folk, one will not be sounding outlandish, perhaps!

This, in a way may not surprise one as even the acclaimed democratic form of government has its roots in Greek structures that privilege the male folk. Udebunu (55) underscores the point thus: right from the early cultural conception to the philosophical dialectics, the history of women had remained a dreary one of misogyny difficult enough to document. They have been castigated and calculatedly kept away from the course of civilisation, even much farther away from the roles in human government. This is probably so because the Greek world, which is the cradle of western civilisation and inventor of democracy had first paved the path towards this direction, having considered them from the beginning as inferior beings and threat to development, beings who must cautiously be excluded in law and in act from the public sphere of mankind if the world's historical progress is to keep on its course.

Certain scholars think this treatment of women was so because in the Greek cultural world, varieties of explanations equating women with a phenomenon to be transcended in the name of historical process were proliferated. The Greeks claimed that the emotions and sexuality linked with the female were perceived as a threat to the *polis*. Furthermore, their closeness to biological rhythms associated with birth and death represented a transitional process that threatened the Greek desire for permanence, independence and autonomy in the state. Or, that women they claimed, threatened the clear antinomies (like nature/culture, barbarian/civilisation) so dear to the Greek mind, writes Segal quoted in Udebunu (58). In Aristotle's *Politica*, the image of a woman is that of a mutilated male; thus using arguments to present a picture of the superiority of the man over the woman.

However, such an explanation was not acceptable to Plato who called for an open debate on human nature in relation to man and woman. As the concept of nature is the measure of all human political activities, Plato made his political proposals for women alongside the examination of the female human nature: "we must throw open the debate" he said, "to anyone who wishes either in jest or in earnest to raise the question whether female human nature is capable of sharing with the male all tasks or none at all, or some but not others ..." (Plato, 452e-453a). This initial consideration of women's nature was so important because, human existence is the realisation and perfection of the nature which mankind has, the nature which for him as for Aristotle, signified the order of right reason and right moral conduct. Nature denoted for Plato the moral ideal, the normative standard of activity in the world. Thus, the practice of politics is intended, not to controvert but to reflect and realise the design of nature, Udebunu (58).

Development and the Alienation of Women

Ake's conception of development perceives the people as agents, means and ends of development. Efemini (13) concludes then that central to the notion of development is the issue of alienation. Development as a process must de-alienate the people. This is so because there is no development in alienation. Alienation is an enemy of development; for when a people are alienated, they are separated from their resources, the decision-making process or even the state. In other words, alienation can take place at the level of both economy and politics. Whether alienation takes the

form of economic alienation or political alienation, it still retains something that is not conducive to development. It is important to add here some sort of nuance that strengthens the theoretical framework of this case.

Marginalisation is one more concept that is closely related to Ake's idea of development. In one sense, Ake argues that marginalisation is inimical to development and in another sense; he argues that marginalisation is conducive to development. The latter serves the purpose. In fact, Ake talks about the benefits of marginalisation for the development of Africa. In the negative sense, marginalisation of the people will make it impossible for the people to control the development process. In other words, if the leaders marginalise the people, they remove them from the decision making process. The implication of this is that decisions concerning the people are taken above the people usually under authoritarian setting. Under such setting the people hardly give their full support and energies in the development process. The result is that there is no development.

On the positive side, Ake is convinced that a marginalised people would be better placed to develop themselves all things being equal. Ake talks about marginalisation helping in the evolution of an endogenous development agenda for Africa. The point been made here about marginalisation is that it is the people themselves that must be responsible for their own development. It is a restatement of Ake's position that development is what the people must do for themselves, or rather, it must be participatory. The idea of development here is not an ad hoc economic growth or accidental improvement in the well-being of people. It must be sustainable; meaning that, whatever is done to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Women, Corruption and Governance

In an address presented at the Conference for Women Scientists and Technologists in India titled, "Role of Women Scientists and Technologists in National Development", Sharma (2003) quoted the Prime Minister of India who in 2001 while declaring the year as the year of the empowerment of women remarked that developing countries that have made remarkable social progress, have done so primarily through the empowerment of women, which has had enormous impact in terms of literacy, health and economic well being of families. The claim here is the trickle down and chain effects of empowering women. This is beyond primordial sentiments of considering empowered women as lacking what it takes to still have and sustain a home.

