

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Local government is the government which is created at the grassroots level. It is a form of community government, so its primary responsibility is community development. It is a form of devolution of political powers of the state. As the government closest and nearest to the people, its importance cannot be overemphasized. On the other hand, there can be no true development without the involvement of the womenfolk. The paper, therefore, X-rays the development at the local government vis-à-vis the involvement of its womenfolk. The paper begins with a conceptual framework of local government, its functions and importance. It goes further to discuss the representation of women in government at the various levels as well as barriers to women's participation in politics. It also examines the role of women in household economy, rural development, peace building and the advantage of their participation using historical and descriptive method and guided by democratic participation theory. The paper argues that the various economic, political, social and system failure serve as a barrier to effective participation of women in politics at the local government level and beyond. The paper concludes that for the women to actively participate in politics and assume their proper position to effect change for the nation at the local government level, government and other stakeholders should engages in programmes and policies that would empower women politically, socially and economically.

Keywords: Women, Community, Policies, Rural Development, Development.

Introduction

Low participation of women in politics and governance has been a major concern at the global level. In Nigeria, women's participation in politics is not proportionate to the 50% of the nation's population which they represent and has not translated into equal representation in political leadership positions. The global issue of goal to promote gender equality and empower women of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other international clarion calls for bridging the gap created by long-term discrimination against women and making women visible in politics made Nigeria to recognize women in the political sphere and include them in both appointive and elective positions. Yet, there poses low participation of women in politics and the number of women in political positions in Nigeria is growing at a slow rate despite efforts to change such trend by Nigerian women groups/advocates/activists, civil society organizations, Nigerian government and international agencies and to increase women's active participation in both politics and public life, particularly in the south eastern Nigeria. This situation persistently falls below the recommended 30% of the Beijing Platform of Action and 35% recommendation of National Policy on Women in Nigeria.

In the context of the on-going democratic reforms, there has been a renewed interest to promote the participation of women in public decision making at the local government level. Gender equality in politics and women economic empowerment are largely seen as part of the development agenda of current liberalization project. Women issues have now become an integral part of contemporary governance discourse and this is largely due to the increasing recognition of women as positive contributors to economic and political development. It has also been argued that the quest for sustainable democratic governance requires active involvement of all shareholders including women (Fasake, 2004).

In this context, the role of women in good governance and nation building cannot be overemphasized. Equal or better representation of women is considered very important for the proper development of any country, and the seriousness devoted to this is reflected in the declaration of the Affirmative Action by the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing (Economic Commission for Africa, 2010).

Also, Nigerian women have the guaranteed rights to participate in active politics and governance by virtue of Section 42(1) of the 199 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended which states that “a citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic groups, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he/she is such a person, be subjected to any form of discrimination.” This further confirms that you go to court to seek redress if as a woman, your franchise is violated and that the constitution as a whole prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.

However, over the years, there has been a remarkable increase in women participation when measured with certain standards like the number of women who vote in elections' the number of appointive and elective positions held by women; number of women related to policies implemented by government and so on. Yet, there is observed extensive discrimination against women and under-representation of them in politics and governance in Nigeria when compared with their male counterparts in actual practice particularly in the southeast.

