

Trends in Igbo Women Participation in Politics Since 1960

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Abstract: This paper discussed the trends in Igbo women participation in politics since 1960. It examined the level of Igbo women participation both at state and national levels. The work revealed that women participation in politics increased after independence in 1960. The factors that induced this high level of political participation include education, International Declarations on Women Issues as Right, financial independence, quota system, godfatherism, civil society, to mention but a few. The paper recommended the revision of legislations to ensure increased women participation in politics and protection of women against domestic and electoral violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women in traditional Igbo society played and are still playing outstanding economic and political roles. Right from time, Igbo men recognized women's rights as partners in the administration of the Igbo society, hence the dual sex political system¹. However, with the advent of colonialism and its aftermath, women were excluded from the structures of state that determined political and legislative priorities. But with the attainment of independence in 1960, the number of women occupying elected and appointed positions in government, politics and the labour unions has increased despite some inhibitions like male chauvinism and electoral violence.

Nigeria now witnesses a revolutionary struggle to increase women's political participation. This revolution has created a new awareness that women should have a role to play in the Nigerian political arena, which is their constitutional right. Ojiakor,² observed that the awakening to self-realization precipitated in various movements that has led to the present recognition that women's rights are human rights. In view of the foregoing, therefore, the successive Nigerian governments have demonstrated an appreciable level of awareness and commitment to redressing the inadequate representation of women in politics, public life and socio-economic spheres in the country.

For example, in 1986 professor Grace Alele – Williams of the University of Benin was appointed as the first woman Vice-chancellor. Major General Babangida defended this appointment in his speech on his visit to the University of Benin. He said, "let it be known that here in Benin I believe we have started what appear to be a silent revolution to bring women directly into the mainstream of the government and administration of higher institution³. Thus, the Babangida regime regarded the emancipation of women as part of its crusade to guarantee equal opportunities for all, irrespective of sex, class, religion or ethnicity". The new trends in women's political participation have been aided by numerous factors. The participation of Igbo women in politics should be viewed in the context of whether in Africa, women like their male counterparts are political animals or not, and whether Igbo women are keen to establish political equality with their male counterparts or not.

This paper examines the trend in Igbo women's political participation in Nigeria since 1960. Some of the factors that have contributed to the trend will be discussed. More importantly the inhibitions to women in political participation will be examined and finally draw recommendation to improve Igbo women's political participation.

Igbo Women in Leadership Positions

The trend in women's political participation in Nigeria has manifested in the increase in the number of women in both elected, appointed and labour union posts. Women's participation in politics is important for improved governance in Nigeria. Assessing the trend of Igbo women in the political arena cannot be separated from the consideration of the entire political situation in Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been

governed by military dictatorship which were largely male dominated. Nigerian women were not in the military hierarchy and so could not be members of the highest legislative and executive bodies in the various military ruling council.

Since the return of democratic rule in 1999 the position of women has improved though slightly. Igbo women have held and still hold positions typically regarded as male preserves as indicated below. In the 1961 Regional elections, Hon. Margaret U. Ekpo (NCNC Aba Urban North Constituency) and Hon. Janet Mokelu (NCNC Enugu South East Constituency),⁴ were elected members of the Eastern Regional House of Assembly. Both women contributed immensely to the parliamentary debates in the Eastern House of Assembly.

Between 1961 – 1966, five Igbo women were among the official members of the 30 – man Executive committee of the Eastern Regional House of Assembly. Four were on the platform of National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon. These includes: M.U. Ekpo, Felicia Obua, M. U. Nzimiro, J.M. Ededeu while in the Democratic Party of Nigeria and Cameroon (NPNC), N. Nwogu⁵ was appointed as an official member among an eight – man executive committee. Between 1967 –1970 Nigeria fought a civil war. The political activities were geared towards the survival of Nigeria and Igbo women represented their individual and collective involvement in the wartime politics in Nigeria.

1970 – 1999, was a very long period of military rule as stated earlier. The military interregnum was marked by the dominance of an all-male military rule in which women were hardly represented. However, a number of internal and external developments have combined to inspire events, which increased women’s political awareness. Successive military governments were signatories to international declarations on the issues of women rights which includes:

- (1) Nairobi Forward – looking strategies (1985).
- (2) Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1987 - 1993).
- (3) Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995),⁶

With these, the trend in women political participation witnessed sharp improvement over previous period in the appointive positions. Luka,⁷ observed that, the trend of women’s political participation witnessed an increased of women appointments as ministers, permanent secretaries, advisers and special assistants to the president and vice president respectively. In line with this, there is an increase in Igbo women political participation in both appointive and elective position into National Assembly, State Assembly and Local Government Councils.