Societal and cultural structures tend to always put the women folk on their toes to such an extent that many can hardly exhibit their vicious tendencies with impunity. This can become ground for several women in positions of authority delivering to the best of their abilities; after all, it is always assumed that women can hardly deliver compared to their male counterparts.

For instance, to influence a female lecturer in a tertiary institution is obviously much more difficult than a male lecturer. Without sentiments, given the natural/biological make up added to the socio-

cultural configurations - most times - when analyses are made about lecturers in terms of the evaluation of students, the male lecturers are indeed at the mercy of such analysts. The implications of these are suggestive of the thinking that the women folk; while not perfect, are not too quick to give in to excessive corrupt tendencies, the paper does not rule out some exceptions though. Nwadiuwe (482) accentuates the point that the overwhelming percentage of the upper hierarchical positioning in the political, economic and most significant social sphere are dominated by the men folk and link the high rate of corruption in Nigeria to the literal exclusion of women from key institutions of government. When political gatherings or conferences or political seminars take place and to be attended by prominently men in the political arena, one will be sure to observe the presence of 'social girls' who perhaps are 'arranged' to attend to the needs of the participants at such occasions; the converse can hardly be the case.

Taking a clue from the score sheet of the performance of women in world history, Onyeabo (22) notes that few women who have wielded power did the woman folk proud and proved that women can really perform even better than men. They were powerful and very effective. Notable among these women are; Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, who was a two time Prime Minister of Britain and the leader of the powerful Conservative Party of Britain; Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was the prime Minister of India and leader of the Indian National Congress Party; Mrs. Bandaranaike, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister and president of Sri Lanka Freedom Party until her regime was over thrown by the military; Mrs. Violeta Chomoro in Nicaragua, who was elected the president of the country; Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister of Philippines. They were all educated, sound and have represented the women folk very well. All of them were married with children and were still able to perform creditably well. In other words, the two are not mutually exclusive. The examples of other women who have distinguishingly served Nigeria and delivered while in various offices are copiously evident. To include; Queen Amina and the noble women of Nupeland, who independently ruled kingdoms and attained very high positions in the aristocracy without the help of their husbands, Madam Okwei and Madam Tinubu for their economic achievements and relevance; others are, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Ramsome Kuti, Mrs. Oyibo Odinamadu recorded in the history of Nigeria and even in the present times; such eminent Nigerians to include the following few names; Oby Ezekwesili, Dora Akunyili, Ngonzi Okonjo-Iweala, in deed, the list is endless.

In praise of her female counterparts, Sharma (2003) states "... it is extremely important that women scientists and technologists are appreciated for their dual role in the society while pursuing scientific research as a career. They should also nurture and cherish their qualities of culture, compassion, courage and creativity and above all, the cooperative spirit. The five Cs' are personified in women's personally". She concludes that "our intention is to put down some concrete action points and place it before the government for further follow up". The implication is that if the government of the day is not interested in the recommendations such may not see the light of the day and little or nothing would be achieve. This brings into focus our claim that if

women are proportionately represented in government then such policies and recommendations would definitely be attended to since they are adequately represented in the government.

Contemporary Women and Modern day Challenges

The gradual erosion of the traditional values that characterise the family setup has consistently distorted the inherent democratic ideals and principles in the young growing girls and/or women in Africa, nay Nigeria. The simplicity of life and sacred institution of family face the strong tides of modern life, where rat race is the order of the day. From the earliest times, women were endowed with management acumen. This begins to develop right from the family level where a young girl starts at a very early age to manage the home and the affairs of her brothers; including her parents. Here, the natural democratic instinct that is inherent in her would come into play and the democratic principles are based on love, understanding and equity. Democratic practice seen as selfless service, justice and fair play begin to mature in the young female raised in a good family background. These critical make ups face the threat of subjugation by contemporary societal demands and pressure.

