

Non – Governmental Organizations and Women Political Participation in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Women political participation in Nigeria has been peripheral. This is despite arguments by some scholars that women like men are free to take active part in politics. Men through maintaining cultural stereotypes and socialization processes have confined women to the private spheres while they predominate in the public sphere. The consequence is that women shy away from operating in the public sphere including in politics. This is despite government's commitment towards redressing gender inequality in Nigerian politics. The wide disparity between men and women in electoral offices has contumaciously remained apparent. However, some Non -Governmental Organizations have endeavored to contribute their own quota towards improvement of women political participation. This study therefore examined the role of NGOs in enhancing women political participation. The study explored both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were obtained through key informant interviews from the operators of these NGOs and interviews of beneficiaries of their services. It had a sample size of 30. Akure, the capital of Ondo state in Nigeria was purposively selected as a case study state because most of the NGOs are active there being the capital of Ondo State. Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) and National Council of Women Society (NCWS) were purposively selected. This is because these two NGOs are very prominent in Akure, Ondo State. This study concludes that NGOs have impacted positively on women political participation and it recommends that NGOs should devise means of changing their leaders or management. The founder should not continue to be the leader who takes major decision until he/she dies. This is because this may not encourage innovative new ideas to be injected into the organization. NGOs should also allow people in the rural areas to feel their impact instead of operating mostly in the urban areas.

Keywords: Political Participation, Democracy, Gender, Non - Governmental Organizations, Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The importance of political participation to democracy has beam searchlight on women and democratization not only in Nigeria but in the world over. Popular participation encourages cooperation and sense of belonging. It also reduces conflict, disaffection and disunity (Oyelami, Magbagbeola and Adedipe 2012). A country like Nigeria cannot be said to have fully democratized without active participation of women who constitute about 50% of the population. When men and women are given equal privilege to participate in decision making, it is to a great extent accepted as very crucial for sustainable development. When a good proportion of the population is not given equal opportunity to participate in governance, it is no longer democracy but oligarchy or other such aberrations.

Women empowerment is now deduced as a development strategy, no wonder it continues to predominate global treaties, covenants and declarations. And this has led to the emergence of some concepts to incorporate women in development. Such concepts include Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender and Development (GAD) and Gender in Development (GID) among others. The Millennium Development goals (MDGs) signed and adopted by 189 United Nations member states in 2000 has women empowerment as part of their development strategy. Among the eight Millennium Development Goals, goal 3 which is to promote gender equality and empower women and goal 5 which is improvement of maternal health specifically target women empowerment (theguardian, March 26th, 2015). This is not unconnected to the fact that women are perceived as a very vital group in the development of any nation.

Apart from their numerical strength, they have the capability to quicken social, economic and political development and consequently change the society to a better one. In modern day Nigeria, women play manifold roles within the family, community and the society at large but gender discrimination in the public sphere

continue to stand in between. Nigerian government has noted that women empowerment and development of the country is inextricably linked. Since the return of democracy in 1999, government has introduced some programs that partly target women. Such programs include National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004 which targets among other things reduction of poverty and maternal mortality and also improvement of literacy rate especially among girls (Okereke, 2012). Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) were established in 2000 and 2001 respectively. They were charged with the mandate among other things to eliminate feminized poverty (Nikkah 2008).

Government also specifically introduced programs to empower and encourage women in politics such as National Policy on Women which was adopted and passed into law to among other things, eliminate all discriminatory practices against women in politics and private sectors of the economy and also create conditions of employment that are conducive to women's special roles in reproduction and community management (Olubunmi, 2010, Fatile, Akhape, Igbokwe and Oteh 2013). National Gender Policy was introduced on 15th August, 2008, to eradicate unequal gender power relations in the workplace and economy. It also aims to increase the participation of women in leadership and decision making positions and to ensure that there is a gender perspective in every sector of development (Olubunmi 2010).