The statistics from table 1 revealed that from 1999-2011 general elections in Nigeria, no woman was elected into the office of the Governor in any of the 36 states and that of the President of the federation. Moreover, out of the 109 Senators, there are only 3 women (2.8%) in 1999; which increased to 4(3.7%) in 2003, a further increase to 9(8.3%) in 2007, and a slight decline to 7(6.4%) in 2011. Also, out of 360 House of Representative members, there were only 12(2.3%) women in 1999; which increased to 21(5.8%) in 2003; a further increase to 25(6.9%) in 2007 and a slight increase to 26(7.2%) in 2011. In addition, out of 990 State House of Assembly members, there were only 24(2.4%) women in 1999, which increased to 40(3.9%) in 2003; a further increase to 57(5.8%), 68(6.9%) in 2007 and 2011 respectively. Furthermore, out of 829,881,887, State House of Assembly Committee members, there were only 18(2.2%) women, 32(3.6%), 52(5.9%) in 1999, 2003 and 2007 respectively with slight increase. But in 2011, there was no woman out of 887 State House of Assembly Committee members. Considering the Office of the Local Government Area Chairperson, there were only 13(1.8%), 15(1.9%) and 27(3.6%) women in 1999, 2003 and 2007 respectively with slight increases. While in 2011, no woman was elected into the office of Local Government Area Chairperson. Finally, out of 6,368 Councillors, there were only 69(1.1%) women which increased to 267(4.2%) in 2003 and reduced to 235(3.7%) in 2007. While in 2011 no woman was elected into the Office of Councillors.

Also, table 2 below revealed that the number of women elected as Deputy Governors for 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 were 1, 2, 6, and 1 respectively. The total number of Deputy Governors was 36 for 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. In 1999, according to Luka (2011), there was an improvement on women political participation with the appointment of 4 out of 29 Senior Ministers representing 13.7% and 3 out of the 18 Junior Ministers representing 16.6%, 2 women advisors and 2 senior special assistants and 6 special assistants and 1 special assistants to the Vice President as well as 8 permanent secretaries. Women were also appointed as commissioners and therefore, members of the executive councils in all the states (Kolawale, Abubakar, Owonubi & Adebayo, 2012). Considering the 2011 political appointments, out of 7 principal officers of the Senate, there was no woman, there was only 1 woman (10%), out of 9 officers of the House of Representative; and for the ministerial appointments as at 7th August, 2011, there were 13 women (32%) out of 41. Tables 1 and 2 showed women representation in two arms of government only: legislative arm (Senate, House of Representative, State House of Assembly and Councillors); Executive arm (President, Vice President, Governors, Deputy Governor, Local Government Area Chairperson); including political appointees.

Table 1: Comparison of Women Representation in the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 Nigeria election

Office	1999		2003		2007		2011	
	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women
President	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Senate	109	3(2.8%)	109	4(3.7%)	109	9(3.5%)	109	7(6.4%)
House of Representative	360	12(3.3%)	360	21(5.8%)	360	25(6.9%)	360	26(7.2%)
Governor	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
State House of Assembly	990	34(2.4%)	990	40(3.9%)	990	57(5.8%)	990	68(6.9%)
State House of Assembly Committee	829	18(2.2%)	829	32(3.6%)	829	52(5.9%)	829	-
LGA Chairperson	710	13(1.8%)	774	15(1.9%)	740	27(3.6%)	740	-
Councillors	6368	69(1.1%)	6368	267(4.2%)	6368	235(3.7%)	6368	-

Source: Eyeh (2010), Irabor (2011), and Okoronkwo-Chukwu (2013)

Table 2: Trends of women Deputy Governors in Nigeria since 1999

Election Year	Number of Women Deputy Governors
1999	1
2003	2
2007	6
2011	1

Source: Adapted from Ogunyankin (2012)

However, from 1999-2011, there has been a drastic increase in women political participation in both elective and appointive positions particularly appointive. In spite of these increases, women are still highly marginalized considering the disparity in the proportion of men to women in politics and decision making positions (Ngara & Ayabami, 2013). Similarly, UNDP report concludes that women participation in politics and decision making is still inadequate (Asaju & Adagba, 2013).

Furthermore, despite these improvements, the representation of women in politics and decision making in Nigeria and southeast in particular are still far below the global benchmark of 35% affirmative action. It is against this background that this paper examined women and politics in local government system in Nigeria: challenges and prospects (a case study of southeast).