The impact of globalisation cannot be denied in looking at the place of women in today's world especially when one understands that globalisation is primarily not an impersonal process. Globalisation is not to be seen as driven by laws and factors of development such as technology operating outside human control and agency; rather as a conscious programme of reconstructing international economic and political relations in line with a particular set of interests (the profit motivations of the businesses, especially the trans-national corporations of the advanced countries) and vision (the dogma of the primacy of the free market and of private enterprise in all processes of human development). Consequently, for Africa, all the central planks of the process of globalisation have been implemented over the past decade-and-a-half as structural adjustment programmes. Countries have deregulated foreign investment, liberalised their imports, removed currency controls, and emasculated the direct role of the state. The results have been to further undermine the internal, national productive capacity, social security and democratic integrity of these countries. In Africa, women have mostly been involved in farming, in employment as civil servants, and quite a few in the industry. They have also been involved in small scale entrepreneurship. No doubt, these sectors have been severely affected by the introduction of trade liberalisation. Women in this continent contribute the most critical factor in agricultural production and agriculture. Yet liberalisation has failed to ensure the availability of credit, agricultural inputs such as fertilisers and insecticides at affordable prices. The marketing of their products has been thrown onto the hands of businessmen whose sole objective is profit maximisation. With results that in rural areas, rural urban migration has increased to unfortunate proportions. This has in turn led to the increase of squatters in urban areas and crime which affects mostly women and children. Children no longer sit around the fireplace in the evening to listen to stories that promote the values of respect, integrity, peace, love and unity, even in the rural areas where this sort of environment

would fit best. People – men and women and children- are all engrossed and embroiled in the struggle for survival.

As fallout of the global trend too, is the pull of the western brand of feminism which is capable of undermining several values needed for a sane and humane world where the women are women and the men are men, without one evaporating the other. Nnamani (219-220) observes that women struggle in the pre-colonial and colonial period in Nigeria, carried out in spirit of African communalism, had a quality which seems to have eluded modern feminism. The modern Nigerian feminism seems to have abandoned this enviable legacy from the past and taken to western feminism, imbibing fast all the individualism and egoism associated with the latter. The tendency to copy the west is very obvious among the educated class, who easily abandon the style of the earlier women struggle in the pre-colonial and colonial period, noted for preserving family values. Rather than build on the real African approach, modern feminism in Nigeria seems to be in the pursuit of the western style of female emancipation – therefore undermining our primary gender and kinship values.

Way Forward

This piece contributes to the women discourse from a unique perspective; while assessing what place women occupy in human society and how development can be an inclusive process, it estimates the justification of the women discourse in an African context in much more broader fashion. For the women talk in Nigeria in particular to retain its justification, the paper agrees with Nnamani (222) that it must be wary of the excesses and dangers of individualism and reductionism inherent in the western brand of feminism. In doing this, the excesses of hatred for men, rejection of motherhood duties, denial of femininity and the drive to be like men must eschewed.

Women's presence in legislatures and other state level elected offices is closely associated with better policy for women. Defining women friendly policy can be very controversial. None the less, some sources provide useful guidelines about what friendly policies might entail at the state level. For example, the Beijing Declaration and platform for action, which was unanimously adopted by representatives of 189 countries at the 4th world conference on women in 1995, outlines critical issues of concern to women and remaining obstacles to women's advancement, including the need for policies that help prevent violence against women; promote women's economic equality; alleviate poverty among women; improve their physical and mental and reproductive health and well-being; and enhance their political power. What women want is meaningful and equitable partnership with the men folk in the furtherance of development of the country. Women have shown a lot of knowledge and are capable of scoring remarkable political success. The lack of full opportunity for women to participate in representative government is one of the most serious problems facing the country.

Examples of countries abound where action and legal frameworks provide for women representations abound and Nigeria has no reason not to follow suit; thus, the Nigerian government should draw on the successes of commonwealth countries like Mozambique and New Zealand;

Mozambique tops the list of African countries with 30% female parliamentarians, while New Zealand has 30.8%. Sweden remains the world leader with 42.9% of its parliamentarians as women. The 35% affirmative action that was on the lips of the present government just before the 2011 general elections should be critically implemented.

In most parts of Africa, there is limit to one's capacity to enjoy one's rights if one has not gone to school. It means that one may not get a job and thus one's economic rights (which are basic human rights) are affected. The first challenge facing women today in Africa is education. This education must empower women with knowledge of their rights and how to seek redress should such rights be violated. That there is link between illiteracy, health and poverty is to state the obvious.

