



Science Arena Publications  
Specialty Journal of Politics and Law

ISSN: 2520-3282

Available online at [www.sciarena.com](http://www.sciarena.com)

2019, Vol, 4 (3): 103-111

# Women Participation in Politics in Nigeria: A Study of Female Representation in National Assembly (2007-2015)

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**Abstract:** *The participation of women in politics in Nigeria is of great concern to many because of the continuous low record of female representation after elections. The elections of 2007, 2011 and 2015 with the promises it held for women, at the end there was low female representation in the country. In spite of the 35percent affirmative action and the huge campaign of the women for change initiatives aimed at providing a soft landing for women in the elections. The obstacles to women representation are numerous and as many have agreed, they root from the colonial leadership and other factors. This has led to low female representation that negates the traditional importance of women in nation building in the Nigeria society. This study therefore critically reviewed the issue of women Participation in politics vis-a-vis female representation especially during and after the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections. It also offers recommendations towards solving the identified traditional and social factors that inhibit women participation in politics in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *political participation, female representation, gender parity, and 2007, 2011, 2015 general elections.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that women the world over are catalysts for development and change; yet in the study of twentieth century Nigeria political history, the role of women has tended to be regarded as insignificant (Sani, 2001).

The various general elections in Nigeria have not shown any improvement in women representation, in spite of the numbers that came out for various elective positions. The women in Nigeria before these elections were highly motivated by the promises and measures taken by the federal government to lessen the difficulties they usually faced in past polls. The measure which includes the enforcement of the National Gender Policy that came into existence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2008, with the promise of 35% affirmative action, was expected to offer women the opportunity to compete with the men and capture a good number of their aspired positions, the Nigeria Women Trust Fund inaugurated on 24<sup>th</sup> march 2011 in Abuja in the ministry of women and social development also gave a launch pad for female candidates at the polls. The 100 million naira, Trust Fund was set up to help offset the campaign cost of about 230 female aspirants irrespective of their political parties (Okoronkwo-chukwu, 2013)

In addition to these was the activities of the office of the wife of the then President, Dame Patience Jonathan directed to the achievement of the political ambitions of Nigeria women in the 2011 and 2015 elections. The

then first lady at the peak of the campaigns roll out her programmed, women for change initiatives. The programme was aimed at encouraging and promoting the female representation and as well as their socio-economic well-being across the 36 states of the Federation.

The fact that the women for change initiatives rode on the presumed efficacy of the 35% affirmative action, left no one in doubt of its practicability in the minds of the thousands of women that obeyed the clarion call. Regrettably, for women, the results of the elections after the much advocacy of 35% affirmative action believed to bring about gender parity showed a complete decline after all the positive effort since 1999. The fact that Nigeria is yet to achieve gender parity in political representation at the National level, let alone meeting the target it set in the National Gender Policy (NGP) (British Council Report, 2012). This emphasizes the position of Nigerian women as second class citizens in the nation's politics as in every relation to men. After all the promises made women are still under represented.

### **The Concept of Political Participation**

The concept of political participation is one of those concepts in the Social Sciences that have been subjected to several interpretations and meanings by scholars and practitioners (Chukwuemeka and Eze, 2011). Norman and Verba (1975), have defined political participation as consisting those legal activities by private citizens, which are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and the activity they undertake. This definition emphasizes conventional political participation and excluded unconventional politics such as illegal political protest, political thuggery, politically motivated terrorist attacks, hijack of ballot boxes etc.

Political participation has also been conceived as activities of citizens designed to influence government decision making. This definition, in a wide sense, comprises all the activities of individual and groups, conventional or unconventional that target decision making process with a view to impacting a change.

