

# Women Participation in Institutional Management in Nigeria: Challenges and Coping Strategies

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## Abstract

*With increased awareness on the need to empower women, involvement of women in politics and management of institutions has increased. However, there is still a wide global gap. This paper examines the extent of women's participation in political systems and educational institutional management. The challenges of gender equity in women's participation such as time demands, unequal opportunities, sexual harassment, occupational segregation, political under-representation and poverty are examined. For women to be able to cope with these challenges, strategies such as educational empowerment, time management, poverty alleviation and provision of supports are suggested.*

## Introduction

An examination of oral tradition shows that during the pre-colonial periods, women featured prominently in the Nigerian traditional societies and took part actively in the political decision-making process. However, colonialism brought along with it the ideology of domestication of women, and the adoption of the indirect rule system, which excluded women from decision-making. Moreover, men were sent to school while women were left out, thus limiting the opportunities available to women. Hence, constraints on the participation of women in the workplace and political systems have their origin in the colonial interpretation of socio-cultural attitudes and the gender-based division of labour. With time, women began to struggle for empowerment and recognition.

In rising up to the challenge, women struggles began, such as the Aba riot of 1929 against taxes and the system of indirect rule. Various individuals and women organizations sought for the advancement of women. Such individuals included Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in 1947, Queen Amina of Zazzau in the 16th century, Nana Asma'u of Sokoto Caliphate and Queen Emotan of Benin Kingdom. Notable women organizations included the Lagos Women League from 1923-1944 which campaigned for more employment opportunities for women, vocational training for girls and better working conditions for nurses.

Also, the Women Party in 1944 fought for more government employment for women, equal pay for equal work, and more training opportunities. In 1953, the Federation of Women Societies also fought against British system of indirect rule and encouraged women to actively take part in the political, social and economic life of the country as they used to (Oyebade, 2001).

The activities of the feminists or women's movement have paved way for the upliftment of women. These activities of feminists have also helped to inspire women and to give them self-confidence in addition to helping them to strive hard for the total liberation and the socio-political and economic empowerment of women. Gender equality is thus of utmost importance to women's well-being and to their development. It is now time to begin to reflect the changes in society and encourage the rising feminine consciousness. It is obvious that what has kept women backward is the gender imbalance. Women have been contributing to development but have been under-represented in comparison to men. What the women need is an increased participation in development to enable them to feel more relevant as productive members of the society.

Our governmental institutions today like any other sectors are still male dominated. It is noteworthy that a few women are presently in significant positions of authority. Quite depressing is the fact that women have not been adequately encouraged to occupy the "highest" leadership position in Nigeria. Women's political participation in Nigeria since Independence has been of a meagre percentage yet women form more than 50% of the registered number of voters in the country (Newswatch, October 2000) while women also make up 49.6% of the nation's total population (1991 census). What then is responsible for the women's inconspicuousness in leadership positions and governance? Olabisi (1999) answered the question that:

Presently, Nigerian women have been relegated to the background in the policy and governance arena. At Independence in 1960, very few women were found in policy positions and what exists today is still tokenism.

The Babangida Administration (1986-1993) initiated the formulation of a National Policy on Women but was not approved until the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. The objectives of the policy are as follows:

Encouraging sectoral and national actions to better recognize and thereby more effectively involve women as equal partners, decision-makers and beneficiaries in shaping a greater future for all citizens of this nation.

Instituting stable democratic governance, where

women input in national development would be recognized and appreciated. The National Policy document is therefore, women's security and a guarantee for a future full

of hope and promise. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1996).

The Yar-ada administration appeared to recognize the policy with more women in the political system, but the picture is still a far cry from expectation.

