

Women in Nigerian Politics: The Struggle for Participatory Relevance

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Abstract

Nigeria has been recording low participation of women in both elective and appointive positions. This is a growing concern to many Nigerians. However, concerted efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations to increase the level of participation of women in politics in line with the declaration made at the fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, which advocated 30% affirmative action. The under representation of women in political participation gained root due to the patriarchal practice inherent in our society, much of which were obvious from pre-colonial era till date. Based on secondary sources of information, this paper, examined the challenges Nigerian women still face in active participation in politics such as discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices; lack of finance; under-representation of women in governance; unhealthy political environment; political party discrimination; wrong perception of women in politics; among others. This paper recommended measures to guarantee women active participation in politics in Nigeria such as socio-economic factors inhibiting women's political potency should be properly addressed. Specifically, conscious efforts should be made by Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies (local and international), and women organizations to liberate women from the grips of culture, religion, male-dominated party system, poverty and illiteracy, among others.

Keywords: Nigerian Politics, Participatory Relevance, Politics, Women

1. Introduction

Under international standards, both men and women should have equal rights and opportunities to everything worldwide, most especially to participate fully in all aspects and at all levels of political processes. Globally, women constitute over half of the world's population and contribute in vital ways to societal development generally. In most societies, women assume some key roles, which are: mother, producer, home-manager, and community organizer, socio-cultural and political activists (**Halkin, 2002: 15**). Of these many roles mentioned, the last has been engendered by women movement. In line with global trend, Nigerian women constitute nearly half of the population of the country. But despite the major roles they play with their population, women roles in the society are yet to be given recognition (**Esidene & Abdul, 2013:1-17**). This is due to some cultural stereotypes, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures. In Nigeria the awareness about the role of women in development of a nation came up in 1980s. The International Conference on women in Beijing in 1995 enhanced the effective participation of women in politics in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, about 51 percent of women are involved in voting during elections. Despite these, women are still under represented in both elective and appointive positions. Available statistics revealed that overall political representation in government of Nigeria is less than 7 percent (**Agbalajobi, 2010: 75-82**). This shows that Nigeria has not attained 30 percent affirmative as prescribed by the Beijing Platform of Action.

Also, Nigerian women have the guaranteed rights to participate in active politics and governance by virtue of Section 42(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which states that: "A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person be subjected to any form of discrimination. This further confirms that you can go to court to seek redress if as a woman your franchise is violated and that the constitution as a whole prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex". However, over the years, there has been a remarkable increase in women participation when measured with certain standards like the number of women who vote in elections; the number of appointive and elective positions held by women; number of women related policies implemented by government; and so on. Yet, there is observed extensive discrimination against women and under-representation of them in politics and governance in Nigeria when compared with their male counterparts in actual practice.

Concerted efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations to increase the level of participation of women in politics, in line, with the declaration made at the fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, which advocated 30% affirmative action (**Yahaya, 2012: 8**). However, in Nigeria, the extant National Gender Policy (NGP) recommended 35% affirmative action instead and sought for a more inclusive representation of women with at least 35% of both elective political and appointive public service positions respectively. The under representation of women in political participation gained root due to the patriarchal practice inherent in our society, much of which were obvious from pre-colonial era till date. However, the re-introduction of democratic governance has witnessed once again an increase in women political participation both in elective and appointive offices in Nigeria. This study will examine the struggle of women in politics from pre-colonial times to recent times.

2. Conceptual Review

2.1. Politics

Politics refers to the activities of the government members of lawmaking organization or people who try to influence the way a country like Nigeria is governed.

2.2. Women

Generally, the word 'women' means any adult female person as contrasted with girl. Women, from the Nigerian political arena, are adult female persons who have attained the age of franchise (18 years of minimum age).