Conceptual Review

Local Government

Local government as a concept has been given various definitions by various scholars. According to Appalorai (2006) in Kyenge (2013), local government is government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular place or district. Awa (1981) sees local government as a political authority set up by a nation or state as a subordinate authority for the purpose of dispensing or decentralizing political power. In the same vein,

Gboyega (1987) defines local government as the act of decentralizing power which may take the form of decentralization or devolution. Decentralization, he observes involves delegation of authority to field units of the same department and devolution on the other hand refers to a transfer of authority to local government units or special statutory bodies such as school boards. From this perspective, one can see local government as a lesser power in the national polity.

Akpan (1992) sees local government as the breaking down of a country into small units or localities for the purpose of administration on which the inhabitants of the different units or localities concerned play a direct and full part through their elected representatives who exercise power or undertake functions under the general authority of the national government.

Further to that is the definition given by United Nations in 1961 in Alao (2016) as a political subdivision of a state, constituted by law and has control of local affairs and the governing body either elected or selected. Similar to the United Nations Organization definition as quoted by Alao (2016) is the 1976 Local Government Reform Guidelines which defined local government as “government at the local level exercised through representative council, established by law to exercise specific powers within a defined area”.

From all the definitions given, the focus is on the transfer of political powers to local areas by involving the inhabitants in the provision of basic needs in their respective communities, Kyenge (2013) therefore sees it as a political authority with right to exercise political power which means, right to take decisions which are binding on the people and to obtain compliance. In effect, local government is a creation of the central government and subordinate to central authority.

It is essential to note that there is no uniformity globally in the mode of creation, the structure and the running of the local government system and that actually help to justify the study of effect of the environment in which it is situated. Even with Nigeria where unified local government system is practiced, there are differences in the way the administration is conducted and the extent to which the system is democratic. In the US, local government falls within the prerogative of the state and run it without interference from the center, while in United Kingdom, US and France, it has a multilayer structure, unlike in Nigeria with only one layer.

Unfortunately, while the general trend is to see the local government as an agent of democratization, contrary is the experience in Nigeria due to selfish reason, the state government hiding under Section 7(6) of the 1999 Constitution as amended developed many cynical tactics hindering the growth of the system. This maintained in adoption of caretaker committee syndrome in place of elected council. When election were held through the State Electoral Commission, they fell below the minimum standard of acceptable election in any civilized and democratic society as it could be described it best as imposition of loyalists of the Governor on the people. In effect, the dividends of democracy at the local government levels are only felt mostly on the pages of newspaper and other media rather than among the people. Hence, local government system has not come of age in Nigeria.

Evolution of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

The Nigeria local government administration can rightly be traced back to the traditional local administration system that existed prior to the colonial era. This was followed by the Native Authority system which was introduced to better service the colonial authority. At the time of independence in 1960, local government was essentially a regional responsibility. During the early military era (1967-1976), local government system remained more or less an extension of the states, with local governments performing essentially, residual roles for their military overlords at the state level. In the later military era (1976-1979), efforts were made to transform the basic roles of local government as exemplified in the 1976 local government reform. The 1976 reform represented a fundamental change in the development of

local government in Nigeria. For the first time, the country was given a common, single-tier structure of local government in place of the different structures of various states. The reforms instituted statutory allocations of revenues from the federation account with the intention of giving local government fixed proportion of both the federation account and each state's revenue.

The local government system by democratically elected local government council is guaranteed under the 1999 Constitution, Section 7. Based on this section, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution provides for the functions of a local government council under its 4th Schedule. According to the fourth schedule I of the amended 1999 Constitution, the main functions of the local government are as follows:

- (a) The consideration and the making on recommendations to a state commission on economic planning or any similar body on:
 - i) The economic development of the state, particularly in so far as the areas of authority of the council and of the state are affected.
 - ii) Proposals made by the said commission or body.
- (b) Collection of rates, radio or television licenses;
- (c) Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries and homes for the destitute;
- (d) Establishment, maintenance of and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;
- (e) Naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- (f) Provision of and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposals;
- (g) Registration of births, deaths and marriages;
- (h) Assessment of privately-owned houses or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the house of assembly of a state;
 - (i) Control and regulation of:
 - i) Out-door advertising and hoarding,
 - ii) Movement and keeping of pets of all description,
 - iii) Shops and kiosks,
 - iv) Restaurants and other places for sales of food to the public and
 - v) Laundries.

