

## **WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA PRIOR TO THE FOURTH REPUBLIC**

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper examines the activities of women to the growth of the democratic processes and their involvement in the political governance of Nigeria. It further investigates how women have been short changed overtime despite their struggles within the polity. The paper relies on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were based on oral interviews and archival materials. Secondary sources on the other hand, included literature such as books and newspapers. The oral interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The documentary data were subjected to internal and external criticism for authentication and then to textual and contextual analysis. The researchers find out that the female gender in Nigeria have been under played and until they get them involved in politics, Nigeria will continue to operate in a weaker posture.

**KEYWORDS:** Economics, Gender, Politics, Democratic Processes.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria's location at the corner of Africa in the Gulf of Guinea, within the South Atlantic Ocean makes it an important geo-political and economic hub in the region (Duyile, *Historicizing the Development and Intensification of the Nigerian Navy between 1956-1958*, 2019). Nigeria also covers an area of 923,768km (Duyile, *The Gender Question and the Nigerian Fourth Republic, 1999-2015*, 2020). Prior to the amalgamation of 1914, the people in what is now known as Northern Nigeria consisted of different 'empires', some of them extending into parts that are not part of current-day Nigeria like parts of present day Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin (Duyile, *Nigeria-Cameroon Boundary Relations in the North of Nigeria, 1914-94*, 2014). The Anglo-French Declaration of 9 January, 1931. The declaration came to being as a result of World War of 1914 when the forces of the United Kingdom and France conquered and occupied most of the West African Region (Duyile, *Nigerian-Cameroon Bakassi Peninsula Crisis: A Retrospect of Nigerian-Technocrats Views Prior to the Court Case at The Hague*, 2015).

This paper, therefore, presents a data-based analysis of women's participation in politics in Nigeria. However, it is important that this research identify succinctly the gender context associated with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, the term "woman" is defined as an adult female, a female human being assigned female sex at birth, or a person who identifies as a woman. Biologically, women are the sex capable of conceiving and giving birth. They inherit X chromosomes from each parent and have distinct female reproductive anatomy. Generally, women have a wider pelvis, broader hips, and larger breast than men, less facial and body hair, higher body fat composition, and are on average shorter and less muscular. The study focuses on women's involvement in political activities worldwide. Traditional gender roles historically limited women's opportunities, resulting in gender inequality. Progress in the 20th century allowed women access to careers and education beyond homemaking. However, violence against women persists, and some face restrictions on reproductive rights. Even today, women in many regions lack equal opportunities, facing gender-based violence and discrimination (Adewale, 2008). Action is crucial to ensure women's dignity and fairness in society.

Women in present-day Western societies experience a higher level of equality than in ancient times. Throughout history, women's equality has been inconsistent, with periods of gaining and losing power. Today, women are recognized for their mental strength and incredible contributions to the world. Being a mentally strong woman is about character, setting good examples, and self-care. Confidence, productivity, optimism, and achievements make women an outstanding gender. The Male gender refers to the biological sex category typically associated with individuals who have reproductive anatomy and characteristics typically characterized by the presence of male gametes (sperm). In most species, including humans, males are characterized by reproductive structures such as testes and the ability to produce small, mobile gametes (sperm cells) which can fertilize the larger, immobile gametes (egg cells) produced by individuals typically classified as female. It's important to note that while male and female were commonly used terms to describe biological sex; gender identity is a separate and more complex concept that encompasses a person's sense of their own gender, which may not necessarily align with their biological sex.

Transgender (considered a gender by some scholars) refers to a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity, which is their deeply-felt sense of their own gender, does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. A transgender person may have been born male at birth but identifies and lives as a female, or vice versa. This term acknowledges that a person's gender identity is not determined solely by their biological or anatomical characteristics. Transgender individuals may take various steps to align their external appearance, expression, and social roles with their affirmed gender identity. This can include undergoing medical procedures such as hormone therapy or surgeries, as well as making changes to their clothing, hairstyle, and overall presentation. It's important to respect and acknowledge a person's self-identified gender and to use the appropriate names and pronouns that they prefer. Acceptance and understanding of transgender individuals are essential for promoting inclusivity and equality. This study exclusively focuses on the involvement of women as a biological demographic in the political context of Ekiti, it does not encompass discussion related to the transgender sex within this study.

