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### EXERCISING THE RIGHT OF WOMEN: THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

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#### ABSTRACT

*The central and immediate concern of critical feminism is reformation of concepts and an attack on epistemological assumptions that affect the conception of the position of women in society. Critical feminism as a theory of change holds that the long established myths and even jokes that misrepresent or downgrade women should be abolished to allow room for a new and a better socialization process in society which will not deny women their rightful position in society. It is the view of the radical feminists that the continued neglect of women in the society is adversely affecting the development of one section of the society. This, therefore, means that the neglect of half of a nation leads to refusing to tap the great potentials in women. As good home managers, they are likely to do better in managing the resources of their countries than do some men if allowed the opportunities to do so. This paper has highlighted great events undertaken by women and also the obstacles facing them in the process of participating in the policy making process in their countries. Some solutions have also been proffered.*

#### INTRODUCTION

For decades now feminists have been looking critically at the style manner and language being use to address women by the men. With due apology to some men who have persistently appreciated the



position of women in the society worldwide, women continue to suffer from the negative general attitudes of some men.

It is a widely accepted fact that most women in some countries in the world have been taken for granted and neglected. Especially in some developing countries, like, Afghanistan for instance, only recently have they been allowed to move out freely without being accompanied by men. Also the recent moves by the United Nations Organization to solve the problem of Afghanistan has led to the recommendation of two women for inclusion among the thirty personalities to govern the country during the interim government which will last for six months beginning from February 2002. This situation, of course, would be attributed to the rigid Taliban rule. Be it as may, the United Nations organization had tried to persuade countries to recognize women's rights. It should be taken into account that an increasing number of households among the 'urban poor' are particularly discriminated against, and most of them are women (source). Against this background, the Nairobi world conference of July 1985 which marked the end of the United Nations Decade for women, ushered in the 'forward looking strategies for the advancement of women up to the year 2000. Why not also refer to Beijing of 1995-6, which is recent? It can also be recalled that back home, Nigeria signed the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This is meant, in all respects, to remove all obstacles that hinder the participation of women in National policies and programmes. In Nigeria various type of development programmes have been initiated ranging from Women in Development to life enhancement Programme, all in a bid to allow women play leadership roles in their various capacities.

This paper is intended to make a modest contribution to the feminist debate by in the area of leadership in politics and Administration in Nigeria.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

Sections 30 to 42 of the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria deal with the fundamental Human Rights. These rights are:

1. Right to life
2. Right to dignity of human person;
3. Right to personal liberty;
4. Right to fair hearing
5. Right to private and family life
6. Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
7. Right to freedom of expression and press;
8. Right to peaceful assembly and association;
9. Right to freedom of movement
10. Right to freedom from discrimination

In the light of the above, there is no gainsaying that women except Right No. 10 have partially enjoyed all other rights, which is being hindered by many forces that militate against women emancipation. The thesis of this work, therefore, is that women have been denied their right to "freedom from discrimination" especially in terms of equal participation with men in the decision-making process in Nigeria.

While trying to look at circumstances surrounding insufficient participation of women in decision-making processes in Nigeria, it is necessary that we look at the following areas that pertain to women:

1. Women's place in the society;
2. Past and present efforts of women to participate in decision-making;
3. Government's role (s) in encouraging women to participate in decision-making in Nigeria;
4. Factors militating against significant participation of women in decision-making in Nigeria;
5. Suggested solutions for solving the problem.