The awareness of the subordinate status of women has brought about the concept of gender equality. Gender equality, according to Lopes-Claros and Zahidi (2005), refers to that stage of human development at which the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female. Rather, both will realise their full potentials. In recognition of the importance of gender equality around the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1984. The Platform of Action resulting from the 1995 Beijing 4th Women Conference expanded this concept calling it “gender mainstreaming”. This Affirmative Action which agitated for women empowerment and participation in decision making is aimed at redressing the gender imbalance and increase the number of women in governance. It was suggested in Beijing 1995 that a certain percentage of political appointments or elective seats should be reserved for women. This Affirmative Action has been in practice in the United States of America, Brazil, South Africa. This, like other affirmative actions in Nigeria before, like the federal character or geographical spread will ensure greater participation of women in politics and governance.

### **Women Participation in Nigerian Politics**

In the pre-colonial era, women were seen playing important roles in their communities and they occupied key positions therein. From Nigeria's Independence in 1960, only a few women emerged to participate actively in politics. Between 1960 and 1965 there were only three women in the National Assembly. The Second Republic ushered in the first set of five women ministers. These were Mrs. Efun Oyagbola, Minister of National Planning, Mrs. Janet Akinrinade, Minister of State for Internal Affairs, Mrs. Elizabeth Iyase, Minister of State for Education, Dr. Simi Johnson, Minister of Youth and Social Development and Mrs. Asinobi, Minister of State for Internal Affairs. The Interim Government of Chief Ernest Sonekan also recorded some women who served as successful Secretaries of State in persons of Chief Mrs. Bola Kuforiji-Olubi, Mrs. Bimbo Akintola and Mrs. Laraba Dagash.

In the Third Republic, women were further sensitized and mobilized to participate in the political and economic spheres of the country. Many workshops and enlightenment programmes were organized in order to encourage women to

brace themselves up for the transition programme. Azuike (2003) confirmed that the long transition period witnessed a radical change in the involvement of Nigerian women in politics from the grassroots to the apex of executive offices.

Many women like Chief Mrs. Titi Ajanaku (Ogun State), Mrs. Oluremi Adiukwu (Lagos State) and Mrs. Hanatu Chollom (Plateau State) contested for governorship positions but were not elected; only Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong became a Deputy Governor in Cross River State. There was only one female member in the House of Representatives while Mrs. Sarah Jibril emerged the only female Presidential candidate.

In the Fourth Republic, there was an increase in the participation of women in active politics which is still marginal when compared to that of the men as revealed in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Women in Elective Positions (1999)**

Election	Male	Female	Total
Local Government Councilors	8,667	143	8,810
Chairmanship	765	9	774
State Houses of Assembly	971	12	983
Deputy Governors	35	1	36
Governors	36	0	36
House of Representatives	343	12	355
Senate	105	3	108
Vice President	1	0	1
President	1	0	1

**Source:** Independent National Electoral Commission, 1999

From Table 1, one would detect a sense of bias as regards the election of women into offices. In spite of the participation of women in active politics, their “activism has not always been rewarded with commensurate share of political power” (Alamin and Alkali, 2002). There is an increase in the number of appointed positions, but more women need to get to elective positions. The Fourth Republic has nine female ministers but Nigeria has been incapable of having a female President or Vice President, Military Head of State or Chief of Army Staff. This shows that women are still under-represented in the upper echelon of governance.

### **Women in Institutional Governance: An Overview**

In discussing institutional governance, the paper has examined women's participation in politics because quite many posts at decision making levels of governance is closely linked with politics - partisan politics and institutional politics alike. Politics in Nigeria is still male- dominated and that explains the reason also why men dominate

decision making levels of control in Nigerian educational institutions at all levels. Tertiary institutions are the post-secondary institutions like Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities. At the pre and primary levels, many women are found in governance. There are many female teachers at this level and quite a number of females are found as headmasters of these institutions for example as can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

**Supply of Primary School Teachers in Kwara State**

	Male	Female	Total	% Female
2000/2001	6,591	8,056	14,647	55.00
2001/2002	6,758	7,934	14,692	54.00
2002/2003	6,734	7,964	15,195	52.41
2003/2004	NA	NA	NA	NA
2004/2005	NA	NA	NA	NA
2005/2006	NA	NA	NA	NA
2006/2007	NA	NA	NA	NA
2007/2008	7,439	10,411	17,850	58.32