2.3. Active Participation

Active participation here refers to active political participation which is seen as those voluntary activities by which members of the society share in the selection of leaders and directly or indirectly

in the formation of policy and is a civic right of all citizens. Political participation involves essential political activities such as attending political meetings, rallies, campaigns, nominations, elections, etc; holding political party offices and public offices; contesting for elective positions; voting in elections; holding elective and appointive positions; attaining political power in legislative bodies; and other electoral activities

Politics in Nigeria, since the inception, has been dominated by men. It's all men affairs, but a no-go-area for Nigerian women. Right from the colonial era, politics in Nigeria has suffered violence and only the violent will take it by force (paraphrased from the Holy Bible: Matthew chapter 11 verse 12). Women, by nature, do not possess the kind of violent nature or characteristics exhibited by men in Nigerian politics. **Agbalajobi (2010: 52)** has opined that winning public elections in Nigeria is a matter of force or "do-or-die" affairs. Therefore, those who possess physical stamina and strength to use brutal force are men. As a result, women would have to give way for the men to take whatever is available by force. According to **Aluko (2011:41)**, the absence or under-representation of women in decision-making and implementation processes undermines the fundamental concept of 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 has undermined female legitimacy resulting in women's political powerlessness. **Akiyode-Afolabi (2010: 42)** submits that women's overall political representation and participation in government is still at 8%.

An analysis of the Nigerian electoral system has shown that the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections witnessed unprecedented increase in the number of female aspirants and increased local mobilization of the generality of women. However, only few women aspirants succeeded in winning political seats in these elections. Women candidates in the 2011 election constituted 9.1% (against 90.9% male candidature) of the total number of candidates who contested in the April 2011 polls. As usual, only few women made it through party primaries (**Aluko, 2011: 23**) which have been the trend even in the just past elections in 2015 and 2019. This failure is reinforced by the fact that political parties and structures have been hijacked by men.

3. Historical Background of women struggle in Politics

3.1. Pre-colonial era

Politically, in the pre-colonial era, Nigerian women were an integral part of the political set up of their communities. For instance, in pre-colonial Bornu, women played active roles in the administration of the state, complementing the roles played by male counterparts. Also, Women also played a very significant role in the political history of ancient Zaria. The modern city of Zaria was founded in the first half of the 16th century by a woman called Queen Bakwa Turuku. She had a daughter called Amina who later succeeded her as Queen. Queen Amina was a great and powerful warrior. She built a high wall around Zaria in order to protect the city from invasion and extended the boundaries of her territory beyond Bauchi and she made Zaria prominent Commercial Centre (**Uchendu, 2006: 17**).

The story was not different in ancient Yoruba land, where Oba ruled with the assistance of a number of women referred to as female traditional chiefs. They consisted of eight titled ladies of the highest

rank. The significant role played by prominent women such as Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin and Omu Okwei of Ossomari, cannot be ignored. Moremi and Emotan were great amazons who displayed wonderful bravery and strength in the politics of Ife and Benin respectively, while Omu Okwei dominated the commercial scene of Ossomari in present day Delta State. Table 1 below shows the statistics of women traditional rulers in the Pre-colonial days in Nigeria

Table 1: Statistics of Women Traditional Rulers in Pre-colonial days.

S/N	Name	Town/Village	LGA	State	Type of Rule	Date
1	Luwo Gbadiaya	Ife	Ife Central L.G.	Osun	Ooni of Ife	Pre-colonial days
2	Iyayun	Oyo	Oyo L.G.	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
3	Orompoto	Oyo	Oyo L.G.	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
4	Jomijomi	Oyo	Oyo L.G.	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
5	Jepojepo	Oyo	Oyo L.G.	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
6	Queen Amina	Zauzau		Kaduna	Emir	Pre-colonial days
7	Daura	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
8	Kofono	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
9	Eye-moi	Akure	Akure	Ondo	Regent- Monarch	Pre-colonial days 1705- 1735 AD
10	Ayo-Ero	Akure	Akure	Ondo	Regent- Monarch	Pre-colonial days 1850- 51 AD
11	Gulfano	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
12	Yawano	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
13	Yakania	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
14	Walsam	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
15	Cadar	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
16	Agagri	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
17	Queen Kanbasa	Bony	Bony L.G.	Rivers	Queen	Pre-colonial days

Source: Kolawale, Adeigbe, Adebayo & Abubakar (2013)

3.2. Colonial Period

Colonialism affected Nigerian women adversely as they were denied the franchise. It was also only in the 1950s that women in Southern Nigeria were given the franchise. Three women were appointed into the House of Chiefs, namely Chief (Mrs) Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti (appointed into the

Western Nigeria House of Chiefs); Chiefs (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu (both appointed into the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs). The women's wings of political parties possessed very little functional relevance (**Kolawale et al, 2013**).