According to Nzekwe (2011), the local government councils corroborate with state government on issues such as:

- The provision and maintenance of health services.
- The provision and maintenance of primary education.
- The development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploration of minerals.

A local government council is headed by a Chairman who is the Chief Executive. He is helped in the discharge of these duties by other elected members, also referred to as elected, but can be appointed, under special circumstances. As a third-tier of government closest to the people, each local government council is the pivot of socio-economic planning and development in its area of jurisdiction.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach adopted for this work is the democratic participatory school of thought due to the fact that it is essential to a democratic administration or for practical administrative purposes like responsiveness, accountability and control. The concept of democracy is central to the democratic

participatory school of thought. This school of thought believes that democracy is a way of life that demands that one another's point of view and one another's interest be mutually appreciated. It is a concept that is based on fair play, tolerance and respect for the right of others, a concept that accepts those to be intrinsically undeniable values (Mukoro, 2005). It is expected that real democratic governance would be good governance. Good governance amongst other things involves the enthronement of due process, constitutionalism, rule of law, transparency and accountability in the conduct of public affairs, the absence of good governance and its by-products, automatically leads to two negative outcomes like massive corruption and political instability. None of these outcomes is conducive to development (Ibok, 2014). The general consensus among Nigerians is the corruption appears to have been institutionalized in the local government. Selection instead of election is a serious trait of anti-democratic governance among other things might have accounted for the scenario.

Participatory democracy, participant form of government in which citizens participate individually and directly in political decisions and policies that affect their lives, rather than through elected representatives for instance, by voting, citizens are participating in the democratic process. Citizens vote for leaders to represent them and their ideas, and the leaders support the citizens' interests. Although, democracy is generally understood to be defined voting, no consensus exists on a precise definition of democracy. Karl Popper says that the "classical" view of democracy is simply, "in brief, the theory that democracy is the rule of the people, and that the people have a right to rule".

The democratic participatory school of thought exists solely for the purpose of bringing about democracy and Mill (1975) justified local government on three main grounds. The first was that there are certain concerns or interests which only a section of the community has in common and it is convenient as well as advisable that only those who share this community of interests should administer them. As Mill (1975) puts it, the very object of having a local representation is in order that those who have any interest in common, which they do not share with the general body of their countryman; many manage that joint interest by themselves. The second reason was that local government is one of the "free institutions", which provides political education. According to Mill "I have dwelt in string language – hardly my language is strong enough to express the strength of my conviction – on the importance of that portion of the operation of free institutions which may be called the public education of the citizens. Now, of this operation, the local administrative institutions are the chief instrument."

The third reason was that of accountability as Mill expressed it: "Not only are separate executive officers required for purely local duties but the popular control over those officers can only be advantageously exerted through a separate organ. Their original appointment, the function of working and checking them, the duty of providing or the discretion of withholding, the supplies necessary for their operation, should rest with the people of the locality.

The arguments of Mill have been refined by elaboration. Mill's modern adherent, Keith (1954) argued the pedagogic value of local government, asserting that participation in local administration teaches the participant the art of weighing and choosing between competing claims and justifying the choice as a just one that is, being accountable. He further stressed that the capacity to make rational choices and the art of winning consent are as much necessary in local government as in central government, and that capacity is acquired and enhanced by participation in local government.

Another adherent is Wilson (1984) who argued that the higher ultimate purposes that local government serves are political. One of these is political education, which participation in local government affords that political education is in the first place, an education in the possible and the expedient; in the second place, it is an education in the use of power and authority and in the risks of power; in the third place, it is education in practical ingenuity and versatility.