Axford, et. al. (2002), have observed that the definition of political participation is far from being straightforward and that one problem of the various definitions is that they are more or less exclusive. They argue that the perception of political participation as a voluntary action through which people seek to influence the making of public policy, excludes those form of participation that is coerced. Thus, they defined political participation as a term that denotes the action by which individuals take part in the political process. Parry, Moyser and Day (1992), suggested that political participation consists of taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies. This conception, however, did not take into account the passive form of politics such as discussing political issues with colleagues or making joke about a politician and his political activities.

Krauss (1971) has also stated that in a merit system, electoral, legislative and differential political behavior varies with hierarchical structure and length of service or income of bureaucrats, while in the patronage system, party preference is a significant predictor.

According to Gerry, political participation is shaped by locally distinctive "rule-in-use", notwithstanding the socio-economic or level of social capital in an area. The "rule-in-use" refers to the institutional rules that frame participation. They further stated that the level of participation is related to the openness of the political system, the practice of a "public value" orientation among local government managers, and the effectiveness of umbrella civic organization (Eme, 2015). Political participation has the intent or effect of influencing public action, either directly or indirectly by influencing the selection of political decision makers. Chukwuemeka & Eze (2011) have identified political activities to include: voting; campaigning for a party or supporting party work through other means; protest activities; getting involved in organizations that take a stand in politics, and serving in a voluntary capacity on local governing board (as cited in Eme 2015).

Scholars, however, have not reached a consensus on what constitute conventional and unconventional political participation. Conventional participation has been viewed as a relatively routine behaviour that uses the established institutions of representative government especially campaign for candidates and voting in elections. On the other hands, unconventional participation is a relatively uncommon behaviour that challenges

or defies established institutions or dominant culture. Conventional political participation has been associated with activities such as voting, letter writing to policy makers, contact with representatives, working on campaign, and campaign contribution. Newton and Van Deth, on the other hands, identified some unconventional participation to include: demonstrations, boycott, sit-ins, use of violence, burning draft card, bombing government buildings etc. Besides, it is our view that political activities such as falsification of election result, political thuggery, hijack of ballot boxes, political assassination, burning of political party's building or candidate's campaign posters and other forms of electoral malpractices and violence are forms of unconventional political activities (Eme, 2015)

Therefore, political participation as can be inferred from the above analysis, involves a wide spectrum of activities that take different forms depending on the political culture of a given nation.

Whether an activity is conventional or unconventional also depends on a nation's political culture, legal framework and socialization process. Thus, in the context of this work, we are concerned with what we considered conventional activities such as registration as voters, membership of a political party, voting in elections, running for political positions, and participating in political debates. This restriction to conventional political attitudes is informed by the fact that the political education programme of the National Orientation Agency in Nigeria is geared towards promoting political consciousness of the citizens for their active participation in acceptable forms of political activities.

### **Theoretical Framework of Analysis**

To explicate the asymmetry between men and women in the public sphere, it is proper to state that the basis of politics is value production and allocation. In this connection, the economic base becomes the fulcrum on which other aspects of the society rest. The dominant category at the economic base determines the character of the superstructure of society, which includes politics, religion and law. The point being made is that the superstructure is an embodiment of the interest of the dominant group in the society. The male sex, which is not coterminous to any socio-economic group, remains at bottom, dominant over women (Eme, 2015). In a dialectic materialist perspective, the development of instruments of production enabled man to achieve some form of surplus in production over and above man the wanderer. The woman who was an equal partner to man the wanderer joins the settled existence, which was a result of the man's improvement of his instruments of production. Besides, she shared the life changes offered by the man's effort and thus become subject to him in a settled family life (Engels, 1977). The extrapolation of the man's authority in the family to the macro level of the public sphere produces patriarchal order, male-centered or androcentric world. The resultant male dominance leads to the privileging of the male over the female. To reinforce the male dominance, women are put at a distance from the sphere of politics and the notion of impropriety of female authority in the public sphere is propagated. Unfortunately, women are socialized into the acceptance of this worldview and more often than not, they partake in its reproduction in the training of children into gender specific roles.