Also, the Nigerian Women Trust Fund was inaugurated on 24th March, 2011 in Abuja by the Ministry of Women and Social Development under Dr. Goodluck Jonathan's regime (Udodinma 2013). The Program provided N100 million trust fund to help offset the campaign cost of about 230 female aspirants irrespective of their political parties. The then First Lady, Mrs. Jonathan introduced a program which she called Women for Change Initiatives. It's main objective was to mobilize support for women and to clamor for 30% quota guaranteed by the affirmative action policy (Nelson 2012). These programs have been described as tokenism because they did not transform to improvement in the number of women contesting for elective positions. The performance of women in elections in Nigeria has been appalling and alarming since Nigeria's independence in 1960. The last three elections in the country, the percentage of women that won elective position was also very low. In 2007, in the House of Representatives, women occupied 27 seats out of 360 seats representing 7.5%. In 2011, Women got 19 seats out of 360 seats representing 5.3%. In 2015, women got 15 seats out of 360 seats, representing 4.1%.

In the Senate, in 2007, women got 9 out of 109 seats representing 6.4% (Odi 2012). In 2011, there were seven female senators representing 6.4% (Odi, 2012). In 2015, there were 8 female senators out of 109 members representing 7.3% (*Daily Trust*, June 6 2015). The above analysis shows that women participation in governance through election has been minimal. Abiola (2003) argues that women are marginalized politically and that it is only when a good number of women hold public offices can they begin to efficiently address problems facing them. A number of reasons have been responsible for women poor performance and participation in elections. Some of the reasons include thuggery, financial constraints, lack of education, patriarchy, political violence, social and cultural factors as well as godfatherism (Ebegbulem 2012).

Globally, 18 countries elected female Presidents between 2005 and 2016. These countries were Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Denmark, Bangladesh, Iceland, Trinidad and Tobago, Thailand, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Jamaica, Slovenia, San Marino, Slovakia, Kosovo, South Korea, Liberia and Malawi. Nigeria has never elected a female president or Governor. It was by circumstance that a woman became Acting Governor briefly when the Governor of Anambra state, Peter Obi, was impeached. Odi (2012) observes that the low number of women elected into public office in Nigeria shows the slow level of change or decline in the country's legislative, political and social systems.

Non- Governmental Organizations in Nigeria which hitherto concentrated much effort in women economic empowerment have also incorporated women political empowerment in their goals. This is because

of the realization that women economic empowerment alone cannot sufficiently emancipate women from poverty and uplift them from their socio-cultural inhibitions. Kakunmi and Kotte (2011) define NGOs as a non-profit making agency put together by people with the same vision, who are committed to the uplifting of the poor, marginalized, disadvantaged, downtrodden and the needy. Vikal (1997) submits that NGOs are non-profit, free will citizens group, which are organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good.

This work is an attempt to unravel the strategies embarked by NGOs that are aimed at enhancing women political empowerment. It also explained the challenges faced by these NGOs. The study also discussed problems militating against women political participation and possible ways of solving them as well as ways of repositioning these NGOs to be of greater benefit to the country. The study explored both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary data were obtained through key informant interviews from the operators of these NGO's and interviews of beneficiaries of their services. It had a sample size of 30. Akure, the capital of Ondo state in Nigeria was purposively selected as a case study state because most of the NGO's are active there being the capital city of Ondo State. Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) and National Council of Women Society (NCWS) were purposively selected. This is because these two NGOs are very prominent in Akure, Ondo State. Essentially, the strength of the analysis depends on descriptive interpretation, critical argumentation and narrative report.

Study Area

Akure is the capital of Ondo state. Ondo state is one of the six states in the South-West geopolitical zone. The state is popularly known as The Sunshine State and was created on 3rd February, 1976. The state has 19 local government and a land mass of 14789sqkm. It lies geographically on the tropical belt and is bordered in the north by Ekiti and Kogi states; East by Edo state; West by Oyo and Ogun and in the South by the Atlantic Ocean (Adesoji 2008).

