Understanding the Extent of and Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

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Abstract:- **It is generally accepted that women constitute a key national resource in which case their ideas, creative solutions and concern for cohesiveness of the social fabric contribute significantly to positive changes in the quality of life and society at large. However, like many world countries, Nigeria's political system has long been plagued by gender imbalance and discrimination against women. Thus, the study focused on providing an exposition on the extent of gender discrimination in Nigerian politics. From the In-Depth Interview (IDI) of Key members of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), the study established that the reality of Nigerian politics and political arrangement have excluded much of female legitimacy resulting in women's political powerlessness and low participation in power and decision making. However, amidst the murky shades of male chauvinism in the country's leadership and political scene, women have thrived, though marginally, in occupying appointive positions.**

Keywords:- Politics, Gender Imbalance, In-Depth Interview, Discrimination, Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The absence of women from active participation in decision making has been evident from time immemorial. In the early days, women were exclusively seen as the creative basis of human life. They have been considered not only mentally inferior to men but also a main cause of temptation and evil. For instance, in Greek mythology, a woman, Pandora, opened the forbidden box which unleashed epidemics and sadness to human race (Priestly, 1945). Furthermore, early Roman law portrayed women as children and being inferior to men (Compton's News Media, 1995).

Thomas Aquinas, 13th century theologian, once pointed out that women's souls are not fully developed, and Jewish men once began their morning prayers by giving thanks that they were not women (Women's International Centre, 1995). That means women have been conspicuously absent from participating in decision making right from prehistoric times. In some parts of the world, particularly in African countries, values relating to femininity concern that of unpaid care of the home and the household, maintaining family honour and reverence for husband and in-laws (ODI, 2015; Makama, 2013). Also, the modest position of women is further espoused by

Apostle Paul who revealed in the scriptures of Ephesians that:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church"… (Ephesians 5 vs 22-23)

Again, a woman is expected to be docile, obedient, quiet, meek, and passive without questioning or challenging any male authority (Compton's interactive Encyclopedia 1995).

However, in the last three decades, the gender gap in the various aspects of public life has been widely observed to follow a downward trend. For example, global representation of women in national parliamentarians increased from 11.3% in 1995 to 22% in 2015 with women's representation in formal labour force and judiciary being 40% and 27%, respectively in 2011 (ODI,2015). The situation has, however, been static in most parts of Africa. Albeit that more than half of Africa's population of approximately 1 billion people is made up of girls and women, the nagging claws of gender inequality in the continent continue to impede women from contributing to the development agenda and lending their voice as they are precluded from many development-oriented conversations (DataScience, 2017). The situation has been shown to be much worse in Nigeria. Oloyede (2016) revealed that women's political participation nationally has persisted on 6.7% on the average in both appointive and elective position and this has been shown to be far from averages for West Africa sub region, Regional Africa and the world at large (15percent, 23.4 percent and 22.5 percent, respectively). In 2011, Nigeria only recorded 9 percent of women in parliament (British Council Report, 2011).

Going by the foregoing statistics, the weak political representation of women in Nigeria could be as a result of the exclusionary predominant culture and the political spaces, processes and platforms that exist in the country which seems to merely confer restricted assesses to women (Nkoyo, 2003). In most instances, the so-called 'available access' thwarts the political ascendancy of women and also erodes their personal and group identity. While it may be difficult to ask women to wait until they find ideal spaces and processes that address all their perceived problems, their inability to make a progress on the demands for changes in the political structure will continue to affect their judgment of what is possible in every given situation. In many cases, women's experiences have left them more

belligerent about their participation in politics than before. This means that finding ways of overcoming or circumventing existing and future barriers seems far from sight (Nkoyo, 2003).

