Nigerian Women and Politics

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This paper focuses on a review of Nigerian women's political activity, particularly their aspiration for government office, grassroots mobilization, and interaction with the state. The influence of variables such as colonialism, modernization, development, and patriarchy on women's political involvement are also investigated. This analysis begins with a historical overview emphasizing the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Finally, the different manifestations of women's political activity are analyzed and I offer some insight into the effectiveness of these activities.

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, it appears that gender, like class, does not influence politics in a significant manner. The state is presumably gender-neutral and women are potentially equal competitors who must build organizations and develop political savvy in order to gain access and control over decision-making. However, this remains the utopian dream of liberal-pluralists. In actuality, the state reflects gender inequality insofar as its institutions are staffed and controlled by men, its policies and laws reflect male domination of women's lives, it maintains oppressive structures and ideology against women, and it continues to perpetuate male domination over females both in the public and private spheres.

State support for an ideology of the family and women's primary allegiance to it provides numerous opportunities for state involvement in the division of labor, wages, and terms and conditions of employment, so intensively that it reinforces women's subordination to men. On the other hand, the expansion of the state could offer attractive, or even the only viable alternative to oppressive family or kin relationships that prevent women from

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1 Sue Ellen Charlton, Jana Everett, and Kathleen Staudt, eds. in "Women, the State, and Development" Women, the State and Development (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1989), pp.3-4.
2 Ibid., pp.7-8.

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realizing either strategic or practical goals. Women in developing countries particularly, look to the state for an opportunity to move away from family control and to lay claim to resources generated by development. Though state interests always supersede state concerns for women, policies provide the clearest link to gender concerns. Policies either benefit or disadvantage, liberate or oppress, women. Therefore, one can argue that the status of African women is enhanced or circumscribed by state/institutional structures, office holders, and dominant societal interests.

Despite state manipulation, one must disclaim arguments that Nigerian women have made no progress since independence because there are more women participating and making an impact in all spheres of life, and to a lesser extent, in politics. Concerning the latter, some argue that there is a critical lack of political awareness, minimal participation, and negligible contribution to the political process among women. Although women constitute about 51 percent of Nigeria’s population, the unequal distribution of institutional and economic power coupled with an acute lack of representation or under-representation in government limit women’s ability to influence the legislative process and to access resources. Most women are apprehensive about, or fear, seeking public office. Uniformed about their legal rights, encumbered by timidity and traditional notions of a “woman’s place,” or fearful of ridicule and insults, they stay out of politics.

Historical Analysis

Historically, women in several societies of pre-colonial Africa, occupied positions complementary rather than subordinate to men. Also, the traditional bisexual political system characteristic of most African societies, allowed women to choose their own leaders to run state affairs particularly in areas considered to be ‘women’s province,’ such as the marketplace. As such,

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4. Charlton, Everett, and Staudt, p.11.
the system of sex segregation enabled women to control their own affairs while still subject to communal government. Women were able to wield considerable power. For example, traditional Yoruba society accorded women high social and political status which necessitated their participation in politics at all levels. Generally, Yoruba women married within the same town so that they were physically close to their own families and retained rights to family land, farms, and participation in the ancestral and orisha cults of their lineage. At the village level, women met to discuss matters affecting the welfare of their communities and in most towns, women’s councils and their leadership exercised tremendous pressure. In addition, wives of Obas had great influence in all political affairs where they represented their husband’s interests at women’s meetings. For example, in Oyo kingdom, there were eight titled ladies as well as eight priestesses who ensured the smooth functioning of the political machinery. As in Yorubaland, the Iyoba (Queen Mother) in traditional Edo society, wielded great political power and governed cities on behalf of her son and in traditional Ibo society, the Omu was the counterpart of the king. At a higher level, women played kingship roles as evident in the oral tradition and records of female Obas in Oyo, Sabe, Ondo, and Ilesha. For example, traditional records reveal that a female regent, Orompoto, drove the Nupe out of Oyo. Hence, the early colonial period witnessed the political visibility of southern Nigerian women via pressure groups and titles within their communities.

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11 Ibid., pp.93 and 98.
However, with colonialism came so many changes in women’s autonomy and traditional positions. In cases where the British found women autonomous, they instituted a Victorian framework which circumscribed women’s power and in others where women had lost autonomy, they reinforced existing patriarchal traditions. For example, colonialism in northern Nigeria encouraged the expansion of Islamic ideals thereby reinforcing the exclusion of women from politics and other public affairs.