The Table below shows some of the notable women.

S/N	NAMES	APPOINTMENTS WITH DATES	ELECTIVE POSITIONS WITH DATES	PARTY	TIERS OF GOVERNMENT
1	Justina C. Eze	-	Member, House of Rep. Uzo-Uwani Constituency 1979	NPP	Federal
		Member, National Executive Committee of the (NRC) 1992 – 1994	-	NRC	Federal
		Nigerian Ambassador to Guinea Bissau, 1999	-	-	Federal
2	V. O. Nnaji	-	Isu Constituency House of Assembly 1979	NPP	State
3	N.V. Emodi	-	Onitsha North West House of Assembly 1979	NPP	State
4	Victoria A. Akanwa	-	Asa Constituency 1979	NPP	State
		Commissioner for Social Welfare 1983	-	NPP	State
5	Keziah Asinobi	Minister for Internal Affairs 1983	-	-	Federal
6	Helen Okafor	Federal Electoral Commission	-	-	Federal
7	Ngozi Nwankwo	-	Member, Constituent Assembly 1988 - 1989	-	Abuja

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		Director of Finance, Enugu State Broadcasting service 1990 – 1996	-	-	State
		Acting Accountant General, Ebonyi State January – September 1997	-	-	State
9	Ngozi Franca Ogba`	-	Councillor, Ishielu Local Government Area, 1991 – 1992	NRC	L.G.A
10	Bridget Nwajike	-	Member, Constituency Isiala Ngwa, House of Assembly 1992	NRC	State
11	Miriam Ikejiani Clerk	Commissioner Caretaker Chairman 1987 – 1989	-	SDP	State
		Minister for State 1999	-	-	Abuja
12	Mane – Theresa Akonobi	Federal Capital Territory Chairperson, Better life programe 1987	-	-	Abuja
13	Lady France Oje	Member, Abia State Development Committee that prepared the blue print for the development of Abia state 1991	-	-	State
14	Anthonia Eze	-	Member, Aniocha Constituency House of Assembly 1993	NRC	State
15	Lady Franca Mgbada	Sole Administrator Abakaliki Local Government Area 1993	-	SDP	State
16	Adeline Idike	Chairman, Social Democratic Party, Enugu State 1992 – 93	-	SDP	State
		Commissioner for Information and Culture, Ebonyi State 1996 – 1999	-	-	State
		Member, Miriam Abacha African Peace Mission Committee 1995	-	-	Federal
		Chairman, Ebonyi state independent Electoral Commission 2001 - 2011	-	-	State
17	Kema Chikwe	Minister for Transport and Later Aviation 1999	-	-	Federal
18	Obiageli Ezekwesili	Minister for Education 1999	-	-	Federal
19	Grace Ogwuche	Minister for Agriculture and Water Resource 1999	-	-	Federal
20	Cecilia Akanu	Commissioner for Women Affairs (Ebonyi) 1999	-	PDP	State
21	Fedelia Ngeze	Minister for Aviation 2010	-	-	Federal
22	Dora Akunyili	Director General NAFDAC 2001-2008 Minister for Information	-	-	Federal Federal

		and Communication 2008-2010			
23	Diezani Alison Madueke	Minister For Petroleum Resources 2010	-	-	Federal
24	Stella Oduah	Minister for Aviation 2013	-	-	Federal
25	Ngozi Okonjo- Iweala	Minister for Finance 2013	-	-	Federal
26	Viola Onwuliri	Minister for Foreign Affairs 2013	-	-	Federal
27	Joy Emordi	Special adviser to Ex- President Goodluck on Senate Matters. 2013	Senator Representing Anambra North 2012	APGA	Federal

II. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR ACCELERATED TREND OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

No single factor holds the key to the positive and accelerated trend in contemporary women political participation. A number of internal and external developments have combined to inspire events bringing about the positive change.

1. International Declarations on Women Issues as Right:

Successive Nigerian governments were signatories to international declarations on women issues as right. With these, women formed various movement groups which have been of much importance as they have lobbied for women's inclusion in the political leadership of their country. Women in many African Countries Nigeria inclusive have been able to run for public offices in growing number and have reached an average of 20.4 percent of seats in national assemblies,⁸ in Africa as a whole.