Accordingly, gender mainstreaming has become a central issue currently receiving a global attention. The concern on gender issues can be traced to the UN's 1975 declaration of International women's year. This interest was further climaxed during the fourth international women's conference held in the year 1975 in Beijing, China which focused on " Equity, Development and Peace" with the sole objective of reviewing and appraising the accomplishments recorded by the UN on women's concerns over a period of ten years (1975-1985) (Akinboye, 2004). The growing concern to integrate and extend gender related issues beyond academic discourse into public policy and advocacy domain is borne out of the fact that women represent more than half of the world's total population and have continued to contribute to human development. Thus, democracy, which is predicated on the principle of majority rule, is believed to be capable of providing a window of opportunity for the marginalized groups to participate in shaping policies and decisions that affect their lives (Walby, 2008). This assertion is based on the reasoning that programmes and policies formulated by any democratic government should be all inclusive in which case equal opportunities and improvement in socio-economic conditions are provided for everyone regardless of their colour, age, ethnicity, religion or gender. It is against this backdrop that the study carried out a situational analysis of women's political participation in Nigeria. Thus, the study raised the following research questions: To what extent are gender inequality and discrimination against women in Nigerian politics? What are the factors responsible for the imbalance in women's representation in elective positions? What are the explanations available for the emerging new trend in appointive positions of women in Nigerian politics?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

> *Women's Political Marginalization in Nigeria*

In their bid to increase their political relevance, women in Nigeria have had to face a number of oppositions. Discriminations against women from the male folks have been observed largely in terms of voting rights and nominations for political offices (Olamitoke, 2011). Their continued denial, as regards being equally likely to take advantage of opportunities just like their male counterparts in the design of policies and legal framework for the country, is rather disturbing despite the provision in Article 3 of CEDAW. According to Afolabi–Akiyode (2011), discrimination against women in Nigeria in terms of low participation in decision making and governance is without bounds. More specifically, they are made to occupy back seats when issues relating to development are concerned. Politics and political framework in Nigeria is one that exclude much of women's legitimacy and this has resulted in women's underrepresentation in politics as well as other areas relating to power and decision making. The

country's male agenda supersedes the agenda which seeks to ensure equal opportunities for both male and female.

However, the Olusegun Obasanjo led administration ensured that there was 15 percent women inclusion at the federal level for all the appointments into public offices, an action considered to be in line with his previous campaign promises. Albeit this action was considered commendable when compared to that of previous administrations, this level of appointment still falls far short of the 35 percent recommendation for women's political participation declared in Beijing which was unanimously decided by the participating countries. The country has however continued to experience further growth in women's political participation as evidenced in the results of the 2007 April Election. Gada (2008) presents the 2007 election results as follows: A total of 93 women emerged winners in the various positions they contested for. The list include 9 Senators, 27 National Representatives, 6 Deputy Governors while the remaining 52 were found in different state House of Assemblies. Nigeria also experienced an improvement in the number of women holding ministerial and cabinet positions. Another significant feature of the 2007 election was the record breaking appointment of the first female speaker of the House of Representatives in person of Honourable Patricia O. Etteh. It should also be noted that the succeeding government of Late President Musa Yar' Adua appointed seven women into exalted public offices. Much as it is believed that there has been considerable improvements in women political participation in Nigeria, these achievements still failed to meet the 35 percent recommendation stated in the Beijing declaration.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

> *Data*

The data for the study was derived from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was generated through the administration of questionnaire and In-Depth interview (IDI) of key staff members of Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), Lagos state. From the research centre in Lagos state, prominent members and staff were purposively selected. The secondary data were sourced from were textbooks, internet resources, and library materials.

> *Method of data analysis*

Data obtained from both primary and secondary sources were analysed using descriptive and content analysis. Descriptive statistics like percentages, tables and frequencies were used to profile the socioeconomic characteristics of the sampled respondents and to characterise the extent of gender discrimination in Nigerian politics.