As public matters became dominated by men, women became more dependent and oppressed. Consequently, following independence, northern Nigerian women were not allowed to vote or participate in politics, and their access to education and other resources was severely restricted. On the other hand, in southern Nigeria, the British simply swept aside previous female political structures, replacing them with completely male structures and positions and perpetuating male dominance in erstwhile complementary systems.  

The colonial period occasioned the disappearance of several female titles. And as the titles disappeared, the privileges and functions of their holders became obsolete through colonial legislation. For example, the colonial government refused to recognize the Iyalode as the direct link between womenfolk and thus undermined her position. The Iyalode was removed from membership in the local council of elders and her long-standing function as supervisor of the market was terminated and entrusted to the local government council. As the titles dropped, women became less visible and less able to attract the attention of British administrators.

Post-Colonial Politics and Administration

For both northern and southern Nigerian women, the loss of traditional political status which began through islamization and continued during the colonial period, manifested in the exclusion and marginalization of women by both the civilian and military regimes in post-independent Nigeria.

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16. See Kamene Okonjo, "Reversing the Marginalization of the Invisible and Silent Majority: Women in Politics in Nigeria" in Women and
Although women aggressively resisted colonial marginalization through press campaigns, petitions, mass demonstrations, and riots, they achieved very little toward regaining pre-colonial autonomy. And as the British formed executive and legislative councils in preparation for decolonization, only Nigerian men were integrated.

Thus, from the beginning, territorial politics was an arena into which only men were admitted, and national politics became male-only terrain. Hence, while several Nigerian women attended the constitutional conferences preceding independence in London, only a handful have actively participated in post-independent politics. For socio-cultural reasons such as the disapproval of husbands, Margaret Ekpo reports, very few women could actually attend political party meetings and other similar rallies which were considered unsavory and solely men’s province.

The decade from 1950 - 1960 witnessed seven years of post-independent civilian politics but, not one woman was elected into any regional or national legislative bodies! Both southern parties: the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and Action Group (AG), attempted to correct this situation by appointing some women to various legislatures. These female appointees were relatively well-educated and organized and recruited both rural and urban women for their parties. The women took part in political rallies, fund-raisers, and demonstrations against British brutality.

Though the NCNC and AG were committed to the women’s suffrage, they could not shift the position of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) thus, in the 1959 federal elections, only southern women could vote and participate. Yet, very few women contested elections and only one woman was appointed to the senate and a second woman in 1964. Women were marginally represented in the federal and regional civil service, and there were
very few women senior servants. Though women could vote in and contest elections in the south, the unisexual nature of national politics did not allow their full participation in government.

In leadership, the only woman in Nigerian history who successfully organized a political party was Beatrice Adunni Oluwole of the Nigerian Commoner’s Liberal Party (NCLP) formed in 1954. The party had two aims: to oppose Nigerian independence in 1956 because Adunni believed the masses were not politically well-informed and to defend the views of the common person. Adunni was a colorful and charismatic politician who played a significant role in the independence movement from 1945 when she became a public figure. A champion of workers’ interests, Adunni emphasized that the commoner should be allowed to choose which form of government she preferred. She promised that her party would recognize the rights of the neglected and opposed self-serving politicians.

As a party leader, Adunni was firm and successful. Her party was well-organized though it lacked adequate financial resources. Nevertheless, it won a seat in the Western Region through a male candidate. However, an analysis of Adunni’s politics reveals a more ideological than pragmatic politician, though her opposition of Nigerian independence in 1956 could be deemed right on target in hindsight.

The question then is, had she been more pragmatic in her outlook, would she have had better success? Or did gender predetermine her actual potential of success in a male-dominated arena? To a large extent, we can

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22Because fewer women than men obtained tertiary education, or education specifically relevant to political or economic activity, their avenues to power were limited to political parties and governmental nominations. See Ibid.
23The party was in existence from 1954 to 1957. See O. E. Odinamadu, “The Role of Women in Our Community,” Lecture delivered in Awareness Forum Seminar, cited by Uchendu, p.47.
25Ibid., p.127.
26Adunni had eloquence, flamboyance, irrepressible energy, and a sense of the dramatic which made her very popular. Already an aberration, she adopted the habit of dressing in sackcloth and riding a white charger through town. See Ibid., p.128.
27Ibid., pp.129-30.
argue that gender did predetermine Adunni's lack of widespread success because it conditioned opponents reactions, voter response, and financing. Moreover, though Adunni's party holds the record for the most successful female-led party, it was not a feminist party. In other words, it did not espouse a feminist ideology nor did it seek to champion women's causes. In fact, the only thing particularly feminine about the party was Adunni.