Africa is a diverse continent with various cultures, languages, economies, and political systems, all impacting African women differently. African women actively participated in United Nations World Conferences on Women in 1985 and 1995, advocating for women's rights and empowerment (Johnson, 2010). These conferences brought global attention to women's issues and pressured African governments to respond to women's demands. Additionally, in the 1985 conference, African women successfully influenced discussions on national liberation and apartheid, which were significant to them but previously overlooked (Olatunji, 2014).

Despite Nigeria having a female population of 80.2 million out of 162.5 million people, women's political participation in governance and decision-making remains low compared to their numerical strength (Adeleke, 2007). Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, there has been marginal progress in women's political representation. In the first republic, only two female senators were nominated by their parties, not elected. Subsequent elections showed limited female involvement, with very few women elected into political positions (Lawal, 2009). The colonial government also contributed to gender segregation, neglecting women's roles in decision-making. The colonial leadership did more damage to the plight of women. For instance, prior to colonial rule, women in some of the empires were given a place of prominence. The coming of the colonial rule reversed most of these achievements. Women could become chiefs in their own rights, for example, Mba noted that, Yoruba women had occupied the highest public office in the past but not in the nineteenth century; they were allowed formal direct participation in the political process through the institution of Iyalode and the Erelu Ogboni; as palace priestesses in Oyo and Ogboni in Abeokuta and Ijebu, they were involved in judicial processes affecting the whole society.

They effectively controlled their own affairs and were also involved in executive responsibilities covering the whole society (Ogunleye, 2005). The women had their own structures of power which dealt with the feminine issues; the Obi Meetings named "Mikiri" were held where women could resolve issues arising from their roles particularly as traders, but also as farmers, wives and mothers (Oloyede, 2013). Women could also resort to taking sanctions both on other women and on men to resolve individual or collective grievances. In the northern part of Nigeria especially before Islamization of the society, women took active part in politics as some of them were war leaders like Queen Amina of Zazzau now Zaria, and Queen Nzingha of Ndongo in the present day Angola. Diop, concerned them, including the regulations of markets (Ajogbeje, Women Participation in Nigerian Politics and its challenges for Nigeria's Centenary). Historically, among the Ibo people of southeastern Nigeria, there existed a unique governance structure led by a female official known as the Omu. This role held substantial political and social significance within the region, and the Omu was accompanied by a council of elders. While it is impossible to generalize about all pre-colonial societies, it is possible to argue that, while gender relations were not generally characterised by equality and an absence of male dominance, women often

had a degree of autonomy over their lives. Pre-colonial African woman occupied a position complementary, rather than subordinate, to the man.

### **The Role of Women in Politics during the Colonial Era**

The recurring decimal in all colonies is that the colonial legacy of exploitation surpassed other achievement (Duyile, 2016). ‘Conventional Politics’ had a very narrow and restricted meaning in the colonial context. Colonies were administered bureaucratically, and as they were not run on a liberal democratic model. The liberal democratic model is a political system characterized by representative government, individual rights protection, rule of law, and regular elections, aiming to balance individual freedoms with collective decision-making), competitive electoral politics did not function. Except at the lower levels, the colonized, particularly colonized women, were excluded from the running of the colonies. The exclusion of the colonized population, particularly women, from significant roles in running the colonies was primarily driven by colonial policies aimed at maintaining control, economic exploitation, racial and cultural biases, traditional gender roles, power consolidation, and limited education and empowerment opportunities for the colonized. This systemic exclusion perpetuated unequal power dynamics and dependency on colonial rulers.