Mackenzie (1961) regarded local government as a training ground for national politicians. In

addition, local government has the advantage that local knowledge, interested and intimate, firsthand knowledge which makes administration concrete and relevant to locality can be more easily and perhaps cheaply made available to the local and central authorities.

There is no doubt that the essence of government fits into this framework in view of the federal system of government adopted and the quest for development at the grassroots level. Local government cannot meet the needs of the people without adequate participation of the local people, particularly the women folk.

To sum it all, local government, it is claimed enables services of local importance only to be locally administered, provides education in citizenship, provides training in political leadership, makes available to the central government information about localities, which is essential for adequately meeting their needs efficiently and minimizes concentration of political power by diffusing it.

The Importance of Local Government

There have been several arguments and strong support for local government all over the world and these stem from its importance. The reasons include the following according to Nzekwe (2011):

- Local government is more responsive to citizens' needs than large units of government.
- As government at the grassroots, it is nearer enough to the people and hence, articulates and tackles their problems better.
- Through the local governments, the local people understand and conduct their own local affairs better than would the central or state government operating from afar.
- It encourages people to become involved in lives of their community.
- Local people favour activities as generated from within (internally) but resist imposition from above (outside influence).
- Local government is a form of decentralization of power in order to avoid disposition.
- Local government decongests the national or state government of excessive business.
- It upholds personal liberty and as a cradle of democracy, provides a chance of local politicians' pressure upon the centre, especially under a tyrannical government.
- It is an instrument of political education achieved by creating opportunities for political activities and participation.
- It is a preparatory ground for future leaders.
- It helps in sourcing funds for the provision of wide range of essential services.
- Local government is always in a better position to stimulate initiatives, inculcate the feeling of national consciousness and economic drive and experimentation in the people than the national and state governments.

The Place of Women in Government: Southeast

The roles of women in leadership positions have generated heated debates for over two decades now. At the international level, the United Nations Conference on Women have advocated the need to increase the number of women in decision-making positions to ensure that women's interests are represented and because of growing evidence that women's involvement improves the way in which leadership and decision-making is practiced. The last twenty years have seen a steady but modest increase in the number and proportion of women candidates and councilors in local governments in the United States/United Kingdom, yet there remains a large gender imbalance in the make-up of most local

councilors, with under one-third of councilors being women (Bochel & Bochel, 2010).

Dwindling Number of Female Legislators

In Nigerian women are under-represented at every level of government. The International Republic Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), in 2019 report revealed that, the Nigerian Senate had the lowest rate of female legislative participation in sub-Saharan Africa. *Daily Trust* Saturday reports that, according to a 2018 report by the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA), women held only 14 percent of parliamentary seats in Nigeria, one of the lowest percentages in Africa. In the National Assembly, a total of 17 made it to the 10th Assembly, according to the list published by INEC on successful candidates that won the February 25th National Assembly elections. While there are female Senators elected, 14 of them are House of Representative members. This implies that out of the 469 seats in the National Assembly, women occupy only 27 seats. A 2022 report in the Gender Strategies Advancement International (GSAI) indicated that the participation of Nigerian women in politics, which is at 6.7%, falls below the African average of 23.4% and a global average of 22.5%.

However, the 2022 gender gap report by World Economic Forum ranks Nigeria at 141 out of 146 countries in terms of female political participation. Out of the 988 State Assembly seats across the 36 states of the federation, only 48 female lawmakers representing 4.85% were elected in the just concluded 2023 elections, *Daily Trust* Saturday reports.

The poor outing of women in the just concluded elections has once again brought to the fore, an existential problem, which experts believe would require serious legislation at the National level for a certain percentage to be reserved for the womenfolk in the spirit of fairness.

In the southeast, the breakdown of women representative in the just concluded 2023 general election was neither something to take home about. In the House of Assembly election of Abia State, out of the 24 House members, no woman was elected, in Imo State, out of the 27 House members, no woman was elected, in Enugu State, out of the 24 members, only 2 women were elected, in Ebonyi State, out of the 24 members, only 2 women were elected and in Anambra State, out of the 30 members, only one woman was elected.