Nigeria inherited the British parliamentary system of government, with a bicameral federal legislature and four regional legislatures which were contested by three major political parties and several minor ones. This system was maintained until 1989 when it was changed to a two-party system for civilian rule. Today, the military continues to maintain a bureaucratic centralism in which women are either not represented or marginally so.

The military's patriarchal structure limits the number of top female officers in the different forces. No woman has been appointed to the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the nation's highest ruling body under the military nor has any been appointed a minister. Because the military maintains a rigid patriarchal hierarchy, the highest ranking female officer is Major General Aderonke Kale, a two star General who commands a military hospital. Further, there are no women governors, despite the fact that there are quite a few senior women military and police officers.

On the other hand, political parties operating in 1979, like earlier parties, ignored the issue of women's representation. Some had separate women's wings but nominated far fewer than men. None fielded women as gubernatorial or presidential candidates. According to the parties, the electorates and male party members were prejudiced against women in government and would not vote for women candidates. Other excuses advanced include: the false assumption that women could not stand the rigors of politics, the campaigns, the machine control, and the physical violence.

28 Ibid., p.70.
29 The military first came into power in 1967, and have ruled the country for over twenty-eight of its thirty-seven years. Since independence, no woman has reached the executive or decision making body yet. See Ibid., p.87.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ogundipe-Leslie, p.174.
Similarly, socioeconomic factors such as: age distribution of society, rural/urban migration, marriage, fertility and child-rearing patterns, prevailing family organization, societal attitude towards female participation in the labor force, and educational patterns, contribute in varying degrees to the marginalization of Nigerian women in politics. In turn, problems resulting from marginalization and under-representation include: high levels of illiteracy/minimal education, underemployment, legal minor status, and second-class citizen treatment.

Tied into political issues are legal rights issues. Though Nigeria granted women equal rights and equal access to resources, a gender-biased mixture of colonial and customary law which deprives women of their constitutional and civil rights as citizens, are still in the books particularly in matters concerning land, marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Nigerian laws require a married woman to gain permission from her husband before applying for a passport, cannot post bond for suspects at police stations, and is exempt from tax rebates and holidays. In addition, the implementation of laws discriminates against women; for example, in their access to credit.

Further, wide gaps exist between laws, women’s knowledge and understanding of them, and enforcement of them by authorities. These gaps are particularly evident in rural areas where discriminatory beliefs and practices prevail and sometimes result in human rights violations against women. To compound the situation, the government is constrained in its efforts to curtail most abuses because of the rigid separation between the public and private spheres, and because of its avoidance of intervention in the jurisdiction of Sharia or customary law courts.

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37 Huston, p.47.
The State and Women's Political Participation

Taking its cue from the UN Decade for Women, General Ibrahim Babangida’s administration supported the promotion of women’s issues through the sponsorship of Better Life for Rural Dwellers Program (BLP) from 1987 to 1992. According to its brochure, BLP aimed at effectively mobilizing rural women and providing markets for their agricultural, arts, crafts, and other products through exhibitions, trade fairs, seminars, lectures, publications, loans, and machine grants.

The program, directed toward rural women, had urban organizers who were wives of state governors, and at its apex was the then first lady, Maryam Babangida. Eventually, BLP became no more than a propaganda tool of the military because of its political bias and marginalization of other organizations, societies, and institutions where women’s affairs had previously been handled. Nevertheless, BLP cast a much-needed spotlight on women’s issues.