Overview of the Selected NGOs

Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) is an association founded in Akure, the capital of Ondo state in Nigeria under a woman social worker chief Mrs. Bisi Ogunleye. COWAN alongside Farmers Development Union (FADU) and Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO) are Pioneer NGOs in Nigeria (Ogunleye 2005). The association was established in 1982 as a response to the perceived marginalization of womenfolk and condition of abject poverty especially in the rural communities. Chief Mrs. Bisi Ogunleye, a then Civil Servant in the State, started helping women to organize themselves by presenting her one month salary to a group of rural women as a loan so that they could start their own businesses. When the loans were repaid, she reinvested it in other groups. COWAN was founded in 1982 with six cooperative groups of 150 members. Now COWAN has grown to over 1400 groups and over 31,000 active members across the country (Ogunleye, 2005). COWAN has three schemes that are aimed at women empowerment, they are; the COWAN African Traditional Responsive Banking (ATRB), COWAN Grass Root Health Insurance Scheme and Women Political Participation and Development Fund (WOPOPADEF). WOPOPADEF was specially designed to encourage grass roots women mobilization for active political participation. COWAN has branches in about 20 states.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN SOCIETIES (NCWS)

NCWS was created as an instrument to fight for the empowerment of women in Nigeria. NCWS was founded in Lagos, Nigeria in March 1958 on the premises of the United States Information Service office on Catholic Mission Street (NCWS Handbook, 1999, NCWS Communique, 1961). It was modified in Benin 1974, in Calabar 1980, in Makurdi 1982, in Kano 1984, in Abuja 1988, in Enugu 1990, in Abuja 1999 and further

amended and adopted in Lafia 2005 (NCWS Handbook, 1999). NCWS is an amalgamation of women's organisations, philanthropic, religious, cultural and professional. Individuals are also allowed to join the membership of NCWS. NCWS has branches in almost all the states in Nigeria including Akure. Affiliate members of NCWS include:

- Association of Professional Women Bankers
- International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA)
- Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)
- Zonta International
- The Nigeria Guides Association
- Ward Women's Vanguard
- Medical Women's Association
- Amata Progressive Women's League
- Ibibio Women's Co – Operative Societies
- Muslim Mother's Association

DISCUSSION

This section will deal with the discussion from the key informant interviews and interview of beneficiaries of their programs.

Strategies embarked by these NGOs to empower women politically

COWAN: Had this to say: They have many strategies of empowering women. They have a program which they tagged "Democracy and Governance". Through this program, they mobilize and sensitize women to vote. They even sponsor female politicians; they have a forum where they meet. They have another program which they ask women to form 100 working groups. If any woman is aspiring for any political office, it is a matter of talking to working groups. If a woman gets 30 working groups to support her, the woman is already sure of 300,000 votes from COWAN. According to them, they also sponsor female politicians. They give them money to make posters and for logistics. They also help them to canvass for votes. They recalled of a woman that told them that she is interested in contesting for chairmanship position of a local government. According to them, even before election, they distributed loans to that local government through the woman. So people from the local government thought that the loan they received was from the female aspirant. They also recalled of how a male aspirant brought bags of rice, salt and tomatoes to share to women so that he can get their votes. According to them, the women gathered everything together and gave the man back. The women inquired from the man where he had been all this while. And that because he wants their vote, that is why he bought things for them. That they will vote for the woman who has been giving them loans before election year. According to them, WOPOPADEF is one of the various products of COWAN that specifically target women empowerment. The model is designed to sensitize the womenfolk and provide a platform to bridge the wide gap of unequal representation between women and their men counterparts on the political scene. COWAN mobilization strategy revolves around a home grown political awareness model tagged "The One hundred-women working Group" in trust. In each local government geopolitical set-up, there are ten electoral wards. COWAN ensures that a member from each ward is involved in co-coordinating ten other members. The One hundred-Women Working Group so identified becomes the arrow heads for reaching out to others in tens. The scheme, according to them, which started in 1997 in Ondo state has 1,300 active members. Each member contributes a token sum of ₦10.00 per day into a trust fund for economic empowerment and political expediencies. The financial commitment of these grass root women provided a pool of fund of ₦13, 000.00 daily, N390, 000.00 monthly and ₦4, 680,000.00 in a year. Any financial member has equal access to credit facility from the fund. At inception, what appears as a meager ₦500.00 loan actually transformed some petty traders' businesses to the extent that repayment records were not only 100% but repayments were made even before due dates. The perceived "meager" or "token" fund is apparently the sine-qua-non for their loyalty,