The male dominance of the substructure is evidenced by the sorting of women into low paid jobs (Semyonov and Kraus, 1983). But beyond the control of the economy, androcentrism is strengthened at the superstructure almost to point that it seems to be independent of the economy.

There is for instance a gradual overcome of the sorting of women into economic irrelevance because expanded training opportunities can now enable them to earn living in hitherto male dominated economic environments and consequently become economically empowered as men. But there is a rigid encumbrance to the translation of the economic empowerment of the women to political power or achieving leverage with men in political participation. What explains this is pervasive androcentrism in the male dominated gladiatorial level of political participation. It is only where expediency permits that some functions of marginal importance are conceded to women at this level (such as leadership of women wing of political parties, appointive positions in government etc.). The consequence of this is inequality within democratic equality.

Central to this study is that global patriarchy has given ascendancy to men in politics, authority and decision-making in and outside the family. Under such a male-centred system without a female face, women lack access to politics and decision-making and are highly under-represented at most levels of government. This framework analyses female representation in decision making and the challenges encountered by female politicians on their way to political participation in Nigeria. It also, contends that the power relations that have prevented women from political activism operate in many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public. It argues that the gender uneven electoral politics in Nigeria is as a result of men's majority in the political party hierarchy, which places them at a vantage position to influence party's internal politics in terms of selecting or electing candidates for elections, and political patronage. The study notes that socio-cultural, economic, political, organizational, legal and political factors have combined to shape the "home-centred" perception of Nigerian women, and explains the level of participation of women in political and bureaucratic decision-making positions.

### **Women's Performance at the Elections (2007 and 2015)**

The poor performance of women in 2011 and 2015 elections (both the new entrants and those who were already occupying elective offices before and wished for a second tenure like their male counterparts) indicates that a lot have to be done if they must effectively transcend political power in Nigeria. The 2011 and 2015 election were widely monitored by both local and international election monitoring bodies and this removed the element as among the lowest in female representation. In a review of women's participation and performance during the elections, Irabor (2011) noted that women aspirants were more and audacious in 2011 unlike in 1999, 2003, and 2002.

The total number of aspirants both men and women were 3306, with 3004 (90%) male and 302 (9%) female aspirants. The measured number notwithstanding the female representation could not beat the 2007 performance.

It is important to note that in 2007 election about 1200 women entered the context, 660 won the primaries while 93 emerged winners. Out of these winners 6 were deputy governors, 9 senators, 27 members of House of Representatives and 52 won the state House of Assembly seats (Eyinade, 2011). Even though this result was a great leap at that time and given the poor presence of women in the nation's politics, it did not fill the yawning gap. The most important political seat after the executive (presidency) is the legislature because of their important role of enacting laws of the land. However, with more men in that position, laws affecting issues of gender will always remain inequitable

The general belief among female politicians in Nigeria is that if more women are elected into the national assembly, they would encourage and help in making law against most of the problems militating against their progress. Therefore, many were dissatisfied with the results of 2011 and 2015 elections where only 7 women were members of senate out of the 109 members (7<sup>th</sup> senate) and 19 female representations in the house of representatives out of the 360 members and 8 women representation in the senate and 15 women lawmaker representation in the house of representatives respectively (Daily Trust, 2015).

Furthermore, in 2011 only one woman (Mrs. Sarah Jubril) emerged as presidential aspirant (the only female presidential aspirant of the People's Democratic Party). While in 2015 the nation got its first ever female presidential candidate Professor (Mrs.) Oluremi Sonaiya of the KOWA party, she was only able to garner nominal votes but hope her example will inspire more Nigerian women participation in politics.

Many view the women inability to match the spending power of their male opponents as one of the greatest challenges Nigerian women face in politics. The reign of political godfathers in Nigeria who bankroll anointed son (always male) and do everything including thuggery and buying votes to make sure they win, means that women will always come last. Women are yet to have a lot of money with which to earn the sobriquet "political godmothers" to be able to sponsor their political daughters.