From 1991 to 1993, the Babangida administration introduced a transition program to civilian rule. For women, this presented a unique opportunity to participate in politics, hence the aborted 1992 elections witnessed the most spectacular showing of women in Nigerian politics. The list of political aspirants included: Sarah Jubril as presidential aspirant under the umbrella of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Lizzy Ajufo vying for vice-presidency under the auspices of the National Republican Convention (NRC), and Tokunbo Dosunmu as governor of Lagos State under SDP. In the proscribed elections, Pamela Sadauki and Latifat Okunnu were elected deputy governors for Kaduna and Lagos states respectively. At the ward, council, state, and national levels, the list of women who contested and won elections multiplied to an all-time record. For example, in Oyo State alone, 130 women were elected into executive positions at the ward level, while 176 won their elections at the local and state government levels.

Throughout the country, women performed impressively. In Plateau and Lagos states, women floored tough male opponents to emerge as

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40 Usen, pp.32-3.
chairpersons of the NRC. Bose Oshinowo, 42, wealthy plastic manufacturer and wife of former speaker of the House of Assembly in Lagos State, defeated nine men to head the party, while Helen Gomwalk defeated six men. Victoria Aguiyi-Ironsi, performed a similar feat to become party vice-president in Imo State. At the national level, Onike Oshodi was elected ex-officio member of the NRC and was the only woman to win a party post at the national level.41

During the same period, many women emerged as local government councilors in different parts of the country including the Muslim North where two women became councilors in Kano State. In addition, women led the NRC in Lagos, Plateau, and Benue.42 Several explanations have been proffered for the unprecedented influx of women into politics in 1992 including: MAMSER, the government’s mass mobilization outfit, mobilization efforts of women’s organizations such as the National Council of Women’s Societies (NCWS), the BLP, and the establishment of the NCW.43

In spite of their progress, several challenges still remain. Many women are turned off by the violence, political insults, thuggery, and other ‘murky practices’ which characterize Nigerian politics.44 In addition, family status (presence of young children), money, religion, and financial insufficiency, bar women’s widespread participation.45 Opponents of women’s political participation tirelessly emphasize how women are neglecting their roles as wives and mothers to chase after public glamour thereby contributing to the degradation of Nigerian society.

Women’s Political Initiatives

When not actively involved in politics, women are members of civic organizations which may also act as springboards for political careers. Hundreds of formal and informal women’s associations flourish in post-independent Nigeria, each drawing attention to the problems and needs of women. Some are autonomous bodies such as NCWS, while others are female wings of larger organizations such as Society of Women Accountants of

41Ibid., p.33.
43Olarembi Elizabeth Adiukwu in interview with Usen, p.33.
44Usen, p.35.
45Uchendu, p.93.
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Nigeria (SWAN). Others include: Women in Nigeria (WIN), the Nigerian Association of University Women (NAUW), and various service organizations such as the Lionesses, Inner Wheel, and the Soroptimists.

Urban women’s groups reflect western influences. Typically, these groups are dominated by the middle-class and their views and interests often diverge widely from those of the poor. They support social welfare activities such as literacy campaigns, seminars, symposiums, and so on. In order not to offend the male establishment, they tend to be anti-feminist and to promote their own interests in securing greater access to their husband’s income, seek more advantageous marriage and divorce laws, and promote education in the domestic arts, beauty, and fashion. Consequently, they are limited in addressing the plight of poor urban or rural women.

Unlike instituted organizations, grassroots self-help groups, founded by poor rural women, provide vital economic assistance. They often assist in obtaining credit for farming or business ventures, and provide other forms of mutual assistance to members such as child care and maternity services. Reciprocal service is a common basis for solidarity. Groups such as the Nigerian Market Women’s Association regulate trading practices, perform voluntary community work such as construction of roads, schools, and health clinics, and stabilize prices among themselves using systems with built-in penalties.

Also, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are founded with explicit goals addressing development issues. For example, the Lagos State Women’s Association for Home Gardening and Farming concentrates on increasing food production and encouraging women to grow food for consumption. Another NGO, the All Nigerian Women’s Association led by Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, acts as a pressure group which brings together subgroups of women such as the elite and the market women, to dialogue and improve the conditions of women.

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48 April A. Gordon, pp.212-3.
50 Lillian Trager and Clara Osinulu, “New Women’s Organizations in Nigeria: One Response to Structural Adjustment” in Structural
Analysis and Conclusions

Though women's voluntary associations are outstanding in wielding political clout from an economic or mass base, their organizations do not carry the weight of men's. Besides an obvious gender bias, these associations are limited in their effectiveness because of their isolation from mainstream development activity, lack of sufficient linkages between groups, and marginalization from government administration. For groups such as market women's associations which utilize mass mobilization tactics such as marches and protests to gain government recognition, factors determining the success or failure of their protests include: type of government (protests seem to work better under a civilian than a military regime), personality of the governor (pacifists tend to be more sympathetic to women's issues), and the gravity of the situation.