## **WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE SOCIETY**

Historical evidence, in the form of the surviving records of earlier societies, tends also to indicate the universality of some form of male dominance, (Randall, 1982). Some writers have argued that in pre-historic times societies existed in which women were not only free



from male domination, but also were themselves the rulers. They were the so-called 'matriarchies.' The earliest systematic exponent of this view was Bachofen, who wrote in the mid nineteenth century about 'matriarchies.' Basing his analysis on surviving mythology, he suggested that matriarchy developed out of 'mother right,' that is, the mother's right in her own children (Barn Berger, 1974). Other writers on matriarchy include Davies (1971) and (Webster, 1975). Even in the Yoruba societies, women were seen to participate in decision-making. Such title as "Iyalode" was given to such women; who were also regarded as chiefs and who participated in decision-making; but the percentage of women who were placed in such position was very insignificant. Akpabio (1989) opines that the folk songs sang by the Ibibio include such stories as "it is the woman who attends to domestic chores, not in a demeaning way, but as a noble obligation," "it is the wise old woman who weave benevolent spells to transform enchanted beings back to their shapes". Brown (1975:243) talks of the Iroquois matrons and describes them as enjoying "unusual authority in their society, perhaps more than women have enjoyed anywhere at any time".

#### **PAST AND PRESENT EFFORTS AT WOMEN EMANCIPATION**

The name of Margaret Ekpo is an inspiration among Nigerian women during this closing decade of the twentieth century. This seems to be unforgettable and evokes in Nigeria and abroad a feeling associated with a great feat performed by Nigerian women during the colonial era. Her leadership potentials bring to her admirers reminiscences of women activism and achievements; the capability, the power and force, which Nigerian women could put in the field of national development. The exemplary roles played by her as the foremost Nigerian woman leader of her time in matters concerning Nigerian politics, is worthy of emulation (Effah-Attoe & Jaja, 1993). There have been other leaders including late chief (Mrs.) F. Ransome-Kuti, Nina Mba, who have tried to fight for women emancipation with a view to mobilizing women the world over for active participation in politics.

Many people have the erroneous belief that the fight for women emancipation has recently started. They do not know that this move had started even during the colonial period. This fight will continue as long as some men rate women second-class citizens. The view of some men about women runs contrary to the Nigerian constitution which provides for equal rights and opportunities for all Nigerian citizens and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of sex, place or origin, religion or political opinion. A number of prominent women organizations in Nigeria have been involved in this fight for women emancipation. They include Nigeria council for women society, The family Support Programme, The Family Economic Advancement Programme, The Better Life for Rural Women Programme, National council for Women Society, Women in Nigeria, The Media Women, The University Women Association, Professional and other numerous women's organisations in Nigeria have been involved in this fight for women emancipation. These organizations have so recorded significant development of women in various fields. For example, women in politics in Akwa Ibom State are an active body drawing women from all walks of life to participate in politics. Life Enhancement Department in the Governors office is currently training women in various craft works.

The Beijing platform of Action - the Forth Conference of women on the emancipation issue is worthy of note. The Global Framework of the Platform identified twelve critical areas of concern for women worldwide as represented below:

1. The persistent and increasing poverty of women;
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in, and unequal access to, education and training;
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in, and unequal access to health care, including reproductive health and family planning;
4. Violence against women;
5. Effects of arms and other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation;
6. Inequality in economic structure and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources;



7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels;
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
9. Lack of respect for, and inadequate promotion and protection of, the human rights of women;
10. Stereotyping of women, inequality in women's access to, and participation in, all communication systems, especially the media;
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in safeguarding the environment; and
12. Persistent discrimination, and violation of, the rights of the girl-child.

The other ten problematic areas are not discussed in this paper except Nos. 7 and 9, which correspond to the topic of this paper. Efforts have been made by women themselves to tackle the problems identified in areas 7 and 9 above.

#### **GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO CHAMPION HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH REGARD TO PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING**

Past administrations in Nigeria had been bothered about the insignificant participation of women in politics that eventually resulted in few women politicians and fewer women participating in decision-making bodies in the country. Government's views and comments on the findings and recommendations of the Political Bureau, (Lagos, 1987) are represented below:

##### **Women in Nigeria**

Full involvement of women in politics is one method of defending and promotion of women's interests in society. They can participate fully if they are members of the Legislative and Executive arms of government. Further reason, the Bureau recommends the allocation

of five per cent of the legislative seats to women, in all the three tiers of government. This five per cent seats allocation of women is to be filled by nomination through the political parties (Effa-Attoe & Jaja 1993).