The British Council (2012) report further reveals that women lost some of the ground they gained in 1999 at the 2011 election. It noted that the low percentage of women elected to various positions in the 2011 polls

especially in the House of Representatives where women recorded a rise 9%, has earned the nation 118 positions of 192 countries in terms of gender parity. The 9% representation of women lawmakers in the lower house puts Nigeria make Nigeria remade representatives for lower than their counterparts from South Africa (43%) and Rwanda (65%).

According to the European Union reports on 2011 election there were downward performance of women in the national assembly in comparison to 2007 election. In 2015, Mama Taraba as she fondly called (Senator Aisha Alhassan) of APC came close to making history but lost to the governorship election to Arch. Darius Ishaku of PDP. However, the female folk were consoled with four deputy governors in Lagos state, Ogun state, River and Enugu state. According to United Nations development program (UNDP) and Women in Politics Forum “lessons learned Workshop” 2015 noted that if the political parties had sincerely assisted female contestants, they would have performed better in the 2015 elections. It also observed that contesting and winning election for female goes beyond giving women free nomination forms .It is surprising that despite all the efforts spanning several months, the female representation recorded lower success than even the 2011 elections. It is important to note that given women free nomination forms is one thing , supporting them to win the primaries and the real contest is another , parties did not do much for women to win in the 2015 elections .

The results of the 2015 National Assembly elections confirm that female representation in the Parliament is steadily declining. Only 5.11% of federal legislators in the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly are women, down from 9% in 2007 and 7% in 2011.

It is regrettable that although women constitute the greater number of registered voters in any of the elections held in Nigeria, they are yet to experience full representative positions. The role women play during the electioneering campaign and voting processes therefore demands that they be allowed to partake in leadership positions for their sacrifices to the success of the various political parties at the polls. Political appointments, supplementary seats in the National Assembly and enabling constitutional amendments to safeguard women’s positions have been suggested as alternatives to female elective positions (EU Report 2011). These will remove from them the pressure of competing with the men and allow more women to be involved in policy making. Abike Dabiri-Erewa, a member of the Federal House of Representatives, who was elected into office in 2007 and regained her seat in 2011, believes that it is a far better option. Politics to her is male dominated and “appointive positions are better than elective positions”

Appointive positions apart from giving women the freedom to participate in the politics of the nation, will also reduce the unequal gender ratio where men surpass women at all times. The political analyst, Bisi Alabi Williams sees the 35% affirmative action as uneven while blaming the failure of elective positions for women in Nigeria on the “difficult terrain of politics and the domineering attitude of the male folk apart from representation in elections, having women in appointive positions also helps to balance the equation (Alabi 2012). Given the results of the elections of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 which glaringly demonstrate that women in Nigeria are underrepresented, the above alternatives seem to be the best for the realization of gender parity in governance.

### Tables Illustrating Female Representation from 1999-2015

**Table 1: Women Elected to Public Office in Nigeria 1999-2015.**

Office	1999		2003		2007		2011		2015	
	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women	Seat Available	Women
President	P	0		0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Senate	109	3(2.8)	109	4(3.7)	109	9(3.8)	109	7(6.4)	109	8

House of Reps	360	7(1.9)	360	21(5.8)	360	27(7.5)	360	25(6.9)	360	15
Governor	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0	36	0
State House of Assembly	990	24(2.4)	990	40(3.9)	990	57(5.8)	990	68(6.9)	990	0
SHA Committees Chairpersons	829	18(2.2)	881	32(3.6)	887	52(5.9)	887	N/A	887	N/A
L.G.A. Chairpersons	710	13(1.8)	774	15(1.9)	740	27(3.6)	740	N/A	774	N/A
Councillors	6368	69(1.1)	6368	267(4.2)	6368	235(3.7)	6368	N/A	6368	N/A

Source: Eme Okechukwu Innocent (2015)

### The Effect of Colonialism on Nigerian Women

That political leadership in Nigeria is not favorable to women is a fact that started to emerge with the colonial government. Colonialism brought many changes in the African traditional society especially in the role of women. Whereas the Western society at the time of colonization shielded women from the socio-economic and political affairs of that society, African women on the other hand were integral part of all the aspects of their society.