IV. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study focused on gender and Nigerian politics between 1999-2011 because it was originally conducted in 2014 but later published in 2019. The authors could not update the results because the primary data obtained were mainly based on the results of 2011 elections. To avoid any form of discordance or inconsistency, we decided to retain the results we obtained earlier. The authors are therefore of the opinion that the findings of this study may not necessarily represent the present situation of women's political stance in Nigeria. However, it provides a strong exposition of what has been and serves as a reference point for future studies. We therefore suggest that further research can be carried out to examine the level of women participation in the subsequent 2015 and 2019 general elections.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

➢ *Gender inequality and discrimination against women in Nigerian Politics*

This section focuses on the extent of discrimination against women in Nigerian politics while exposing the factors responsible for the imbalance. In the light of this, opinions of 10 key members of WARDC were sampled using the IDI method. Below are the considerations of the questions raised to address the foregoing issue:

➢ *What is your view about the extent of gender inequality and discrimination against women in Nigerian politics?*

According to the respondents, gender inequality and discrimination have been part of Nigerian politics since time immemorial, and their responses revealed a nuanced view. Most indicated that Nigeria's political scene has long been dominated by men but the situation has however improved following the restoration of continued democracy in 1999. "*Women are coming out now with more confidence and economic stability which has been identified has one of the factors impeding their participation in politics. Women can now speak for themselves and have started clamouring for greater women's participation in politics*". Another view observed to be widely held is that "*Political parties are embracing women in their manifestoes and we can see some of them putting women as deputy governors and vice presidents. This is believed to be a good start and we can from there push for more*".

In addition, the deputy director of the organization further stressed that "*Nigeria does not have up to 10% women participation in both appointive and elective positions. This is to show you that it is not gender inequality but under representation of the Nigerian women. This establishes that women are underrepresented- it is 10% not even 20 or 30 not even up to the 10%*". Similarly, although at a much lower benchmark for women representation, the director of WARDC expressed that "*The absence or under-representation of women in the very process of decision making and implementation undermines the fundamental concept of a democratic form of governance which assumes that participation and representation in all areas and levels of public life will be equally available to women and men. However, politics and political arrangement in Nigeria have undermined female legitimacy resulting in women's political powerlessness. From available statistics women's overall political representation and participation in government is less than 7%*".

➢ *What are the factors responsible for the imbalance in women's representation in elective positions?*

Following the joint analysis of the responses elicited from the respondents, the major factors responsible for the imbalance in women's participation in politics in Nigeria are social and cultural factors: "*Among the factors affecting women participation in politics in Nigeria are: gender and cultural patterns, ideology, pre-determined social roles assigned to women, male dominance and control, conflicting demands on the time of women candidates due to their domestic and social responsibilities and their lack of confidence to run elections*". They also identified other problems such as perception of politics as a dirty game, gender bias nomination and selection process, lack of funds and resources which are considered crucial factors given the heavy monetization of politics in Nigeria. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and limited access to education, the dual burden of domestic task and professional obligation, lack of confidence in other women, lack of access to information and the multiple effect of violence against women were also significant factors raised by the respondents.

➢ *What is responsible for the emerging new trend in appointive positions of women in Nigerian politics?*

Appointive positions do not only give women the freedom to participate in the politics of the nation but also help to narrow down the wide gender gap observed presently in the country's political scene. This submission creates the urgent need for Nigeria to at least conform to the 35% women's participation in politics as recommended in Beijing. In Nigeria, overall women's representation in public office got a boost in the years between 2003-2007, during the second term of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, when they attained 5.6% elected representatives and 16.6% cabinet ministers (Nwankwo,2003).During the preceding 1999-2003 years, women got less than 3% and 9.5%. This achievement underscores the importance of appointments as an effective means to close the gender gap in political participation. Although the number of women appointees was lower at the state level during the period under review, it was remarkable for the emergence of the first set of elected female Deputy Governors and Speakers.