**Source:** Kwara State Primary Education Board, 2003.

**NOTE:** NA = Not Available

At this level also, there are 5,070 female headmasters as against 1,156 male head teachers representing about 45%. This is the lowest level of institutional governance where the percentage is representative of women population. It is interesting to note that from the population of the supply of teachers supplied in four years as shown on Table 1, there are even more women than men as teachers. The female are actually about 55% of the total population of teachers in Kwara State Primary Schools. At the secondary school level, the female teachers form about 40% of the total number of teachers in the schools as contained on Table 3. The percentage had dropped as against the 55% in primary schools.

**Table 3**

**Supply of Teachers in Kwara State Secondary by Gender**

Number of Teachers				
Year	Male	Female	Total	% Female
1999	3,142	2,156	5,298	40.69
2000	2,274	1,574	3,848	40.90
2001	2,267	1,566	3,833	40.86
2002	2,264	1,565	3,829	40.87
2003	2,264	1,561	3,825	40.81
2004	NA	NA	NA	NA
2005	NA	NA	NA	NA
2006	NA	NA	NA	NA
2007	2,782	1,972	4,754	41.48
2008	3,358	2,545	5,903	43.11

**Source:** Kwara State Teaching Service Commission (2003)

**NOTE:** NA = Not Available

At the headship of the secondary schools in Kwara State, there are 27 female principals out of the 223 principals in the State. This is about one percent of the total number of the principals in the State (see details on Appendix I).

The number of female in the governance of the tertiary institutions is very low. In the university governance for instance, there are 52 Universities in Nigeria owned by Federal and State Governments including private ownership. Only University of Abuja has a female Vice-Chancellor. The other 51 are male while there are five female Registrars of the 52 universities. Taking University of Ilorin as a case study, there are 65 female lecturers out of the 605 lecturers in the University representing one percent. At the very highest position occupied by University lecturers are Professors. In the University, there are three female Professors as against the 133 Professors of the University representing two percent.

The situation is similar in other Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. The story is that there is gender discrimination at the highest level of governance. The fact that this society is patriarchal make women who eventually get to the highest decision-making level of governance not enjoy the support of men. The government of Prof. Grace Alele-Williams as Vice Chancellor of the University of Benin was conflict- ridden, partly because there were a lot of oppositions from her male colleagues. Our patriarchal society has not come to term with female leadership taking excuse from the cultural and religious reasons. The male vehemently protest against female leadership and go to any extent to run-down such female in government. There are so many challenges confronting female-folk to further compound the situation.

### **Challenges facing Women in Institutional Management**

The 1989 constitution granted equal rights to men and women while prohibiting any form of discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnic group or religion in Section 41.

So, by law, women have equal rights to participate in politics, social and economic activities of the countries but like Lenin (1920) put it “equality before the law is not necessarily equality in fact”, the participation is minimal especially at the decision-making levels. Women are 49.6 percent of the Nigerian population but at the decision-making levels, women are about or less than three percent. It is then worthy of note to examine the challenges facing women in being adequately involved in high political and educational institutions' management.

## **Challenges**

### **1. Time demands**

While women take on additional responsibilities such as jobs and political posts away from home, their household duties often remain the same. The time requirements of household and paid work/posts are complicated and often conflicting (Shriner, 2006). So, it becomes difficult to cope with the demands of the family, children, husband and extended family. In the political sector, decision-making meetings are often held at nights and in governance the demand of the work take them out of their homes for most of the day, sometimes including nights. Since it is the men that have time to attend closed-door decision-making meetings at nights, women are exempted and are therefore relegated to the background when it comes to power-sharing.