Colonialism brought important changes, profoundly altering political, social and economic systems. These changes were gendered in crucial ways and men and women were affected very differently. The social and economic changes brought about through the colonial imperative of capital accumulation therefore had a contradictory impact on women. Many women found that their position worsened, for example because their control over economic resources such as land was reduced, or their overall workload was increased perhaps because of the absence of male relatives.

During the colonial rule women lost much of the power they had in the pre-colonial period, and their indigenous political authority became invisible. Indeed, many women initially rejected and/or withdrew from the state and the redefined political order during the early period of colonial rule. In the later phases of colonialism, women came together to promote their interest and also acted to protect themselves against the encroachments of colonial rule. There is clear evidence that the ‘most dramatic female opposition to colonial authority was carried out by women where the status differentials of men and women tilted against the women. It became unthinkable for women to challenge male authority. In the colonial period, there are three well documented instances where Nigerian women resisted the threat of the imposition of taxes and changes to their control of land and farming practices in this way. The ‘Women’s War’ in southern Nigeria is perhaps the best known example of a women’s anti-colonial action which demonstrate both the use of traditional forms of protest and the obliviousness of both colonial officials and other contemporary analysts to the meaning and significance of what became known to the British as the ‘Aba Riots.’

In 1929, following a decade where British authorities introduced indirect rule and increased controls over cash crop production, the Igbo women believed that they were about to be taxed, despite assurances to the contrary, as households and property were being recounted and officials had lied about taxation in the past. Whereas women in Igbo land were not typically taxed before the events of 1929. The imposition of taxes on women and the fear of taxation were among the factors that led to the Women’s War of 1929, also known as the Aba Women’s Riot, where Igbo women protested against what they believed could lead to taxation and other unfair practices by the British colonial authorities. Rumors spread quickly through the women’s communication networks and “Mikiri” meetings took place in market squares. These worries combined with resentment at the arbitrary acts of warrant chiefs who abused their power, for example by helping themselves to women’s produce and by not taking account of women’s rights to refuse a particular suitor in marriage. This disquiet culminated in women taking customary action against the colonial authorities. The British authorities failed to realize that the women were using recognized channels for expressing discontent and reacted harshly to what they considered to be riots of ‘frenzied mobs’ and over 50 women were killed by troops.

The colonial state through its policies discriminated against women; included are ‘refusing women the right to vote until 1954, not appointing them to any important governmental bodies and neglecting their education and employment’. For example, the issues of girl’s under-representation in educational institutions in Nigeria even as near independence as 1951 is highlighted by the low enrolment figures of girls in secondary schools in Nigeria which totalled about 1,599 female students. This comprised of 125 in the North, 477 in the East, and 997 in the West. Similarly, the growth of the cash crop economy further marginalised women’s subsistence agricultural production. Women also lacked access to credit and capital required for large scale trading activities and remained petty traders. Lagos market women under the auspices of the Lagos Market Women’s Association (LMWA) under the leadership of Madam Alimotu Pelewura resisted the taxation of omen and attempts by the colonial government to enforce price controls in Lagos markets. They organized mass riots to protest the tax

proposals. The women delivered a petition containing the thumbprint of several hundreds of them to the colonial administrator in 1940. Pelewura is reported to have turned down an offer to put her on the payroll of the colonial government in order to break the women's solidarity. Thus the women effectively resisted the colonial government's price controls of foodstuff. Other women anti-colonial activity includes their protest of colonial tax policies in Abeokuta under Mrs. Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti Abeokuta Women's Union in 1947.

Christianity and Islam have exhibited nuanced impacts on women's engagement in politics, evident in the Nigerian context. Christian values advocating for equality and human dignity have spurred movements for women's rights, enabling them to actively participate in politics. For instance, Christian women played crucial roles in Nigeria's women's suffrage movements, using principles of justice and equality as driving forces. Islam's emphasis on knowledge-seeking has empowered Nigerian women through education, equipping them with skills relevant to political involvement. Prominent examples from Muslim-majority areas like northern Nigeria illustrate women holding political roles. Nevertheless, interpretations of both religions have also hindered women's political participation in Nigeria. Traditional interpretations of religious texts and societal norms may restrict women's roles, while conservative views from religious leaders might discourage political engagement. It's important to recognize that the impact of religion on women's participation in Nigerian politics is multifaceted, shaped by historical, cultural, and individual factors.