To this end, respondents were quizzed about possible explanations for the new trend in women emergence in politics. Varying responses were obtained from the respondents based on the factors responsible for this trend. Notable among these responses is that of the deputy director who stated that "*WARDC and other women group, given the constitutional-electoral reforms, have over the time campaigned for a female deputy governor or vice*

chairman in the case where a male is a governor or chairman. This we achieved by opening a book where prospective candidates are asked to sign and state their positions on health and affirmative action in which case they are expected to take conscious step to have at least 20% of women in their appointive positions. We sued the president then for having all male delegates for the national political reform conference which was supposed to include youth, women, men, disabled, the vulnerable group and the minority group as the word "national" implies". The project director further stated that "*Of course it is the global issue following the Beijing conference in 1980 and assessing Nigeria in the 21st century, people are becoming increasingly aware of gender mainstreaming and women empowerment. This follows struggles like the Aba riot which initiated voting rights for women in Nigeria and subsequently, a lot of credible women have talked about women rights and women issues in Nigeria. Discussions on gender have turned to global issues and people are tilting towards being gender sensitive. Even though we are not there yet, given a lot of lips services and broken promises by government, but women groups and organizations are tirelessly working to make this dream a reality".*

➢ *What policies can be fashioned out to stop the discrimination against women in Nigerian politics?*

Based on the respondents' rejoinders, it is clear that Nigeria needs an electoral system and a constitutional arrangement that can adopt shades of proportional representation as had been canvassed by the Electoral Reform Committee to further widen the scope of opportunities for women. The only obstacle to having these recommendations in Nigeria's constitution and electoral laws is the government's real commitment to reforms that will benefit every sector of the polity. Political will is also critical to the practice of governance and this includes gender mainstreaming strategies that promote a culture of gender sensitivity in government and national machineries for women, which have the primary role of leading and monitoring gender mainstreaming strategies of governments. Majority believed that this will can only be forced out of the government by consistently insisting issues concerning the citizenry and holding them accountable to their words and commitments both locally and globally. Aside from increasing women's access to decision-making positions in government, some opined that "*women in government should continue to invest on sharing of strategies and information resources, as well as forming networks and strengthening linkages with experts and other women in government and non-government women's groups*".. In addition, it was generally believed that there should be policies and programmes targeted at women mentorship, women empowerment in electoral skills, social inclusion and gender-neutral educational opportunities.

The program director, however, believes that there cannot be a steady or one-size-fit-all policy as there will always be various situations requiring unique or different approaches:

"*A lot of things have been done particularly in this country by groups like ours to at least influence policy makers and decision makers to get them to be aware of gender issues you know there are lot of policies going on now like we have 'the girl child education act' we have 'the domestic violence act in Lagos state' a lot of policies like that. There cannot be a particular policy that will say it depends on the emerging trend that would determine the type of policy that would be implemented to address a given problem".*

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established gender imbalance and discrimination against women in Nigerian politics as evident in the under-representation of women in both appointive and elective positions. The study also identified the major factors impeding increased women's political participation as gender and cultural patterns, male dominance and control, conflicting reproductive and productive roles of women, ideology, and lack of confidence to run elections. Women's low political participation in Nigeria has serious implications given the positive effects of gender equity on economic outcomes. Nigeria as a nation must also realize that a gender balanced political leadership is crucial to the sustenance of her democracy. The underrepresentation of women in politics is a political deficit and failure to redress this undermines the legitimacy of the contemporary democratic principles. To address the foregoing, the study therefore suggests the following recommendations:

- Promotion of measures that can confront wider institutional blockades to gender equity in political participation. Nigeria needs an electoral system and a constitutional arrangement that can adopt shades of proportional representation as has been canvassed by the Electoral Reform Committee to further widen the scope of opportunities for women;

- Women in government should continue to invest on sharing strategies and information resources, as well as forming networks and strengthening linkages with other women in government and non-government women's groups and experts. They should also continue to study the increasing complexities in politics and economies brought about by globalization; and

- Feminists, gender advocates, human right activists and all concerned individuals should develop strategies to hold government accountable for their gender commitments.

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