Colonization however displaced African women from these roles by hounding them to the home front while their male counterparts were empowered through education and leadership positions. Hunter (1973:94) asserts that the contact with Europe adversely affects African women who had always been strong participants in the different sectors of their society:

But since the era of colonialism, women have been placed on the lower rungs of the proverbial ladder by the dominant forces of capitalism and now globalization, which emphasizes the need for power, superiority and compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with different values attached to them.

Over the years, with the leadership of the country in the hands of nationals including the periods under Military rule, Nigerian women fared less in politics. Women operated on the margin during the many years of military rule. The then Arm Forces Ruling Council had no female member but democracy with the expected freedom it offered reassured Nigerian women to join politics in 1999. It is pertinent to note here that the World Women Beijing Conference of 1995 drew the attention of Nigerian women to their rights. Part of the fulcrum of the Beijing Conference was to:

Ensure women’s participation in power structures and decision making; develop education and training to increase women’s capacity to participate in decision making and leadership; and aim at gender balance in government bodies and composition of delegation to the United Nations.

Although the political rights of women in Nigeria was not in contention before 1995 since it is fully entrenched in the nation’s constitution, implementing it to the fullest to give women fair and equal rights remained a problem. In spite of the remarkable change from 1995 till date, Nigerian women are yet to attain that level of political participation that would bring significant difference in elections.

### Challenges Women Face in Nigerian Politics

There is a general perception towards political leadership in Nigeria as the preserve of men. Traditionally men are born leaders and this has affected the notion of who should be the effective and right candidate in various political posts. The stakes against women are legion because, apart from the issue of men being heads of families, so many other taboos are invoked by men to scare women away from contesting political positions. It is very difficult for a married woman to participate in politics without people casting aspersion on her person as promiscuous, only very few men, even among the educated, allow their wives to come out and participate in politics. A husband’s consent must be obtained and his relatives consulted before a woman enters into politics.

More so family responsibilities and childbearing also hinder women from participating effectively in partisan political activities. During a sizeable part of their adult lives, most women are involved not only in child bearing, but also in child rearing. Thus, much of the time they may have wished to devote to politics is taken up by their maternal challenges and obligations. Also an unmarried woman venturing into politics is simply inviting public scrutiny to her private and personal life. Political opponents will accuse her of sleeping with all the party stalwarts to win. In addition, the nocturnal hours politicians keep in strategizing and mapping out campaigns deter women from effectively following the electioneering process. Most times meetings are called for in unholy hours when they are expected to take care of their children and homes. The ones that brave it to the venues are booed and taunted by opponents as shameless women.

Majority of the people in Nigeria believe that no decent woman can play politics without compromising their virtue; all the women that go into it are seen as women of easy virtue even when they are married. Women themselves see the name calling and odd hours fixed for meetings as schemes hatched by the men to remove them from the happenings in the political circle. This attitude of the society creates a sense of apathy in the women and explains the reason why they are more comfortable as voters, 'mobilizers', praise singers and supporters to male candidates.

Even when all these challenges have been met the women's greatest test is lack of resources, economic, material and human in financing their ambition. To play politics in Nigeria money becomes more important than the political supporters. With money a candidate can buy overwhelming number of supporters few minutes to voting. Again, none of the women can match the men in money politics, as political space appears to be opened to those with strong political affiliations. Many female aspirants during the 2011 elections were abandoned by their supporters because they could not match the men in money politics. Finance determines a lot in any elections in Nigeria and men are way ahead of women in financial stability.