#### **Comment**

Government does not accept this recommendation in consonance with the decision in Chapter VI (Effa-Attoe & Jaja, 1993). Chapter VI of the Government White Paper on the Political Bureau Report deals with "Political and Constitutional System." In paragraph 94 of Chapter VI of the White Paper, Government accepted that representation on the basis of equality of states at the upper chamber (Senate) and/or population basis at the lower chamber (House of Representatives) should operate as entrenched in the 1979 Constitution.

Some women activists have commended government's view on this issue, as it did not contradict the principles of human rights of Nigerian citizens. As much as a few conservatives appreciate this view of Government, Government should continue to protect women and encourage them to participate in decision-making in Nigeria. Also the United Nations convention on the Political Rights of women should not be forgotten. The Convention stipulates "that women shall, on equal terms with men, and without any discrimination, be entitled to vote in all elections, be eligible for elections to all publicly elected bodies established law and be entitled to hold public office, and to exercise all public functions, established by national law" The establishment of the women programmes such as the Family Support Programme by Maryam Abacha, the Better Life for Rural Women by the Maryam Babangida and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), and the life enhancement Programme are moves to make women effective and active policy-makers Government has made other moves by appointing women into decision making bodies, although the number of women currently appointed is very minimal. It is left for the women to be involved actively in politics and



to make themselves known to the society in order to be deemed fit for election in the Democratic government that has just started or began.

## **FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING IN NIGERIA**

### **1. MALE DOMINANCE OR PATRIARCHY**

The word patriarchy has a Greek origin "patriarchies" meaning 'head of the tribe.' The original patriarchs were the tribal heads referred to in the Old Testament Randall, Vicky, (1982: 15). As reported by Randall, later, the term described certain of the most eminent Bishops within the Christian church, including the Pope. Weber (1981) took up the term 'to describe a particular form of household organisation in which the father dominated other members of an extended kinship network, and controlled the economic production of the household' (Barrett 1980). There are various definitions of the word patriarchy, but such discussions are outside the scope of this paper. Whatever term is used - male dominance, male supremacy or patriarchy stands for a far-reaching social subordination of women. In the words of Randall (1982), there are three main themes in the explanations of women's oppression: those that attribute it to biology, to culture and to the economic system. The theories of individual feminists and non-feminists, according to Randall, often draw on all three. Millet is of the opinion that the principle of patriarchy does not only apply to the women, but also to the men. 'The principle of patriarchy appears to be two-fold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger' (Millet 1972:25). Firestone views patriarchy as implying a system of social organization in which men's control of women is based on their power over wives and children within the family (Randall 1982:16). Beechey is not left out of the discussion when she argues that the concept of patriarchy is used in 'an attempt to think through real politics and theoretical problems' (Beechey 1979:68).

The oldest and most obvious theoretical explanation for the deprivation of women's human rights is the biological differences

between men and women. Non-feminists who toe this line tend to argue that male dominance is natural and inevitable, a conclusion recently challenged by a number of feminist social scientists. As contended by some authors, the natural physical differences between the sexes have been used to explain and justify women's inferior social position for ages now. Another author argues that men have a greater bodily strength and so capitalizes on the seeming smaller size of a woman's brain (Randall 1982:17).

Some nineteenth century feminists were of the opinion that these physical features limited women's personality and potentiality, thus rendering them inevitably socially inferior and therefore unable to perform at the same level with men. Recently, a number of research findings have been conducted with results that challenged these assumptions. In the face of challenge to these more traditional versions of the biological reductionism case for male dominance, women's participation in decision-making recently in Nigeria is becoming increasingly popular

Although men have been identified as the dominant factor regarding women's subordination and oppression, in the Nigerian Society, the over-emphasis on man as the main source of domination either denies or de-emphasizes the importance of other factors, such as the Nigerian society, the religious organisations, the women themselves, colonialism, materialism and capitalism.

