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EDUCATION AND THE CHANGING POLITICAL ROLE OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Politics, the science or art of governance, right from earliest time has always been considered as a role that confers prestige, authority and power on people. It is seen as a game that needs strong physique, intelligence, personality, rationality, disciplined emotion and logical mind. In the middle ages in Europe, men presumed that they had the monopoly of these qualities, so they excluded the women from political activities. This idea of womanhood was supported by British colonies but was greatly resented by Nigerian women who completely opposed the alien concept of women. Historical facts defended the women's position as the roles Nigerian women played in colonial periods have demonstrated. This shows that Nigerian women have always participated in the political administration of the society.

Since independence, Nigerian women have been forced to seek a new identity and to find out exactly what roles they could play in the new political order, noting that the pattern of political development under colonial rule generated structural inequalities between the sexes. / The colonial economy placed Nigerian women at structural disadvantage as education was made available to fewer women than men. The few lucky ones who had the opportunity were excluded from prestigious government or political appointments.

Twenty years after independence, the women education branch of the Federal Ministry of Education was created in 1986 out of the need to ensure increased participation of the female population in education. Even though the educational programme in Nigeria has continued to witness rapid expansion, women have found themselves not fully represented in the process. The reasons for these range from socio-cultural, religious and economic. As a result, women have become an educationally disadvantaged group, and their limited access to education has constituted a major constraint to their participation in the political development of the nation.

This paper reviews Nigerian women's involvement in politics historically; assesses the impact of education on the political role of women and outlines strategies for the women's political education.

WOMEN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In pre-colonial Nigeria, women participated actively in the politics of their communities mostly as groups or representatives of organisations. A number of women organisations at the time were represented in community matters by their leaders and members of these groups were dynamic and powerful. They were regarded at times as guardians of the village traditions. Though most of them got married outside their communities they showed concern for development there. They often intervened wherever the village constitution was

violated and imposed sanctions on offenders. Notable organisations of that nature are the Umuada of the Ibos. and the Egbe Iyalode of the Yorubas (Njoku 1974). Among the Yorubas, in particular one finds that women were not excluded from participating in politics. Smith (1969) observes that out of the thirty eight predecessors to the present Oba, five were women, but he also noted that since Yeyeori, the eighteenth Owa there has been no female Oba. Like their counterparts in Eastern and Western Nigeria, Hausa women were not lacking in the political administration of their areas in pre-Islamic society. There are records of women who held titles and offices like Iya, Magaiya and Madanni before the 1804 Jihad.

Akwa Ibom State women have not been left out. A number of female associations also existed to guard the rights of women and control erring persons. These traditional women organisations existed parallel to male controlled organs of government. Their strength rested on effective application of the methods of gender consciousness, group pressure and group mobilisation. (Etim, 1995)

The colonial era formally began in Nigeria long before 1914, the year of the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Provinces. The new colonial policies had adverse influences on the role definition among the people. They introduced the Victorian concept of the place of the women in the society. According to the Victorian concept of womanhood, women should be seen not heard. This concept came from the medieval period in Europe. It was supported by their educational set-up which only trained women for domestic services and confined them to the home. Their role, though important, restricted their visibility and therefore minimised their public recognition. They even accepted intellectual inferiority to men and believed that both history of art and genius testified to it. It was the duty of a perfect wife to create a home environment that provided shelter from the harsh world for her husband who had the duty to support her. All these determined women's public image and even their right to property. These ideas contrasted greatly with the Nigerian concept of the role of women.

For Nigerian women, some of them before the colonial era had expensive commercial enterprises and in fact shared the family expenses with their husbands. The African woman had a respectable and independent political position before the colonial administration. Even in marriage, irrespective of the fact that they had to obey their husbands, they had a right to own property. Marriage gave them rights of self expression. All these helped them to achieve their economic and political recognition which they valued greatly. As the colonial ideology was to make women non-visible, so their government was shaped in such a way to achieve this objective. Dual gender political system was discouraged and women dropped from all important administrative offices.