3.3. The Post-Colonial Period

During this period, Nigerian women began to play very active roles. In 1960, Mrs. Wuraola Esan from Western Nigeria became the first female member of the Federal Parliament. In 1961, Chief (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo contested and won the election, becoming a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly till 1966, Mrs. Janet N. Mokelu and Miss Ekpo A. Young also contested elections and won, they became members of the Eastern House of Assembly. In northern Nigeria, however, women were still denied the franchise even after independence until 1979 that is, the return of civilian government. As a result of this denial, prominent female politicians like Hajia Gambo Sawaba in the North could not vote and be voted for (**Olufade, 2013: 13**).

Second Republic (1979-1983), saw a little more participation of women in politics. A few Nigerian women won elections into the House of Representatives at the national level and also few women won elections into the State Houses of Assembly respectively. However, During the same period, only two women were appointed Federal Ministers. They were Chief (Mrs) Janet Akinrinade and Mrs Adenike Egun Oyagbola, Minister for Internal Affairs and Minister for National Planning respectively. Mrs. Francesca Yetunde Emmanuel was the only female Permanent Secretary (first in the Federal Ministry of Establishment and later Federal Ministry of Health). A number of women were appointed Commissioners in the states also. In 1983, Ms Franca Afegbua became the only woman to be elected into the Senate. Also, very few women contested and won elections into the Local Government Councils during this period.

4. Return of Military rule in December 1983

With the advent of Buhari led military rule, the first formal quota system was introduced by the Federal Government as regards the appointment of women into governance (Nelson, 2012: 85). He directed that at least one female must be appointed as a member of the Executive Council in every state. All the states complied with this directive; some states even had two or three female members. In the early 1990s, two women were appointed Deputy Governors. These were Alhaja Latifat Okunu of Lagos State and Mrs Pamela Sadauki of Kaduna State. There was, however, no female minister, as well as no female member of the defunct Supreme Military Council or the later Armed Forces Ruling Council.

5. Third Republic

The 1990 transition elections into local governments heralding the Third Republic saw few women emerge as councillors and only one woman emerged as Chairperson of a Local Government Council in the Western part of the country. During the gubernatorial elections, no female governor emerged in any of the states (Oloyede, 2016:12). Only two female Deputy Governors emerged, namely: Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong of Cross River State. In the Senatorial election held in 1992, Mrs. Kofo Bucknor Akerele was the only woman who won a seat in the Senate. Very few women won election into the House of Representatives. One of these few was Chief (Mrs) Florence Ita Giwa who won in the Calabar Constituency.

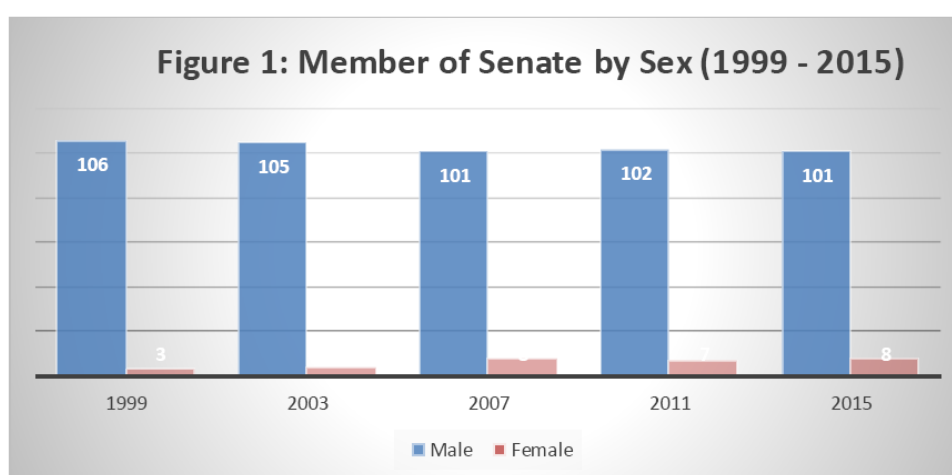
President Babangida’s Transitional Council appointed two women in January 1993, namely Mrs. Emily Aiklmhokuede and Mrs. Laraba Dagash. In the Interim National Government of Chief Ernest Shonekan, two female ministers were appointed into the cabinet. General Abacha administration also had a number of female ministers at various times in his cabinet, including Chief (Mrs) Onikepo Akande and Ambassador Judith Attah. During the military regime of General Abdulsalami Abubakar (June 9, 1998 - May 29, 1999), there were two women in the Federal Executive Council: Chief (Mrs) Onikepo Akande (Minister for Commerce) and Dr. Laraba Gambo Abdullahi (Minister of Women Affairs) (Kolawale et al, 2013).