commitment and unflinching support for any woman political aspirant that receives the blessings of COWAN-WOPOPADEF.

According to them, though the fifty-fifty target of representation ratio between men and women into political offices is yet to be achieved, they made impacts during the 1999 elections in the country. Out of the twenty four COWAN-WOPOPADEF supported women aspirants, sixteen were elected. Also in 2003 general election, out of forty eight aspirants supported by COWAN thirty six (36) won elections into various offices including the House of Representative. The figure represents 79% and 75% respectively. Elaborating further, they opine that towards 2011 election, COWAN was at the vanguard of advocacy for 50 – 50 gender participation in electoral offices. They organized a civic networking forum for stakeholders/women politicians, activists and elected officials to dialogue on the best way to achieve 50 – 50 ratio and strategize on improving women's nomination to political offices. Also, according to them, through this program, the Executive Director of COWAN has gone to the national assembly to speak of the essence of men and women sharing governance on 50-50 basis. Another respondent avers that COWAN also trained 40 women aspirants for the positions of Chair persons and Councilor's portfolio in various Councils in Nigeria. Of the 40 women aspirants, 28 received 50,000 as a loan to support their campaign. 19 of them were successful at the polls, consisting of 3 Chairmen and 16 Councilors.

National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) has this to say, that they are umbrella body of women organizations. They have about 300 women groups under them. According to them, most times they work with Ministry of Women Affairs. They engage in advocacy programmes, they organize seminars to encourage women to take active part in politics. They lobby the national assembly to sign laws that they feel will empower women. For instance, according to them, they are lobbying for the office of the First Lady to be recognized constitutionally. During the constitution review exercise, NCWS, according to them made some recommendations which they feel will empower women which they submitted to law makers. They also protested when there was a call to remove two female Ministers, who were Mrs. Dieziani Allison Madueke and Mrs Stella Oduah.. They argued that there is a gang up against women to remove women in governance. They have also held several meetings with the law makers urging them to domesticate CEDAW i.e (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Though the law makers, especially the then Senate President, Mr David Mark, said that he is not comfortable with some provisions of the CEDAW document. He mentioned some rights in CEDAW document, which he said is against the custom of the Nigerian State. NCWS, according to them, have not given up. They will still get the law makers to sign the bill. Elaborating further, they aver that one of the strategies of NCWS to encourage women in development processes including politics has always been to lobby policy makers to take decisions that will favor women. According to them, on June 21st 2012, the president of National Council of Women's Societies Nigeria Chief (Mrs.) Nkechi Okemini presented a Memorandum to the Senate Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution during a High level advocacy, which took place at the Senate Meeting Room, National Assembly Complex in Abuja. The memorandum, according to them, seeks to incorporate the issues of gender equality and women's rights into the 1999 Constitution. Elaborating further, they opine that the initiative was in response to a call by the Senate for all concerned interest groups to submit suggestions that could improve the 1999 Constitution. UN Women, Action Aid and other partners provided technical and financial support to NCWS. Another respondent opines that, towards 2003 election, African Strategic Peace Research Group in partnership with Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) established a forum on May 2003 where prominent Nigerians were meant to speak on the need to shun violence during the election. Chief Mrs Bolarie Ketebu, the then Chairperson of NCWS chaired the second and fourth session. She enlightened women on the need to embrace peace because according to her women suffer more in times of conflict.