### **2. Unequal Opportunities**

The lower status of women in comparison to men may be due to gender imbalances arising from unequal opportunities and access to and control over productive resources and benefits. For instance, there are persistent gender-specific inequalities between men and women in the education sector, formal-sector employment and government structures. Society has always promoted and favoured men in these areas. Women work mainly as primary school teachers, leaving the professional and administrative positions to men.

### **3. Sexual Harassment**

This may occur in the work place and in the political sector. Sexual harassment refers to any undesirable verbal or physical sexual advances by someone which could lead to any form of discomfort or humiliation. Women could be sexually harassed both at work and political offices by their male counterparts.

Harassment takes many forms such as making direct passes at the women, direct compliments to a woman on her mode of dressing, make-up or walk, making sexist comments to a woman's hearing as she passed by, making persistent attempts to date a woman even as she shows displeasure or unwillingness etc. Women's response in most cases is simply to avoid contact with their male harassers. In trying to avoid, they become

irrelevant at it is one that is seen and heard that is remembered when it comes to selection into positions of governance. When a woman develops a “Machiavellian approach” and is successful in advancing her immediate self-interest, she stands the risk of denting her image.

#### **4. Occupational Segregation**

There is occupational segregation of women in certain professions believed to be associated with lower level of competence and thus compensation and referred to as traditional female jobs (Chauhan, 1999). These jobs include teaching at elementary or secondary schools, and nursing.

#### **5. Political Under-representation**

Since women are poorly represented in number in Senate and House of Representatives, the few that are there, are expected to be subordinates to the men. Because of the patriarchal society, the women find it almost impossible to push through any agenda for addressing and redressing the plight of women generally. Political meetings of legislative deliberations hardly address women's interests and concerns. In the legislative wing, a simple majority is needed to endorse any decision. Most men see women-related issues as frivolous and would hardly listen to them, let alone endorse them. The contempt for women and women issues was so much that even the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the Second Republic once declared that women are unfit to head committees of the House. The genesis of all these anti-women behaviours are simply because the male counterparts feel that it is anti-cultural, anti-religious for women to take a leading position.

The fact that women are few even in appointive positions is itself a major constraint in the advancement of women's interest. The women who get appointed to positions of governance are hardly aware or never bothered to know the needs and aspirations of the majority of females. In the political sector, the women are preoccupied with welcoming guests, singing and chanting party slogans. They antagonize themselves over sharing of peanuts dozed to them by men and engage themselves in run down statements instead of attending serious meetings and pushing agenda relating to their specific gender concerns and interest. The majority of women were simply contented with their limited participation. They would not cast their votes for their female colleagues who

will represent their interest as women rather they would vote according to the dictates of their husbands or sell their votes to a community leader and so in many cases, women are their own enemies.

#### **6. Poverty**

Poverty which affects both men and women alike affects women more. When the British introduced the new type of money economy, it was mostly the men that got recruited to work for wages. Men were the bread-winners while women stayed at home to take care of the family. This saw the beginning of economic decline of women. Women



became less valued where money was discussed. As a result, women in Nigeria became less educated because parents would prefer to educate their male children since it is the male that would bring money returns to them while “the place of the female was in the kitchen”. This is the reason why more women than men are affected by poverty. Women bear the grunt of poverty more, whether in the village or cities. The struggle against poverty keeps them from progressing. Women are left out of taking big contract jobs which usually are dividends of political involvement, men believe that they make contributions to the success of a party through their monetary sacrifices, their time and even logistics therefore think that the big contract award is a reward for their contributions while giving the women peanuts.

Some efforts have been made to address these challenges through various initiatives. For instance, there had been a number of awareness programmes for addressing the marginalization of women, the Better Life for Rural Women (1987-1994), Family Support Programme, creation of Ministry of Women Affairs and Women Development Units.