Nigerian women reacted to these unfavourable factors in their own way. They strove to right the system. One of their strategies was to mount a campaign of public demonstration against the regime and possibly fight to destroy it. Evidence of this was seen in both the east and the west (none in the north then because the women had long been subdued by the Islamic religion). These demonstrations gathered momentum as time went on and climaxed in the 1920s. The colonial administration did not take the demonstrations seriously, until its foundations were threatened in 1929. There were over five serious demonstrations in Nigeria between 1925 and 1929 and women were responsible for all of them. The first of these occurred in Calabar in 1925, caused by the imposition of taxes under the market ordinances in some markets. The women refused to pay the tolls because they had not been consulted. They assaulted the Europeans and the police; however, the police with great difficulty drove the women away. The women then closed the market and imposed fines of five pounds on any woman who sold food to the Europeans, or to their hospitals. A few days later a similar protest occurred at Oron in present Akwa Ibom State but the resident

officer convinced women that no taxes would be imposed on their markets. There, the colonial administration decided to withdraw the levy. In November, 1925, another protest occurred; although it began at Bonny in River State, it spread to Okigwe where it was a more serious incident. It was known as the Dancing Women's Movement. The inspiration for the movement was supposedly divinely revealed to the people of Bonny and Degema before it spread northwards. The nature of this revelation was not made known to the Europeans, but the women considered it their sacred duty to see to it that the Europeans left the country. So bands of women went from town to town and made demands on the people and, by implication, on the government. At first the women demanded better sanitation, increased child bearing, a return to old customs, and a strict regulation of prostitution. Their demands increased as the movement spread until finally they demanded a ban on the use of European coins and a return to manilas and traditional brass rods. The women's activities were most pronounced at Agwu and Umuahia. There were threats of burning the court houses, but it was only at Isu that they carried out their threat. Later the army was sent to return law and order in the whole area.

Another protest popularly called the Spirit Movement took place in 1927. Unlike the Dancing Women Movement, both men and women participated, but women were the largest portions of the bands.

In 1928, another uprising was caused by Ezzi women in Ogoja province, who repeatedly broke up meetings of men who might favour the government plan of taxation. It was only through arrest and conviction of their leaders that their activities were brought to an end.

Each uprising had a number of things in common with the others. First, there were real problems and grievances at the root of each disturbance; secondly each disturbance surprised the authorities, as they were sudden and without warning. Thirdly, the movements were led by the women and their primary aim was simply to liberate themselves from the Victorian concept of women.

Also during this era, the political role of Nigerian women was not limited to participation in local agitation. A few of the women participated in modern politics, aimed at getting the best from the two cultures, namely colonial and Nigerian indigenous cultures. According to Afigbo, (1972).

They also participated in the modern nationalist movement whose ideal is the building of a modern nation-state based on living and dynamic ideas borrowed from European experience and ours. To this end they participated actively in campaigns of the leading nationalist political parties of the day.

Some of such outstanding women were Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, and chief Mrs Ransome-Kuti, Nigerian stateswomen of great importance. Margaret Ekpo was born in Creek town in Calabar and was educated as a teacher. She later studied at the Bathmine School of Domestic Economy in Dublin, Ireland. Ekpo was one of the first four women to join the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (N.C.N.C). She was a member of the eastern house of Assembly. Ekpo and Kuti attended the Constitutional Conference in London for Nigerian independence. Both launched the women's wings of N.C.N.C. in the east and west respectively. They played a very significant role in Nigerian political life during and after the colonial era, in the face of all odds against women politicians. Throughout the colonial period, and the subsequent First Republic, Mrs Ekpo and Kuti were the only women who sat in the eastern and western Houses of Assembly. The fact that they were able to participate

at such level illustrated the success of Nigerian women in spite of the colonialist's enforcement of their Victorian concept of women.

The political role of women in independent Nigeria continued to expand. In spite of constraints, like the Purdah system and illiteracy they have made progress since independence. There is good evidence of women integration into the state and federal political arena. Factors which have contributed to that are the expansion of Nigerian educational system, and the subsequent introduction of free primary education, and the recognition of women world-wide. For example in 1967 the United Nations adopted the "Declaration of the elimination of discrimination against women". The third article of that declaration stipulates that all appropriate measures should be taken to educate public opinion and direct national aspirations towards the eradication of prejudice and the abolition of customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women. As a follow up, 1975 was declared the International Women's Year with a policy of promoting equality, development and peace in the world. From June 19 to July 2, 1975, the International Women's Year Conference was held in Mexico city. In addressing over 6000 delegates at the opening session, then Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kurt Waldheim observed that:

The equalisation of rights of women has become a matter of vital necessity to a world struggling with worsening problems of poverty and ignorance. If discrimination based on colour is deplorable, then discrimination against women should be regarded as deplorable and inhuman.