It is important to emphasize that the need for the ministry of women affairs to revise its conception of development. Economic growth without socio-cultural justice cannot be the genuine idea of development. It is imperative that development is measured in terms of the quality of human life which can be reflected in, for example, better education, health and life expectancy for every single member of the community. This is only possible if men and women are equitably empowered; in theory and in practice and the ministry has a crucial role to play in this process. Anything that falls short of restoring people's dignity, sense of identity, continuity and security should never be accepted.

This is in tandem with Ake's conception of development wherein people are perceived as agents, means and ends of development. Thus conceived, women will collaborate with their complementary counterparts since there is no development in alienation. For when a people are alienated, they are separated from their resources, the decision making process or even the state. In other words, alienation can take place at the level of both economy and politics. Whether alienation takes the form of economic alienation or political alienation, it still retains something that is not conducive to development. Men tend to benefit from living in a society where language, identity, intimacy, history, culture and social institutions are built on gender distinctions, even if the men themselves do not support such inequality. Like most people whose interests are being served by the system, men are largely unaware of the small and large advantages the social structure provides them, W.J. Goodie (17). Thus, most men do not see sex and gender inequality as their problem- it is a "women's issue" – and they are less likely than women to see a need for large scale social change. So the first step toward gender equality is that men will have to come to understand their role in the process, even in the absence of blatant, personal sexism. All men are tacitly involved in the oppression of women each time in purely physical terms, expect less from women on the job or in school, or expect more of them at home.

In addition, the psychic alienation of women as a result of the phenomena of stereotyping, cultural domination and sexual objectification must be ferociously fought by women. This is important because even if women have political and economic freedom, they are stereotyped as not being autonomous individuals capable of making the same serious decisions as men. Second, the culture is profusely the culture of men; and thirdly, women are sexually objectified as when their sexual parts are too often separated out from the rest of their persons. This culture has long impressed upon women that they must make themselves as attractive as possible. This is not demanded of men. Women must free themselves from this oppression. In the same vein, Nnamani (222) adds

that women must guard against low self esteem and the attendant self oppression. Many women oppress themselves through internalised poor self image and become enemies to themselves. When women are made to believe, for instance, that material goods, status and money are prime goods of life, rather than good quality of education, profession, integrity, responsibility and authenticity, they would readily take to such self-destructive ventures as prostitution, wilful submission of their bodies to secure certificates, promotions, degrees, cars, allowances, and above all the quest for excessive social independence the society is yet to grow up to absorb. Women must therefore cherish their nature and femininity as there is much in femininity that can change the world. After all, the world would become poorer, not richer, if all sexes should adopt male behaviour. Such qualities that adorn the female personality are empathy, sensitivity and nurturance; if suppressed in pursuit of a male style of excellence is counterproductive.

The next step will require a fundamental transformation of institutional patterns and cultural values. Such a solution sounds too massive to be possible. But today, we are seeing early steps in that direction with emerging changing conceptions of family roles, women's increasing (though not yet) labour force participation, their growing (but not yet equal) political power and greater awareness of sexual exploitation and violence worldwide. How far the changes will take us depends largely on the concrete actions taken in expanding the space for participation of women in governance as that will increase the possibility of a much more effective and efficient system of government across Africa in this 21st century.

Conclusion

This paper makes a philosophical case for the expansion of participatory space for women in governance in Africa, nay Nigeria using the very limiting framework that tends to look in askance women. Thus, rather than be the hurdle, it can and is indeed the stepping stone with which women more than anything else are better positioned to contribute immensely in terms of meeting the democratic principles of justice, fair play, equity and objectivity. It underscores the *Akean* definition of development to be an inclusive process wherein people (men, women and children) are seen as agents, means and ends. It is a process that leads to increased capacity of people to have control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology and obtain physical necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter), equality in employment, participation in government, political and economic independence, adequate education, gender equality, sustainable development and peace. The flourishing democratic system of governance in some parts of Africa provides the opportunity for the women folk to complement the men folk in the design, generation and development of policies, decisions and programmes that will guarantee sustainable development. Anything less, impedes economic productivity and results in unequal access to and unfair distribution of the collective resources. A number of challenges were noted and suggestions were identified as way forward.

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