Effectiveness/ Success of NGOs programmes

A respondent explained that COWAN has 320,000 members and they encourage their members to save N20 everyday which they set aside to give to women aspirants for political offices. Explaining further, she avers that it was based on their Executive Director's advice that Federal Government set aside some money for female aspirants. According to her, the Federal Government called the fund Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE). The aim of the fund is to give financial assistance to female aspirants. Another respondent from COWAN opines that because of their successes, NAPEP partnered with them, other NGOs want to partner with them and that even CBN refer people to them. A respondent from NCWS opines that NCWS has opposed government policies that are not in tandem with women political advancement. She cited the example of a protest held by NCWS on November 19th 2013. They protested against selective pulling out of women in appointive position. According to her, this is due to the sack of the aviation minister, Mrs Stella Oduah which they see as a move against women. They also expressed their worry over the subtle removal of the 33% affirmative action given to women by the administration. NCWS also co - hosted a rally with the then First Lady Dame Patience Jonathan on September, 19 2013. The rally was tagged Nigerian Women Rally for Peace and Empowerment. The rally reportedly had about 15,000 women from different parts of the country. Women were enlightened on the need to be actively involved in politics.

Problems/ Challenges of NGOs

Many of the Key informants were keen to mention the challenges of NGOs. Most of the respondents mentioned lack of funds. According to them, without money NGOs cannot perform effectively and efficiently. Explaining further, they opine that Government's subvention is too meager and is irregular too. And that due to economic recession, donor agencies have been reluctant to release funds like before. Some of the discussants mentioned lack of volunteers as one of their challenges. According to them, people do not volunteer to work for NGOs anymore. Elaborating further, they opine that unlike the first set of NGOs, Red Cross which did very well using volunteers who volunteered willingly. For another respondent, they lacked trained personnel. Arguing further, she avers that most of their staffs are not even trained to do the job they are doing. Many of the discussants mentioned lack of coordination between NGOs. They said they lacked cooperation among themselves and this incapacitates them from uniting against government when government humiliates them. It was also mentioned that monopolization of leadership is another challenge they are facing. According to them, once a person establishes an NGO, the person will continue to be the leader of the NGO until his/her death. And this does not allow for innovative new ideas to be injected into the organization. For instance, the Founder of COWAN, Mrs Ogunleye was the Executive Director until her death at the age of 81 on August, 2014. For another respondent, one of NGOs greatest problem is lack of solidarity amongst themselves. For instance, they opine that while some NGOs are lobbying for the Nigerian constitution to be amended to be gender sensitive, NCWS was clamoring for the office of the First Lady to be legalized. Some people see this as misplacement of priority.

How can government support NGOs?

Various highlights and comments from the respondents show that NGOs need government support which according to them is in short supply. According to a respondent from COWAN, the stipends they receive from government is too small and is not even regular. Most of the respondents aver that they need an enabling environment from the government. Explaining further, they suggest that government should stop seeing them as competitors but should see them as their development partners. A respondent from COWAN notes that government sees them as rivals who want to expose their deficiencies, while in actual fact they are not. Two-thirds of the interviewees believe that another help that government can render is to help build their capacity. They opine that just as government sends civil servants abroad to build their capacity. They can help them by sponsoring their staff abroad to learn more about their job.

They also mentioned that government should help them to publicize their activities. According to them, advertising is very expensive. They need government to sponsor their adverts in the mass media. And that some people that need their services are not even aware that they are in existence.