Mrs Helvi Sipilä, the Assistant Secretary General for Development and Humanitarian Affairs, on behalf of the American delegation, emphasised that:

Men cannot claim an exclusive right to shape the future of our world. It is high time for them to accept the challenge and share with women in the decision-making process. It is high time to acknowledge that the denial of women's rights and opportunities is at the root of our development problems and social economic ills... The most underdeveloped of all human resources are women.

Thus encouraged, Nigerian women since independence in 1960, have organised themselves and against all odds have been struggling to contribute their own quota in the National Political arena.

IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

The Women Education Branch of the Federal Ministry of Education was created in 1986; twenty - six years after independence, out of the need to ensure increased participation of women in education. Before then, women were seen as being left behind in the educational process. This limiting access to education was seen as a major constraint to their participation in the economic, social and political development of the nation. As a matter of priority therefore, the Federal Ministry of Education created the Women Education Branch specifically for the achievement of the following policy objectives which include:

1. The provision of more educational opportunities for girls of primary to tertiary levels.
2. The provision of functional education for girls and women through skills such as sewing, cooking, baking etc.
3. The promotion of the education of girls and women in the fields of science, technology and mathematics (STM).

Today, thirteen years after its inception, the Women Education Branch has recorded tremendous success in the area of women education and has more than justified its existence. Programme and projects of women education branch are:

1. Production of the Blueprint on women education in Nigeria
2. Mount Awareness campaigns
3. Establish women education units
4. Organise rural workshops, markets square rallies and women's educational visits.

The blueprint now produced in circulation, serves as a framework for women education in the country. The impact of the implementation of this blueprint is enormous. The acquisition of western education has influenced men's attitude towards women and also women's attitude towards their endowed potentials. It has made women more confident in themselves. Such confidence has influenced their output, be it in business, work, home or social organisations. All these have narrowed the gap between men and women as Sullerot (1974) observed.

... in the field of education, women have crossed the immense gap which historically separated them from men.

For a reasonable consideration of Nigerian women's political role, it is necessary to consider the impact of education on the political involvement of woman.

1. Decision Making

Education has contributed in encouraging young ladies to take decisions that affect their future i.e. what to study, who to marry, what career to take etc. Such decisions no doubt have some political implications for them. It has given women confidence and ability to stand up to their rights.

2. Improve Work Skills

Statistics show that more than 80% of women university graduates are in the labour market. Some of them are so well placed that the value of their education becomes evident in their improved work skill and their broadened political vision. Education thus becomes an essential ingredient which has improved women's economic power, transformed their skills and widened their horizon in embracing the new political order.

3. Economic Independence

In Nigeria education has played the greatest role in changing the economic situation of women. Through it women have made a meaningful contribution to national development by trying to eliminate poverty. The above indices of development exhibited by Nigerian educated women have shown that education has made an impact on the women's political participation. As trained individual women for the new political order, education has exposed them to the new economic realities; made them more adaptable to situations,

broadened their awareness and greatly narrowed down their invisibility in public affairs. What then should be done to ensure women participation in politics?

STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN POLITICAL EDUCATION FOR THE NEXT REPUBLIC

It is absolutely important that women are fully integrated and actually participate in Nigerian politics. The women know what policies they want for their children. As the repository of our culture, they have to bring this to bear on our national life. They can do nothing on the periphery.

What must government now do?

Government must as a matter of urgency.

1. Bring education to all women from the urban centres down to grass roots and thus equip them with basic tools that will prepare them for their role side by side with the men, in the social, economic and political development of the nation.
2. Continue to provide women with functional skills that will render them self reliant and encourage them to bring up cottage industries .
3. Encourage women to develop a positive self image through leadership training.
4. Intensify its efforts to promote STM education among girls and women in Nigeria.

Women on their part must also:

1. Join political parties in large numbers
2. Encourage women political aspirants
3. Work towards a strong economic base
4. Study and emulate political role models locally and internationally

SIGNIFICANCE OF INTEGRATING WOMEN INTO POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

The significance of women integration into political decision making can never be overemphasised. Highlight of such importance are:

1. Women will better influence policies, inject their feminine balance and ideas into policies.
2. There will be greater representation of women in national activities
3. Women integration is in conformity with the constitution in Nigeria.
4. Women integration ensures even development of all sectors of the society.
5. Moderacy and sanity will prevail.

The challenge before us all is to utilise manpower from all sectors to build a nation of our dreams. The next republic is in sight. Women and men are required to put in their quota and best good results. Our future is our concern and women integration is a must!!.