6. Re-Introduction of Democracy (The Fourth Republic)

The return of democracy in May 29, 1999 gave hope for a new dawn in the struggle for more participation of women in Nigeria politics. Democracy is about fair representation of all interest groups in the society and the low representation of women is a violation of the principle of democracy. Despite all efforts put in place, we are yet to meet the 30% and 35% affirmation as contained in Beijing platform for action and National Gender Policy respectively. There have been five administrations between 1999 and 2015. President Obasanjo occupied the office of president between 1999 and 2007, President Umaru Musa Yaradua (2007-2010), President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2011; 2011-2015) and President Muhammadu Buhari (at present). The position of vice president in Nigeria followed the same trend as that of the president. Four males have dominated the seat since the return of democracy in 1999.

7. The Senate and House of Representative

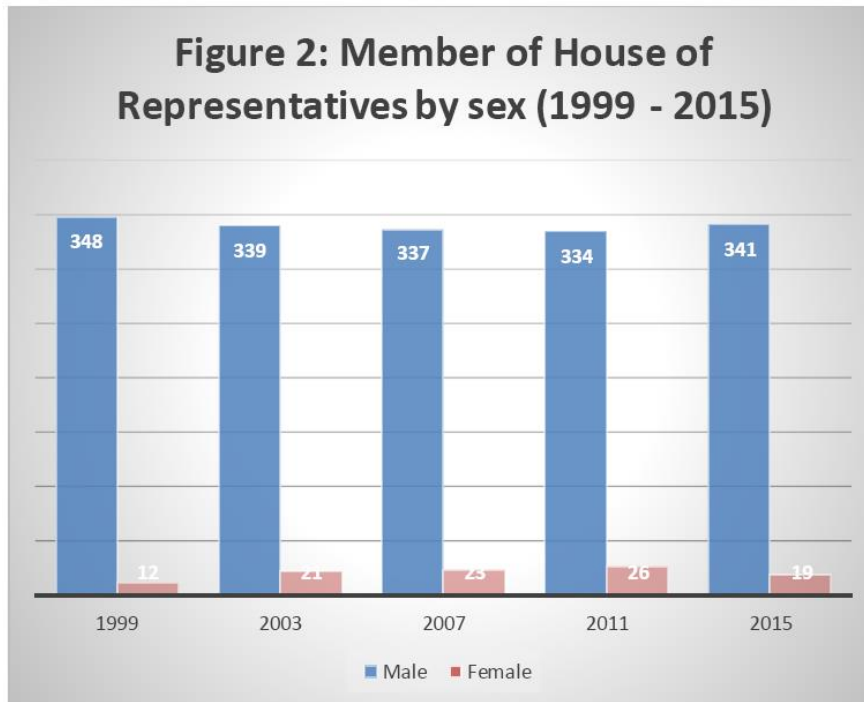
Since the return of democracy in 1999, the Senate has been dominated by males. In 1999 there were only 3 women out of the 109 members representing 2.8 per cent of the members of the Senate. In 2007 the number increased to 8 (7.3 per cent). However, there was a decrease from 8 women members in 2007 to 7 in 2011 which is 6.4 per cent and 8 (7.3 per cent) in 2015. See the Figure 1 below.



Member of House of Representative

In 1999, the number of women in the House of representative was 12 out of 360 members which was about 3.3 per cent but increased to 21 (5.8 per cent) in 2003. It was 26 (7.2 per cent) in 2011, in 2015

the number of women in the House of representative decrease to 19 (5.3 per cent) out of 360 members (Oloyede, 2016:17). See figure 2 below



Appointive position

In 1999 and 2003 out of 130 federal boards of public corporations only 7 (5.6 per cent) were women. During the period, out of 47 cabinet ministers appointed only 7 were women which represent 14.89 per cent. One woman was appointed as Director-General of a government regulatory agency. Special Advisers and Senior Special Assistance were 2 women respectively. Six (6) women were appointed as Special Assistant, 8 women as permanent secretaries and one woman as special assistant to the Vice President National Bureau of Statistics, (2010:13). In 2011 more women were given political appointment, 12 women were appointed as Ministers out of 42 which represent 30 per cent and 4 women out of 20 as Special Advisers. In this present regime only 6 women were appointed as Ministers out of 30 ministerial appointees