Here again we are confronted with the effect of colonialism on women who received education late. Colonialism favored the education of men than women and this accounts for the position of men in almost all the sectors of development and women constituting larger percentage of the illiterate group in Nigerian society. This illiteracy could also be attributed to the fact that in most families, parents prefer to send their sons to school, instead of their daughters whom they feel would eventually get married and thus get incorporated into another family. Thus a larger percentage of the girls remain uneducated and unexposed.

Equally ethical issues and innumerable social, cultural and religious factors undermine women's political participation. In Northern Nigeria, for instance, an important factor inhibiting women's participation is the house seclusion of women.

Another reason women fail is the incidence of political violence and lawlessness during elections. There has never been any recorded history of elections in Nigeria without reports of violence. The 2011 and 2015 general elections witnessed high level of political violence that caused the death of many. The security agencies failed to provide proper protection of the electoral process. Political violence has therefore forced many women to pull out of the race, and some in most cases quit politics prematurely. The activities of political thugs intensify during the voting process and they are the main reason vote jacking exist. It is at this level that violence becomes imminent, because whoever grabs the ballot box determines the winner. Female candidates of the various political parties at this point scamper to safety leaving the field to the men who sponsor those thugs. Female voters are also intimidated into casting their votes for the wrong candidates especially in the rural areas where many are not educated.

Political parties have also come under the hammer of critics for their lack of internal democracy and their inability to reduce the charges of nomination forms which compounds the difficulties female candidates face. In addition, apart from the above challenges directly caused by others, Nigerian women when it comes to politics, lack the spirit of sisterhood which seriously militates against their struggle for political relevance. Traditionally Nigerian women are known for drawing strength from one another especially when it comes to

issues that affect their collective interest. Unfortunately that unity of purpose is not found among women during elections, they are more interested in campaigning for men than lending support to one another.

Again, discriminatory laws and gender blind policies, lack of political will, patriarchy, god-fatherism, male dominated party executives, timidity, corruption. The above factors are among the numerous problems women face in Nigeria and unless they are dealt with, women would continue to experience hurdles in their political aspirations.

### **Recommendations**

For millions of Nigerian women, taking part in elective politics is not easy, not with the cultural and social inhibitions they are faced with. This study is on the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections in the country and how women in elective positions fared. In an effort to address the challenges identified, the paper suggests as follow:

Women should begin to seek elective positions more; not just appointments. With each woman that rises beyond those limitations identified in the paper, many more get encouraged. Also for women to remain relevant in parties, there is need to review the 1999 Constitution, political parties constitutions in order to advocate for greater representation at the party levels, support women through actively identifying, training and building capacity to lead, contest, and advocate for women and social issues, and also create affirmative action like quotas to enable them contest.

The paper also calls for support for the legalization of independent candidacy in Nigeria.

Independent candidacy frees women (and men) from the tyranny of major political party's. Finally; women should make efforts to defeat the psychology of patriarchy via education, empowerment programme, mobilization and networking.

### **Conclusion**

The number of women elected to public offices in Nigeria may not increase significantly after this year's 2015 general election, analyses by this study have shown. This is because Nigerian women have encountered a number of problems while venturing into politics. There is large scale- socio- cultural discrimination from the men folk, both in choosing, voting for candidates and in allocating political offices. More often than not, men constitute a larger percentage of the party membership and this tends to affect women when it comes to selecting or electing candidates for elections. Since men are usually the majority in the political party setup, they tend to dominate the party hierarchy and are therefore at advantage in influencing the party's internal politics.

As 2019 elections with each political party strategizing on ways of winning, making gender parity a reality should start through the practice of internal democracy. The achievement of gender parity at party level will automatically ease the way for women in any position they want. It should be part of the manifestoes of the various political parties. In the other hand the Women themselves need to work together like their predecessors by championing a common front and working towards achieving success. They need to help one another, be there for each other in other to hasten their "dream of gender equality.

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