In the Ministerial appointment by the Bola Tinubu Administration, only two women were appointed from the southeast zone.

The above analysis has shown that the southeast are left to the background in terms of women contributions to the development of its zone, consequently, women's role and Nigeria's diversity and the struggle to nurture its nascent democracy, women deserve a voice in policy making, articulation and execution.

Overtime, the dearth of women in the country's political space has generated growing concerns among stakeholders and gender activists. According to INEC, women constituted about 47.5% of 93 million registered voters in the just concluded 2023 elections.

But despite forming the bulk of the voting population in the country, women in the country particularly in the southeast hardly have the chance of being elected into political positions due to many odds that stand against them.

Challenges to Women Active Participation in Politics in Nigeria (South East)

The challenges to women's active participation in politics in Nigeria in general and southeast zone in particular are manifold. In this paper, some of these challenges examined include but not limited to the following:

Fundamental Inequality

Even though, women enjoy the same constitutional rights as men, they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities. While politics and community affairs are seen as unsuitable for them. In most African countries, women are most constrained by obstacles such as culture and tradition. In such countries including Nigeria, men are generally believed to be superior to women.

Political and Economic Instability

Political and economic instability affects to a large extent, the development of a political culture with democratic norms. Socio-economic interpretations are frequently used for challenging and interpreting women's rights and thereby creating insecurity for women. And while women are deemed to have equal rights to political participation with men, they are often discouraged to do so in highly patriarchal society like ours.

Discrimination

Women are highly discriminated against in all facets of life. The society exhibits attitudes that put politics and decision-making as the preserve of the men folk, thereby portraying women as incapable of governance and management roles.

Men Dominance of the Political Institutions

The styles and modes of working in decision-making bodies are determined and dictated by men. This makes it difficult for the few women there to raise issues that affect them. Even when they make suggestions, they are harshly judged by both colleagues and society.

Lack of Finance

Politics in Nigeria, especially seeking elective position, is an expensive venture requiring huge financial involvement and solid financial backing. Generally, the relatively pathetic poor financial disposition of Nigerian women is a critical challenge which mostly accounts for their poor participation in politics and political defeats. About 90% of women in Nigeria according to Ngara *et al.* (2013), currently live below poverty line, so in spite of concession granted by some major political parties which lowers the cost of obtaining party nomination forms for women into elective office, nonetheless, the cost of realizing electoral ambition is still far beyond the reach of even the most highly placed women in the absence of “a godfather who foots the bill in exchange for unlimited favour when the seat is eventually secured” (Yahaya, 2013). Considering the financial backing of the godfathers and other financiers of politicians in Nigeria prefer male political aspirants to female ones based on the societal value assumption that political activities are masculine and male candidates are believed to stand better chance of winning elections. In Nigeria, the women's poor access to credit facilities, lack of inheritance rights for developmental purpose, including culturally unacceptable control of their income and resources while living with their husbands (for married ones) contribute to their lack of financial strength as a major challenge in their active participation in politics.

Zoning Formula

This formula through not a constitutional provision but has come to stay, was introduced to take care of the minorities, who may not occupy certain positions due to their small numerical strength. While this may work for the minorities, it works against women who are always sidelined in the process.

The Indigeneity Factor

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, according to Olufemi (2006) continues to act as an impediment to women's active participation in politics particularly political ambitions. Married women are often confronted with the problem of constituency, especially if they are married outside their locality or state of origin as they cannot claim the state of origin of their husband. If a married Nigeria woman goes back to her constituency of birth/state of origin, she is likely to receive the same discrimination treatment for she is regarded as being over ambitious and a “non-indigene” by her own state of origin. Similarly, such women have no base from which to develop political contacts with the people or build knowledge and experience about the issues in the areas and are not considered for elective positions. Thus, the indigenization of Nigerian women that discourages them from active participation in politics is a remarkable challenge.