8. Effort Made towards Female Participation in Politics in Nigeria

Several efforts have been made to address the low representation of women in elective and appointive positions in Nigeria; among such efforts are the establishment of Women Political empowerment office and Nigeria Women Trust Funds, Women Lobby Group. Other efforts include the institution of an INEC gender policy, the national multi stakeholder dialogue; the initiation of several interventions to actualize affirmative action and the convening of the Nigeria Women Strategy Conference (Olufade, 2013:167). National Center for Women Development in collaboration with National Bureau of Statistics are making efforts to have evidenced based data about this issue. Presently the available data are not harmonized. The data collation covers the period 1999 – 2015; the data is devoid of 2019 elections positions due to election tribunal here and there.

9. Factors Affecting Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

9.1. Under-representation of Women in Governance: Nigerian women are marginalized, discriminated against and are greatly under-represented in politics and governance where important decisions are taken relative to their male-counterparts which is a terrible challenge to their active participation in the nation's politics. It is regrettable that although women constitute the greater number of the registered voters in any elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to experience full representative positions (**Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013: 39-46.**). The 1999 Nigeria Constitution generally refers to non-discrimination on the basis of sex, etc but is not explicit in ensuring equal representation on gender basis, takes no cognizance of the disadvantaged position of women, and has no provision for gender equality. Likewise, "the Federal Character Principle, which is meant to ensure equitable representation of states and ethnic groups in national appointments, actually places Nigerian women at additional disadvantage by implying that they can only represent their ethnic and states of origin. Where culture does not permit a woman to represent her place of birth, she loses a golden opportunity. There have been many cases where a woman's state of origin disallows her appointment and the husband's state also refuses to endorse her. In many of these instances the government plays safe by appointing a man instead. And this has continued to consolidate women's under-representation in national politics (**Agbalajobi, 2010:7**). Based on the quota allocation system as approved by the UN to be implemented in global politics, and the Beijing Conference agreement on 30% public seats and positions to be reserved for women, it is evident that there has been an increase in the number of Nigerian women in elective and appointive positions. Yet, there is still under-representation of Nigerian women in governance which is another major challenge to their active participation in politics.

9.2. The Nature of Party System: Political parties in Nigeria are usually male-dominated and do not have level playing ground for women. According to **Aina (2012:71)**, political parties in Nigeria are more or less rhetoric than real, and obviously pay lip service to the gender equality agenda. She further accused political parties in Nigeria of being characterized with a gamut of problems including undemocratic administration of the parties, lack of gender responsive party politics culture, gender unfriendly party practices (such as violence, money politics, blackmails and name calling, among others), and lack of technical skills to mainstream gender issues in party politics. Also, political parties are usually dominated by men. Ideally, it is the position of "women leader" that is reserved for women. In a situation where men are almost the executive members and non-executive members, political decisions are usually taken in favour of men. Women are left to their fate. Of course, it is obvious that "no cockroach will win a case in any court where fowl is the chief judge". This implies that it is very difficult for women to win elections where men decide the political outcomes. It is also pertinent to point out that most political meetings are usually held in the night, and this makes it difficult for women to cope for fear of being nicknamed "harlots" by their respective husbands and even fellow women. Consequently, most women see politics as a "dirty game" played by men alone and simply withdraw from it and even dissuade fellow women who are interested from contesting against men.

9.3. Family Responsibilities: Family responsibilities and childbearing also hinder women from participating effectively in partisan political activities. For better part of their lives, most women are involved not only in child bearing but also in child rearing (**Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2013:19**). Thus,

much of the time they could have devoted to politics is taken up by their maternal challenges and obligations. On a serious note, most men do not allow their women to deeply or actively involved in politics, for fear of losing their wives to political activities and gladiators, becoming more powerful or influential than them (husbands), reneging their domestic/family responsibilities, among other things.

9.4. Cultural/Religious Demands: Culture, as we know, is the totality of the patterned way of life of any people. In almost all the cultures in Nigeria, women are only meant to be seen and not heard. Among the Igbo, Hausa and Tiv peoples, women are seen as domestic beings, with their place in the kitchen. Most cultures in Nigeria forbid women from competing with men in issues involving public interests. Also, among the Islam-practicing Hausa people, the religious practice known as “purdah” forbids women from being seen in public (**Mohammed & Zaid, 2014:71**). Thus, these women continue to be marginalized in terms of education, and thus cannot be actively involved in politics. However, increased education of women has continued to liberate some Nigerian women from the shackles of culture and religion.