Outside of protest marches and riots, women attempt in various ways to improve their political situation. Women in non-elective offices such as Obas' wives or mothers and first ladies, infuse an interesting dynamism to the advancement of women's issues. Prior to Maryam Babangida's ascension to the position of first lady, the office was non-political and the occupant was restricted to cutting tapes at opening ceremonies and greeting the first baby of the year. However, during her husband's tenure from 1985 to 1993, Mrs. Babangida established the BLP, National Commission for Women (NCW), and a host of other programs.

As expected, her pro-active attitude sparked controversy and provoked intense criticism. In March 1990, Gani Fawehinmi sued the first lady. In his claim, he sought an account of the public funds spent on BLP. Fawehinmi also demanded that the first couple declare their sources of funding, and proclaimed that Mrs. Babangida had no constitutional authority to implement BLP.
to implement BLP. Maryam Babangida’s aggressive use of the first lady’s office raises questions of whether the end justifies the means in terms of women using non-constitutional power to attain laudable ends. It also raises the issue of whether the dual-sex government of pre-colonial times can be transferred to a modern political-economy. At another level, the establishment of the women’s commission raises the concern that it would marginalize gender issues and absolve other ministries of their responsibility to work toward gender equity. Instead, a “total package” would include a women’s ministry supported by gender desks in other ministries.

Perhaps the unequal participation of women in Nigerian government has contributed to its illegitimacy in the eyes of the public, particularly since most traditional societies had a bisexual structure of government contrary to the unisexual system instituted following colonialism. Because women form a majority of the poor, their involvement in government will help bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural populace, as well as between leadership and the polity.

The inclusion of women, enhances grassroots participation in politics and de-emphasizes the top-down approach to policy-making by taking cognizance of the masses. Representation in government implies that decision makers will take into consideration the impact of policies on women, their families and the nation as a whole. Women in government may ensure that short and medium term policies do not impact their communities negatively but rather, are consistent with long-term objectives of equality in the society.

Women demonstrate perhaps more starkly than other social groups, the broad strokes of sociopolitical conflict in contemporary Africa: formal or informal, official or off-the-record, manipulative, agitative, or repressive, hegemonic or escapist. Perhaps, their vulnerability makes them better qualified to be more equitable leaders. Several women leaders even suggest that given the opportunity, women would make better leaders. As Titi
Ajanaku, first elected woman municipal council chairperson (elected in Abeokuta, Ogun State in 1988), stated, "women in politics have a greater sense of purpose and are by far less corrupt." However, others are more averse to female leadership. For example, the Amirah, the leader of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), stated, "a woman should not be at the apex; a man should always be the head."

Judith Van Allen argues that:

African women today, are not for the most part in politics. More accurately, they are between politics. Those who had opportunities for political power and autonomy suffered the impact of colonialism and what westerners call modernization. But, they have not gained power in modern political institutions, nor autonomy in modern urban social and economic life.

In actuality, it appears that Nigerian women’s “political activity” or their efforts to influence the allocation of resources and values in their communities rely more heavily on appeals to leadership than their own participation in that leadership in order to secure favorable government policies. From the foregoing, Nigerian women’s political power appear to be mainly associational power derived from associating with powerful men. For example, the titles “Obas’ wife or mother,” first lady, or “cash madam” suggest women’s association with powerful men who may be kings, presidents, or government officials but, does not confer any real authority on women. Because of the male territoriality of Nigerian politics, women have to beg permission to enter this domain and they remain within defined areas.

Invariably, those women who do get into government are no better than their male counterparts and they maintain the status quo. Variables which limit women’s effectiveness in government include: a high level of tokenism

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58 Usen, p.35.
which produces a diffusion of power, male-dominated patronage, relational avenues of success, and scapegoatism. Where women have sought power themselves, they encounter extensive backlash and very little success. Even intra-gender, women's political activity reveals class, religious, and socio-cultural stratification which may result from a weakness in female collective or feminist consciousness.

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