One of such initiatives is the African Women Leaders Project (AWLP) funded by the European Commission and the Canadian International Development Agency to support and strengthen women's participation and performance in politics and other high level decision-making positions for the benefit and development of the countries in focus: Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Likewise, Women's Right Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) is a women organization in Nigeria headed by Hon. Fati Abubakar for protecting women interests.

It is worthy of note that politics and education are like the two sides of a coin; one cannot be divorced from the other. However, in educational institutions, aside the high headship positions that are often politicized, women can aspire to any position if they have the requisite requirements. There is therefore the need to address the coping strategies for the identified challenges.

## **Suggested Coping Strategies**

### **1. Empowerment through Education**

Education is the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society. Thus, empowering women through education is one of the most important concerns of the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality. Young women need to be given education of comparable quality and content to that given to boys and men, and relevant to existing knowledge and real needs. This is to enable women to access well-paid, formal sector jobs, advance within them, participate in, and be

represented in government and gain political influence. There is therefore the need for individuals, organizations, government and all stakeholders in education to increase their support for the education of women, and especially girls.

## **2. Time Management Strategy**

There is need for active women to get acquainted with time management strategies such as prioritization, accommodation of time use, routinization of activities, synchronization of events (doing two chores at the same time) and preparation for contingencies. For instance, day care services could ease the conflict between work and child care responsibility to a large extent. In other words, women in demanding positions should be able to identify their priorities, find some balance and protect the most precious things.

## **3. Poverty Alleviation**

There is the need to improve the quality of women's economic involvement with a view to reducing their poverty level. With the creation of adequate and effective employment programmes, younger women would be economically empowered to develop themselves and be able to aspire to top leadership positions. Women should build themselves to be economically buoyant like men. In doing this, the following are the suggestions postulated by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs (1996):

Women groups can:

1. Organize activities to create more awareness about different kinds of careers and economic opportunities which are available in the country.
2. Look for or grant scholarship to girls or women to read courses in engineering, technology, computer and management sciences.
3. Monitor practices that exclude women from equal employment opportunities and appointments to positions which do not take account of equal opportunities for women.
4. Organize public protests against business companies industries, banks and the likes which discriminate against women either in employment, promotions or access to resources.

Therefore, heavier responsibility rests on women and women organizations to exert serious pressures on the State and Federal Government for policies to empower women equality. Radical Women Organizations like Women in Nigeria (WIN) must provide the necessary ideological guide for women's representatives in positions of decision-making and authority.

The Government must continue to be ready to support women participation at decision-making levels in institutions and all sectors of governance. The Affirmative Action which was adopted in Beijing in 1995 that women are to be reserved a certain

percentage of political appointment or seats should be given a constitutional backing. The government is doing its best to appoint many women into decision-making level of governance but women are not yet given the necessary support to contest and win elections. There should be a gender balance using a systematic power-sharing formula of 30 percent minimum women representation in all spheres of public life as suggested by Akande (2003). This is because equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of the society and more importantly meaningful contributions from the women folk

#### **4. Provision of Support**

Among the necessary provisions to increase and improve effective women's participation in political and institutional governance are:

- constitutional and electoral reforms to entrench the principle of quotas in politics and governance.
- National policies stressing improvement of women's access to a wider range of jobs, including those at managerial level.
- Introducing legislation to prevent unfair discrimination of women in work place.
- Institution of mentoring by female role models in governance and different professions to encourage women to participate and aspire to attain leadership positions.
- Institution of networking to support one another, exchange ideals, as well as encourage young women to organize themselves to learn how to access their various needs. The existing improved communication technologies provided by the globalization process could be useful for this networking.

#### **Conclusion**

In spite of the on-going and increasing awareness of the need to empower women so as to increase social, economic and political equity, the global gender gap is still wide. This gap is evident in governance as well as in advancement to managerial positions. There is thus the dire need for the women in high positions, women organizations, government and all stakeholders in gender matters to provide women with a quality of life equal to that of men, with comparable levels of political participation, and with equal educational and economic opportunity, and participation.

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