### **2. THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

Although many authors argue that the discrimination between men and women had no root in the past, it should not pass unnoticed that the percentage of women who were ever admitted to decision-making bodies was insignificant before now. Even as far back as 1945 when Margaret Ekpo was fighting to become a member of the Constitution Making Committee, she was faced with the problem of convincing the society that a woman was capable of participating in the decision-making of her country. The Nigeria society has never, whole-heartedly,



accepted the leadership of any woman into decision-making bodies. The current executive of the fourth republic that started (1999), both at the Federal, State and Local levels is a clear example of the author's considered view.

### **3. THE RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS**

One of the factors militating against effective participation of women in the decision-making of their country is the teaching and practice in religious organizations. The orthodox churches teach and practice the domination of women by men. Women are to be obedient to men in all respects especially when their husbands ban them from participating in politics. It is not uncommon here in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria to find situations where members of particular churches have doctrines preventing their women from participating in the current women programmes organized in the state. Most parents of the unmarried female children in some churches, advise their children not to participate in politics. If women are banned from participating in politics, it therefore, means that their chances of participating in decision-making are very slim.

Although the new-breed churches do encourage their women to participate in politics, their effort is insignificant as it takes quite some reasonable time for the society to accept and adjust to new changes.

### **4. THE WOMEN THEMSELVES**

Some groups of writers point, not to men or other forces in the Nigerian society but to women themselves as the cause of decline of women in their societal role of decision-making. It is the women themselves that contribute to their insignificant participation in decision-making. According to some feminists, several women in positions of authority face problems posed by their fellow women who are less privileged. At other times, they cause the problem by plotting with men to bring about problems and consequently the downfall of their fellow women in positions of power. Sule Bello emphasized this salient point at the Seminar held in 1982 at Zaria. The topic for discussion was "Women in Nigeria She said:

If we take a look at the history of Borno, Benin and Zaria, we see that at certain times Women occupied high if not the highest positions as members of the dominant classes. Yet women in lower classes, together with other members, resolutely opposed and overthrew them (Effah-Attoe and Jaja 1993).

When the opinion of women were sampled during the Local Government elections of 1999, it was surprising to find out that few women voted for women contestants for the post of chairman. It is not surprising too, to find that some educated women seem to emphasize that women should naturally be subordinate to men in every African society, including Nigeria.

In Zambia, in 1974, a similar view was expressed during the National Conference of the Council of Catholic Women held in Lusaka. In its communiqué, the Conference admonished all African women in general, their Conference participants and members in particular, to maintain their female role as wives and never opt for other types of duties. Clara Sikeneta, talking on the topic. "The Progress by women in Zambia" had this to say:

The woman worker ought to know that her income is only a supplement to her husband's income. She ought to be fully aware of her responsibilities as a mother and a wife and never neglect them for the sake of extra-domestic work (Umoh, E.D, 2001:19).

### **COLONIALISM**

Before Colonialism, women in Nigeria possess more wealth than the men. They were able to farm, fish and partake in all kinds of trade. (Marshall, 1964:73, Hallet, 1965:122, 162, Schwab, (1955: 357, Johnson, 1921: 124). The women engaged in a variety of crafts such as dyeing, pottery, cosmetics, bread making, spinning cotton, weaving, brewing beer, and processing foodstuffs Johnson, (1921: 124). Women also possess political power and could participate in wars Awe (1974: 7), Johnson (1921: 390-94), Ajaji and Smith, 1964:135, Biobaku, 1957: 39, 40).