Culture

The Nigerian culture is gender unfriendly. This is more so when men are the custodians and interpreters of the same culture, which they do to their own advantage. Culture as applied by men abhors female leaders in male environment. Women who defy this order and venture into politics are regarded as deviants who do not want to conform to the norms.

Violence, Thuggery and Intimidation

Women, all over the world are known to eschew violence and thuggery. Men deploy all forms of thuggery and violence to ensure victory at the polls and women unable to withstand such attacks, withdraw from the contest. All these lead to apathy among the Nigerian women towards politics.

Why Encourage Women's Participation in Local Governance

The need to encourage women's participation in politics stems from their numerous roles in household economy, food production and food security, rural development, peace maintenance and their organizational abilities.

(1) Role of women in household economy, food production and food security:

Women are very strong pillars of the economy. Rural women in every state of Nigeria are major contributors to food production, who have successfully managed human and economic resources to achieve optimum results. They help in reducing unemployment by becoming employers of labour. Their farm output contributes to food shortage reduction, increases national agricultural output thereby, guaranteeing facing food security.

The role of women in agriculture is not restricted to Nigeria as Afolabi (2008) observed, agriculture accounts for 21% of the continent's GDP in sub-Saharan Africa, and women contribute 60-80% of the labour dispensed in food production. Most women in rural areas in a bid to ensure adequate food supply for their families over labour themselves. For playing such as important role which occupies prominent position in the chart of human needs, women should be encouraged and adequately involved in every policy and decision-making at all levels of government, especially at the local where their impact will be felt more.

(2) Role of Women in Rural Development:

Women are strong force to development. They have arisen as a conscious social force and their involvement in the pursuit for development is yet to be fully analyzed (Nzekwe, 1999). Every nation, developed or developing, has recorded the involvement of its womenfolk in its development as a nation.

Every development has man as its focus; central focus, it has to do with the ability of a people to improve on their experience through the use of the natural laws (science) and to use this understanding to devise and improve upon the tools of production (technology) that will ultimately give rise to a specific model of production and social relations upon which will rest a definite strategy of development (Amucheazi, 1989). Women have demonstrated their ability and desire to bring about development through various programmes organized in recent years towards grassroots development such as the Family Support Programme, Cooperative Societies amongst others. Oguonu (2010) recorded women's roles in socioeconomic development in the local government system in Nigeria to include: agriculture, health, education and establishment of skill vocational centres. Women through the formation and use of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) bring about development at the grassroots. These NGOs are charged with specific responsibilities as each has its objectives. Some of these include:

- Action Health Incorporated (AHI), Eastbrook Foundation Breast Cancer Association of Nigeria (BRECAN), etc. are charged with the responsibility of providing free confidential counseling and healthcare services for children and adults who cannot afford them.
- BAOBAB, Alliance for Africa (AFA), etc. are charged with responsibility of women's local rights issues under the three (3) systems of law customary, statutory and religious law in Nigeria.
- Access to Education for Children, Global Knowledge Organization of Nigeria (GKON), provides free education for indigent children.
- Guidance Community Development Foundation, Kilba Development Association, are involved in the execution of community development projects.
- Women Aid Collective (WACOL), Women Development International Association (WODIA), Women in Technology in Nigeria (WTN), are involved with the promotion of women and youth empowerment, democracy, transparency and global governance and campaign against electrical violence.
- Women in Management and Business (WIMBIZ) and others concern themselves with the improvement of success rate of female entrepreneurs and increment of the proportion of women in serious positions in corporate organizations, national and national development in general.

(3) Fight against Crime and Peace Making Roles:

Women have always been against crime. They fight against crime by lending support to the formation of alternative security organs. They also organize collective protest action whenever they feel threatened by certain actions. Women sometimes intervene to moderate the scale of human loss by protecting targets of violence. In conflicts within their communities, women collectively step into and the violence in Abiriba Town in Abia State, women there succeeded in bringing an end to a 2 year violent political crisis to an end by organizing themselves and deserting the town en masse until the protagonists of the crisis agreed to cease hostilities. Women occasionally engage in discrete peace advocacy by exerting pressure on the main actors of the crisis. They can also achieve these feats through organized demonstrations. Other times, the women use their social positions to mitigate or encourage settlement between the combatants and to provide both material and moral support for victims of violence. All these activities are geared towards rural development in particular and national development in general.