9.5. Financial Constraints: Politics in Nigeria has been monetized. In fact, it is usually referred to as “money-bag” politics. Political period therefore becomes a time to display wealth by contestants. Electorates are deceived into voting for the highest bidder(s), as they are not sure if they can benefit from the governments when enthroned. Poverty, which has been feminized in most developing countries, including Nigeria, is a major obstacle to women’s active political participation. This forces women to accept the “second fiddle” role. According to **Nelson (2012:15)**, financial resources constrains women's political efficacy as women find it difficult to fund election, including payment of registration and nomination fees, and funds to finance the kind of elaborate and expensive electioneering campaigns required to mobilize supporters and voters to guarantee success at the polls. The monetization of electoral politics in Nigeria amplifies the generally poor socioeconomic conditions of Nigerian women and reduces their chances of success significantly. Although they are occasionally granted waivers with regards to registration and nomination fees, women lack money to finance their campaigns and ensure their victory. Therefore, with enormous financial resources already in the hands of men as controllers of party structures, women's chances are further reduced. According to **Agbalajobi (2010: 82)**, the dominant philosophy in Nigerian politics is money. The “money” factor plays very vital role in the conception, mobilization and winning of political offices either at the presidential, governorship, senatorial, and local council elections. Money is very critical in the shaping, making and unmaking of public office which is supposed to be on trust. Thus, the higher and larger one’s financial muscle is in Nigeria, the greater one’s chances of winning public office. Women are generally poor in Nigeria, and thus do not have enough financial strength to prosecute their political ambitions. But having dominated the socio-economic and political scenes since the creation of the Nigerian state, men have enough money to sponsor their political ambitions.

9.6. Mass Illiteracy: Lack of adequate education is a major hurdle for women political participation. Women constitute a larger percentage of the illiterate population in Nigeria. They are largely uneducated and lack the courage to challenge male chauvinism and domination over women. In fact, illiteracy has resulted in some women opposing and blackmailing fellow women who have taken the challenge to demand for equality between men and women.

9.7. Wrong Perception of Women in Politics: In Nigeria, women who are actively participating in politics are seen and treated as free women (prostitutes/wayward) of easy virtues, stubborn people, whores, too domineering, cultural rebellions, etc. It is observed that during campaign, the political opponents (mostly men) use the alleged loose moral standing of these women against them and often insult them directly in public. Thus, they are often subjected to public ridicule and are socially stigmatized by both men and women. The use of negative labelling; derogatory names; abusive language and expressions to describe Nigerian women in politics discourage many of them from active participation in the nation's politics

9.8. Unhealthy Political Environment: Unhealthy Political environment is another challenge to women active participation in politics in Nigeria. The political terrain in Nigeria is do-or-die affair fraught with violence, maiming, assassinations, threats, blackmail, intimidation, humiliation, etc which are used by mostly men to scare women away from active participation in politics in Nigeria. Involvement of thugs before, during and after elections (**Kolawal et al., 2012**), and the attendant insecurity such as destruction of lives and properties that characterized a typical electoral process in Nigeria makes politics something out-of-the-way for most women (**Ngara & Ayabam, 2013: 47-58**). Nigerian women have over the years become targets of violence of diverse forms based on their positions in promoting transformative politics (**Agblajaobi, 2010: 79**).

10. Conclusion

Following the trends and happenings around the political environment in Nigeria pre-colonial times till now, it is becoming clearer that women may never achieve the mandated 30% affirmation as enshrined in the Beijing plan of action. Several challenges that Nigerian women still face in active participation in politics such as discriminatory socio-cultural and religious practices; lack of finance; under-representation of women in governance; unhealthy political environment; political party discrimination among others. The advancement of women's rights (education, political, economic, reproductive etc) becomes a critical precondition for effective and sustainable development in any nation.

11. Recommendations

- a) Socio-economic factors inhibiting women's political potency should be properly addressed. Specifically, conscious efforts should be made by Nigerian governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies (local and international), and women organizations to liberate women from the grips of culture, religion, male-dominated party system, poverty and illiteracy, among others. Failure to address these inhibiting factors implies that women political underrepresentation will continue in the Nigerian polity
- b) Introducing quota system at all levels of government and Identifying and engaging relevant stakeholders such as Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties to ensure strict adherence to it.

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