### **Historical Background of Women Participation in Politics**

Modernization theory posits that societies progress through a series of stages from traditional to modern, characterized by increased industrialization, urbanization, technological advancement, and the adoption of democratic governance and Western values, understanding of 'traditional' societies. Many studies of pre-colonial African societies, despite the problems in analysing both pre-colonial and colonial periods because knowledge is so dependent on mediation by colonial texts and sources, have described societies which were dynamic and developing. The only thing is that the dynamics of change varied in intensity from one society to another. While gender relations in pre-colonial African society were not characterized by equality, however judged, they often entailed greater independence than 'modern' societies, with men and women having different but, in many ways, complimentary roles. Women often had a degree of autonomy and control over their lives with high levels of solidarity along the lines of gender as much social stratification was based on gender (Lawal, 2009). Much of this autonomy stemmed from the access to and control over economic resources which many women exercised in different forms, although this was on unequal terms to men. The economic status enjoyed by women which came through their role in production often brought with it certain political rights, particularly in those societies which permitted women to accumulate wealth.

Despite huge variations between African societies, in most agricultural communities, whether matrilineal (Matrilineal refers to a kinship system in which family descent, inheritance, and lineage are traced through the maternal line, typically passing through the mother's side of the family) or patrilineal (Patrilineal refers to a kinship system where family descent, inheritance, and lineage are traced through the paternal line, usually following the father's side of the family) (Duyile, *The Gender Question and the Nigerian Fourth Republic*, 1999-2015, 2020). Women usually have political control over some area of activity, be it farming, marketing, trading or household and family affairs; had political institutions (usually councils) to decide how to rule their own affairs or to influence the affairs of men; and were not subject to general control by men as much as they were autonomous in their own areas of responsibility. This was often expressed through various women's groups and networks organized around kinship, age, culture and production. While never acting on equal terms with men, women often had well-defined political roles and structures which allowed them a certain degree of power and control within society.

Despite these challenges, some Nigerian women have made notable contributions to the nation's political history since independence (Akinwunmi, 2010). However, the country has yet to produce an elected female president, vice-president, or senate president. Nigerian women have been more determined to achieve greater political inclusion and representation. Despite the National Gender Policy's 35% affirmative action target for women in public offices, women have mainly been appointed, not elected, indicating the limitations of gender quotas in addressing gender disparity (Akinwunmi, *Agents of Change: Women Political Activities in Ekiti*, 2010). Political participation and representation remain essential for achieving real power in governance, and relying solely on gender quotas might not be enough to address the issue effectively (Ogunleye, 2005).

There is growing recognition of the untapped potential of women's talents and leadership. The rate of women's representation in national parliaments has seen incremental increases globally, but it remains below the desired benchmark of 30 percent. The full and equitable participation of women in public life is crucial for strong democracies. Women's involvement in political leadership and policymaking leads to tangible benefits for



democracy, including better responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace (Oni, 2016). The world needs more women involved in all aspects of the political process to achieve these positive outcomes.

Women's participation in politics is vital for promoting gender equality and considering a diverse range of policy issues with relevant solutions. Female legislators prioritize policies that address the concerns of women and marginalized voters, improving policy responsiveness and governance (Osebogun, 2010). Increasing women's representation in office leads to policy-making that focuses on quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and minorities (Oloyede, 2013). Women's political participation has positive democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizens' lives, contributing to the overall success of democracy (Ajogbeje).