During Colonialism, the traditional roles of women in society diminished. This was partly as a result of the fact that the Christian religion had brought with it the belief that men are the head of the household and therefore, women should be subject to men. Women were to be limited to the household in which they could exercise their authorities over their children. Very insignificant number of women were educated enough to participate in the governance of their country. Some of those women were, Mrs. Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, Mrs. O. Sowunmi, Mrs. S. F. Adeyinka, and Mrs. Margaret Ekpo. Colonialism made women feel victimized and deprived of their rights in the society. This notion of women that they are being suppressed eventually led to an uprising in the Southern Nigeria in 1929. The movement was essentially anti-government as they {women} were asking for the exodus of the British.

### CAPITALISM

Marx identifies the fundamental aspects of social activity; the production of means to satisfy needs, the creation of new needs and the reproduction of species (Randall, 1982: 26). He understands patriarchy as a system of father-dominated household production as he identifies patriarchy solely in terms of production, not reproduction. According to Reed (1975), the institution of the bride price helped the husband to regard both his wife and children as property he had paid for. Other Marxist feminists suggest that an economic surplus exist in such societies, which is associated with increased control by the male elders of the means, not only of production, but of reproduction. Marx and Engels are of the view that domestic labour under capitalism is unproductive in the sense that it does not produce commodities for exchange and so does not generate surplus value for the capitalist (Randall 1982: 30). Boston argued that the cause of women's oppression under capitalism was precisely the economic necessity of their domestic labour Benston, (1969). Seccombe (1974) believes that housework was not subject to its law of value or to capitalism's relentless drive for profit-making innovation, but the least efficient organization of a labour process existent within capitalism.

making of their country. The discovery of bronze enabled man, in the experience of hard and productive labour, to discover himself as creator, dominating nature, he was no longer afraid of it, and in the fact of obstacles overcome, he found himself as an autonomous active force, to achieve self-fulfillment as an individual (de Beauvoir, 1974: 62).

### MATERIALISM

The Theory of Materialism has enabled human being to come to some hidden truths. Human society fails to submit to domination by nature, but rather seems to control the events that occur. In the era of 'primitive communism', a form of group marriage prevailed. Within this system, children belonged to their biological mother, not their father (Randall, 1982: 27). Also in the primitive division of labour, both male and female contributed two different classes and there seemed to exist equality between the two cases. In this dispensation, women were contribution more to the household than the man. During this Stone Age, all members of the clan claimed ownership of the land and farming instruments were reduced to the hoe. Engels (1972) traces the history of women equality with men in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the States*, showing that the history depended essentially on that of technique (Simone de Beauvoir 1974:60).

With the discovery of valuable deposits such as copper, gold, diamond and other valuable deposits, men became richer than the women. With more money in men's hands, they were able to pay bride price and also could buy the services of other men (de Beauvoir, 1974: 60).

*As reported by Simone de Beauvoir (1974),*

*The discovery of bronze enabled man, in the experience of hard and productive labour, to discover himself as creator, dominating nature, he was no longer afraid of it, and in the fact of obstacles overcome, he found himself as an autonomous active force, to achieve self-fulfillment as an individual (de Beauvoir, 1974: 62).*

With the mastery of rich resources by the men, women's housework became insignificant thus allowing maternal authority to give place to paternal authority.



## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

It is the author's considered view that if the following suggestions are adopted, chances of women participating at equal level with men in the decision making of their country will be greatly enhanced.

1. Women should be sensitized to participate actively in politics to and contest for positions of authority.
2. Government should encourage women to participate more in the decision-making processes in their country by appointing more women into decision-making bodies.
3. Women should also pursue professional courses and programmes to enable them have equal opportunity with men for appointment into appropriate decision-making bodies.
4. Parents should be enlightened on the need to give the female child the same privilege to aspire for higher educational qualifications.

The future is bright for the women of Africa and especially Nigeria, if they realize that they are in a changing world and be prepared to change their attitudes towards political participation. It is not proper for the women to continue to blame the men while absenting themselves from soaw-political activities. If the men will work together with the women, the future will change in a significant way.

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