Advantages of Women's Participation in Local Governance

The advantages of women's participation in local governance include the following according to Nzekwe (2011:341):

- Women have a greater sense of social issues and the wellbeing and welfare of their communities. When in such positions, their priorities will center on the provision of basic amenities like food, shelter, clothing, health services, property allocation and community development.
- They will see to the improvement of the environment within their communities. Since women are the lovers of aesthetics in planning city development, the women take into account certain issues like the quality of life, harmony in art and culture and environmental development.
- They will be decisive on such issues that are often neglected by men such as family issues and violence against women and children.
- Women are sure to adopt more democratic and transparent approach to governance than men.
- They will bring about the much desired change from politics of corruption to a more friendly and accommodating politics of openness. When this happens, politics will cease to be a “do-or-die” affairs to sometime you-win, sometime you-loose kind of game (affair).
- Women's style of leadership is more inclusive, collaborative and consultative, more tolerant of different viewpoints, people-oriented, encourages participation, more assertive, innovative and above all, more conscientious.

Way Forward

There have been a number of policies, strategies and action plans put in place for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment and these include the National Gender Policy; National Gender Data Bank; Social Development Policy; National Gender Education Policy; National Education Policy; Nigerian Labour Congress Gender Policy; The National Population Policy; The Food and Nutrient Policy; The Water and Sanitation Policy; The Policy on Household Food Security; National Adolescent Health Policy; The Women in Agriculture Policy; Reproductive Health Policy; Transport and the Recent; Thirty-Five Percent Affirmative Action.

The implementation of these programmes have been very slow and achievement of set objectives very minimal due to inadequate national legislation and poor knowledge of and will of the state institutions to effect necessary changes.

Conclusion

The global issue of goal 3 (to promote gender equality and empower women) of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other international clarion calls for bridging the gap created by long-term discrimination against women and making women visible in politics made Nigeria to recognize women in the political sphere, and include them in both appointive and elective positions. It is no doubt that women still remain highly marginalized, discriminated against, and are under-represented in political life of the nation. This is more obvious when the proportion of men to women in politics and decision-making positions are compared despite the fact that women represent 50% of the nation's population.

Several challenges that Nigeria women still face in active participation in politics such as discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices, lack of finance, under-representation of women in governance, unhealthy political environment, political party discrimination, indigenization of women political aspirants, amongst other have been identified as responsible for this state of affair.

Thus, the following recommended measures to guarantee women's active participation in the southeast and other parts of Nigeria should be strictly adhered to for better development of Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on this, the following recommendations are made:

- Government at all levels should fully integrate women into reputable and decision-making responsibilities.
- The 35% Affirmative Action as endorsed by government should be fully implemented.
- Women should be given all the necessary assistance needed to develop their full potentials, be it financial or material assistance.
- Politics of thuggery and intimidation as practiced in the southeast and other zones of Nigeria should be jettisoned for open, free and fair democratic practices.
- Women in politics should serve as role models for other women to the top and encourage others to participate in politics.
- Women when elected to positions of power should be encouraged and supported rather than castigated.
- A political environment that is congenial needs to be developed in local government in which discrimination against women is not acceptable.'
- There should be adequate training programmes established by political parties, educational institutions and other concerned agencies like NGOs to help women in local government to develop the necessary skills needed for their new roles and to develop self confidence.
- There should be periodic seminars, workshops and other educative programmes organized to educate people on women's rights and the need for women's equality.
- Lastly, curriculum on girls' education should include training and such areas a self-reliance, self-confidence and potential for decision-making positions.

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