In the early 1990s, Ekiti State was created, and the first democratic elections took place in 1999. Initially, there were only a few women participating in politics in the state. However, over the years, the level of women's involvement in politics improved. Nevertheless, several women were elected as members of the state House of Assembly and local government councils (Ajogbeje, Women Participation in Nigerian Politics and its Challenges for Nigeria's Centenary, Nigeria's, 2023). Although none of them won, their involvement was considered positive for the state's political landscape. However, challenges cultural barriers, limited financial resources, and gender bias continue to hinder women's full engagement in politics in Ekiti and other parts of Nigeria.

### **Women Political Participation in the First, Second and Third Republic**

With a female population of 80.2 million out of 162.5 million people women's political participation in governance and decision making is still very low in relation to their numerical strength. However, marginal progress has been made since Nigeria's political independence in 1960. At independence, there was no woman appointed into the cabinet. The first republic (1966) produced two female senators nominated by their party and not elected. There was no female elected in the 1979 general elections while in the 1983 general elections only one female candidate was elected into the 91-member senate. Women's level of involvement in politics and governance is abysmally low and proportionally negligible. Hence, the nation has neither produced an elected female president, vice-president nor senate president. Gender segregation was a predominant feature of the colonial government in Nigeria. British colonial government paid no attention to the role of women in the decision-making process as evidenced in the appointments to key positions and policies in Nigeria.

During the second Republic (1979 – 1983) there was a little increase in the number of women that participated in politics although only one female Senator in the person of Late Franca Afegbuwa. Six (6) women won election into the House of Representatives at the National level. Some of these women were Mrs. J.C. Eze of the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) who represented the then Anambra State. Mrs. V.C. Nnaji, also of the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) who represented the Isu constituency in Imo state and Mrs. Abiola Babatope of the Unity Party of Nigeria who represented Muslim Central II in Lagos State. On the whole, few women won elections into the State House of Assembly during the Second Republic. Prof. Chinwe Obaji, born in Ezinihitte-Mbaise in Imo State, graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1975. She began her academic journey as a lecturer and administrator at Michael Okpara College of Agriculture (Osebogun, 2010), Umuagwo, Imo State, Nigeria, starting in 1980. Her academic pursuits led her to the United States, where she was appointed Professor of International Education at Voorhees College in 2007. Her career encompasses a commitment to education and academic leadership both in Nigeria and the USA.

The 1990 elections into Local Government Areas heralding the Third Republic, and few women emerged as councilors and only one woman in the country emerged as Chairman of Aboekuta Local Government Area in Ogun State. During the gubernatorial elections, no female governor emerged in any of the States in Nigeria. Only two female Deputy Governors emerged namely Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong of Cross Rivers State. In the Senatorial election held in 1992, Mrs. Kofo Bucknor – Akerele was the only women who won in the Senate. Very few women won seats in the House of Representatives including Mrs. Florence Ita – Giwa who won the senatorial seat in the Calabar constituency of Cross River State under the National Republican Convention (NRC). Prof. Grace Alele-Williams is a distinguished Nigerian mathematician and educator (Duyile, The Gender Question and the Nigerian Fourth Republic, 1999-2015, 2020). Born in 1932, she became the first Nigerian woman to serve as a Vice-Chancellor, holding the position at the University of Benin from 1985 to 1991. She advocated for women's education and made significant contributions to mathematics education. Prof. Alele-Williams' achievements inspire gender equality in academia and empowerment through education. Her legacy exemplifies determination and breaking barriers, impacting generations of women.

## 2. CONCLUSION

It could be observed that the level of political participation by Nigerian women is low. This is drawn from the fact that Nigeria democratic culture is characterized by factor such as: assassination, lawlessness, illegalities, rigging, oppression, manipulation, marginalization and violence. Other factors include male dominated party executives, lobbying, money politics and innumerable social, economic, cultural and religious issues. These ills are perfected by men and these constitute barriers to women aspiring and contesting for elective positions in Nigeria. The World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 is another accelerating factor for women participation in politics globally. In Nigeria, there has been a marked improvement at the level of women participation in Nigeria since 1999 democratic government. It is important for women to participate in politics because as noted by Skler (1994) without the active participation of women at all levels of governance, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

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