Obstacles to women political participation

A common response among the respondents was that women's subservient position is one of the factors inhibiting their political participation. According to them, women suffer from poverty, illiteracy, intimidation and violence, low self-esteem, cultural stereotypes, etc. Also, religion was mentioned. A respondent submits that both Christian and Islamic religions do not support women to be leaders. Explaining further, she observes that the holy books do not support women to lead. A woman leader mentioned belonging to occult societies as one of the requirements to be successful in politics. According to her, most men before they venture into politics, they must patronize a shrine to fortify themselves or else their opponents may harm them. Elaborating further, she questioned that how many women will be willing to go through all these because of political office. Another woman leader sees military incursion into politics as one problem affecting women political participation in Nigeria. According to her, Nigeria experienced more than 30 years of military rule and during that time, the military disempowered women, only men were given positions and men used the opportunity to embezzle money which a lot of them spend during campaigns and also use to intimidate women. Another respondent recounted an experience she witnessed during local government primary election. According to her, her sister won the primaries to emerge as the Local Government Chairperson aspirant. But the party refused to give her the ticket, because they are not comfortable with presenting a female as their candidate. So, instead, they gave the position to a man and gave the woman Deputy Chairman aspirant. Explaining further, she said even if a woman wins the election, men will always manipulate it to have their way. Many of the respondents mentioned political violence as another obstacle to their participation in politics. They explained that violence can be in the form of intimidation, kidnapping or killing. According to them, they are not ready to give up their lives yet because they want to be in government. Another respondent notes that men atimes through some manipulations discourage women from participating in politics. According to her, men can organize political meetings in conference halls of hotels; they take crucial decisions in informal meetings. They can even organize late night meetings which women will not like to attend. Another respondent also affirms that a times men will label women as prostitutes, stigmatize them and call them deviants to discourage them from participating in politics.

Another woman leader has this to say. According to her, the way women are socialized is another problem they are facing. Explaining further, she submits that women are socialized to believe that they are the weaker sex and therefore should not aspire high. That is why according to her, some women are not ambitious and are very okay with their subservience position.

Possible ways of improving women political participation

Most of the respondents mentioned quota system as a way of encouraging women participation in politics. They suggest that government should consider leaving 50% of political offices for women. Another respondent avers that government should give loans to women who want to aspire to political offices. A respondent recalled her experience. She recounted how during the 2011 elections, she wanted to access the WOFEE loan which government said is meant for female aspirants. According to her, she was not able to collect the loan due to bureaucracy and government unwillingness to give the loan. Explaining further, she opines that government should stop paying lip service by saying that it is setting aside money that cannot be assessed. For another respondent, government should abolish all customary laws that placed women in a subservient position. Some interviewees mentioned that lack of education is a serious threat to women political participation. They suggest that government should make education to be free at all levels especially for women. According to them, if this is done nobody will have any excuse for not sending his/her female child to school.

CONCLUSION

NGOs have become an attractive global force. Their efforts are gradually being recognized world – wide. The involvement of NGOs in development has become requisite. Donor agencies more than before prefer to identify with them than to identify with government institutions. This is because they see them as a force to identify with. NGOs have turned out to be big employers of labour, offering job opportunities to people. They

have identified and paid attention to areas that were hitherto ignored by the government. There has been proliferation of NGOs and this has even led to their expansion. The task of women political empowerment is a daunting task that cannot be left for NGOs alone. Due to women's disadvantaged position, there is need for government to support initiatives that tend to pay special attention to them. There is need for government to assist NGOs to empower women politically. Women's political participation has been found to be central to the goal of achieving an all-embracing, just and sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reposition NGOs to render more services to the society, there is need to do the following: NGOs should organize symposia where youths can be enlightened on the essence of volunteerism. School curricular should be restructured to accommodate courses that will teach students the essence of volunteering for community service. Monopolization of leadership by the founders of NGOs should be discouraged. Leadership of NGOs should be for a fixed term. Retirement age can be specified so as to give room for young and vibrant people to lead. Young people can introduce modern and innovative ways of achieving their aims and objectives. Since NGOs are development partners with government, government can encourage them by giving them specified and substantial amount of money. The money should also be regular. This can go a long way in encouraging these NGOs. Government can also encourage these NGOs by building their capacities. Government can sponsor them to international conferences and seminars where they can learn better ways of offering their services through these NGOs.

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