2. Financial Independence:

The changing economic and social conditions brought about by Christianity, colonialism, education, industrialization, migration, and urbanization have significantly transformed the political position of Nigerian women. Western education was a powerful corollary of Christianity.⁹ As more women acquired primary, secondary and tertiary education, the education industry became the key to their emancipation from the hitherto traditional bonds. Education attainment and economic independence propelled Nigerian women to reject and challenged made dominance of the public shares of paid employment and political participation in governance.

3. The Quota System:

The positive trend in women's political participation in Nigeria can also be attributed to the efforts made by government and non-governmental organizations towards attainment of the mandated 35% affirmative action's. Some state governments such as Ebonyi State allocate a certain percentage of the posts to women. Examples, three chairmanship position were allotted to women out of the 13 chairmanship seats. The local government chapter of the party (PDP) has eleven (11) women as secretaries while two (2) were reserved for men.

Again, the Vice Chairman of all the local government councils in Ebonyi State are women. This then implies that men now understand the essence and need for women participation in politics. To further buttress this fact, the people's democratic party (PDP) has also introduced a waiver of the mandatory registration or nomination fees for women aspiring to any elective post on the party's platform. At the same time, the platform act suggested that political parties should consider examining the party structure and procedures to remove all forms of barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against women from being part of the party's decision making body¹⁰.

4. god Fatherism:

This is a form of political situation in which an influential member of a party assists another person to secure a leadership position. Some Igbo women get sponsored and nominated by already established political figures who influences decisions in their various parties. These women who are either mistresses to the politicians or those who may have worked assiduously during campaign are appointed or elected to political position.

5. Civil Society:

Women's political participation has also been enhanced by the growing drive by the civil society in fostering women's participation in leadership. The civil society has been instrumental in creating awareness of women's right. Through the civil society, practices that violate women's rights have been challenged. They have assisted in building social acceptance of women's political participation.

III. INHIBITIONS TO IGBO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA.

An analysis of political participation around the globe shows that certain factors impede individuals participation in politics. Some of these factors that affect Igbo women include;

Socio-Economic Factor:

This is a determinant of individual political participation. Ojiakor,¹¹ observed that the discriminatory practices against women in the area of education, especially during colonial period and immediately after independence in Nigeria, served to ensure that only men were equipped with the kind of educational skills and qualifications requisite for high level managerial roles in public life.

Patriarchal and Religious Beliefs:

Igbo women participation in Nigerian politics has not had much transformative impact on the subtle patriarchal culture and practices in Igbo land. Tradition and culture have tended to deny women effective participation in public life and decision-making. In the words of Tripp;¹²

The prohibition cultural attribute against women's involvement persist among both men and women. These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views.

Political Violence:

This is one of the factors that has resulted to the low level of Igbo Women political participation. Many political activities are characterized by violence, thuggery, high level of intimidation and killings. These discourages women from political participation. It is therefore of paramount importance to checkmate political violence before and after elections so that women who are interested can fully participate in elections.

Gender Inequality:

Gender inequality is experienced by women and is manifested in a almost all aspects of human endeavour in Nigeria. Cultural and religious beliefs tend to contribute largely to Igbo women's gender discrimination and low status. Some of these beliefs have been practiced for so long that they are embedded in the societal perception almost as the norms such that the laws of the land and international instruments, which protect rights of women, are flagrantly infringed in the guise of these age-long cultural and religious beliefs¹³.

Assumptions:

Afigbo note the following assumptions as impediments to Igbo women political participation;

- i. Well mannered and God fearing women are chaste and discreet.
- ii. Good women do not and should not seek to usurp men's "God Given" roles and responsibilities
- iii. A women's place is in the home where she support both her husband and children.

Women are naturally ill-endowed with the intellectual and managerial skill required for decision-making in public life.¹⁴ Based these assumptions Igbo women avoid politics in other not to be labeled deviants.

Campaign Strategies:

Kellow observed that "political inexperience makes it much harder for women to access existing power structures and how to influence them".¹⁵ Igbo women are not left out as they need these experiences to run effective constituency campaigns such that they can compete with established men in the communities they live in.

Recommendation

- There is need for the revision of legislations to protect women from abuse.
- Political violence should be addressed through sustained law reforms; capacity enforcement agencies, public awareness campaigns against violence before and after elections.
- Financial independence through women empowerment.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the trend in Igbo women participation in politics has improved since the 1960s owing to the impact of internally and externally induced changes. The externally induced changes especially education, have been more revolutionary. The recognition of women's rights and the series of actions by the united nations to improve the lot of women world-wide is a big gain. This is a positive development given that increasing number of women in politics is a means of eradicating the structural foundations of inequality between men and women. However, there is still a huge gap in spite of the changes. Therefore there is need to revolutionize the political arena.

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