Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria: A threat to national development

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchal nature of traditional Nigerian society, which enables men to dominate women, continues to negatively impact the participation of women in formal and informal decision-making. Gender equality has become a global core commitment because equality between men and women is just fair and right. With a benefit of hindsight, this study examines the conceptual and material bases of patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria. It discusses a number of socio-cultural, economic and political factors involved in various dimensions of gender inequality and discrimination. By adopting the theory of feminism, this study found that the following circumstances perpetuate the inadequate representation of women in Nigerian society, and pose serious threats to Nigeria’s quest for democratic consolidation and sustainable development: lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women’s leadership; undue dominance of men in the socio-political sphere, including imbalances in political appointments; and poverty. The research methodology is termed qualitative research and with the use of secondary data gathered from the internet, newsprint and journals. To redress gender inequality in Nigeria, the author emphasizes the need to challenge the influences of patriarchy, and promote women’s rights in domestic production, paid employment, culture and religion, sexuality, male violence and governance.

Key words: Women, gender equality, gender issues and discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal nature of traditional Nigerian society, which enables men to dominate women, continues to negatively impact the participation of women in formal and informal decision-making. Women constitute about half of the population of the Nigerian State and are known to play vital roles as mothers, producers, managers, community developers/organizers etc. Their contribution to the social and economic development is also more than half as compared with that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal and informal structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant. The Nigerian society has been patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society (Aina and Olabisi, 1998). Traditional society is a structure of a set of social relations with a material base which enables men to dominate women (Stacey, 1993; Kramarae, 1992; Lerner, 1986). It is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females.

Generally speaking, and from contemporary perspectives in Nigeria, it would appear that women had never been influential in the realm of Nigerian politics. In the past, and even in the present democratic dispensation, there has not been a fair share of recognition of the increasing role of women in the Nigerian society, be it the social, economic or political. Erunke (2009) wrote that the place of women in politics during the pre-colonial period is sufficiently familiar. Thus, the exploits of legendary women such as
Queen Amina of Zazzau in Zaria, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Princess Moremi of Ife, Princess Inikpi of Igala and Emotan of Benin readily comes to mind. During the colonial period, women asserted and expressed themselves politically. Some women who made political marks at that period included Mrs Margaret Ekpo of the famous Aba women riots of 1929, Madam Tinubu of Lagos and Egbaland; Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of the Abeokuta Women Union of 1948 and Hajia Swaba Gambo of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) to mention but a few. It is however worthy of mention here that this gender discrimination is a challenge to National development because the gap Nigerian women are supposed to occupy explains why backwardness has become the order of the day in Nigeria (Erunke, 2009). As regards human endowment in term of potentials, Nigerian women are blessed in various ways, but social reality reveals that these potentials that could have been resourceful in nation building are left untapped.

Moreover, this culture of patriarchy is a very strong determinant of male dominance over female and as a result, men will sit back in the family to keep the family name and lineage growing while women will be entrapped in marriage. Thus men are being trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic activities; roles ascribed to them by cultures which affect them later in life, thereby making them lose self-confidence and develop low self-esteem in their career in adult life, as well socio-political activities. Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to the bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, women are highly marginalized and are poorly represented in political activities. (UNDP Report, 2005). This position of women in society in relation to men and the subordination, oppression and marginalization of women has attracted the attention of scholars, activists, feminists and development workers for a very long time. The issues relating to what is also known as gender inequality has become very prominent in the last few decades. Thus, the question of representation equality and clear-cut democratization of the Nigerian democratic space to accommodate women in line with the dictates of the 35% Affirmative Action specifications is of growing concern to this study. Even when women are deeply involved in the highest level of decision making in Nigeria, their involvement is superficial, grossly inadequate and lacks the moral justifications for effective representation.

OPERATIONALIZATION OF TERMS

It would be most appropriate to begin this theoretical exploration by explaining the meaning of Development, National Development, Patriarchy, Gender and Gender relations.

Development

Rodney (1976) in his own argument claimed that at the level of the individual persons, Development implies an increase in skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and well-being. But for Rodney (1976) the achievement of any of these aspects described in personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society as a whole. In search of a more acceptable approach to the concept of development, Seers (1972) directed attention to the conditions of human beings rather than building nations. This group of scholars propounded the Development Model Approach, which contends that man should be the central focus of development and so, any development that is anti-human is no development at all. Again, development connotes increase in the capacity of political agencies, political unification and political participation. Myrdal (1968), on the other hand, is of the opinion that development involves total and full mobilization of the whole societal system and that it has to be comprehensive and should invoke total political commitment.

Taking a holistic approach, Fadieye (2005) feels that development could be described as those change or progress, which enhance better quality of life for the generality of the people in the society. Such desirable and positive changes are observable in all human endeavors with particular reference to social, economic, political and cultural aspects of life, which usher in progress for the overall benefit of the entire population in the society.

National Development

Different scholars have described the concept of national development from various perspectives. The National Educational Research council perceives development as “the plan, usually initiated by the government, for economic social and political development of the nation.” As Aderito and Abdullahi (1988), national development encompasses social and political development. Other scholars also see development as rapid mechanization and massive production of material goods and services as some of the notable yardstick for measuring national development. One of the vital issues that are connected to, and has profound effects on national development is women empowerment. Women empowerment, according to Fadeiye (2005), is a notable pre-requisite for national development. The contributions of women in all spheres of human endeavors to the overall development of the home, the community, the state, the nation and the world at large could no longer be dismissed with a wave of the hand from time immemorial,
women had played an immense role in bringing outstanding changes and rapid transformation to their different states and countries." Frank (1969) provided a figurative expression of the dominant theory, which has been guiding development policy in many developed nations for several decades.

**Patriarchy**

The word "patriarchy" has been recreated in the past two decades to analyze the origins and conditions of men’s oppression of women (Kamarae, 1992). Originally used to describe the power of the father as head of household, the term ‘patriarchy’ has been used within post-1960s feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination (Kamarae, 1992; Stacey, 1993; Aina and Olabisi, 1998). The term has been defined as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions.

Feminist theorists have argued that in any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex-gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. They characterize patriarchy as an unjust social system that is oppressive to women. As feminist and political theorist Carole Pateman writes, "The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection" (Carole, 1988). In feminist theory, the concept of patriarchy often includes all the social mechanisms that reproduce and exert male dominance over women. A feminist theory typically characterizes patriarchy as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations (Ann, 2001). Okpe (2005) submits that patriarchy is a broad network or system of hierarchical organization that cuts across political, economic, social, religious, cultural, industrial and financial spheres, under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men.

**Gender**

Gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of the property, decision-makers and heads of household are social, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences. It is important to note the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female. For instance, the adult female has breast that can secrete milk to feed a baby but the adult male does not have. Gender roles differ from place to place and change with time. But sex roles are naturally fixed (Hartman, 1997).

**Gender relations**

Gender relations are part of social relations, referring to the ways in which the social categories of men and women, male and female, relate over the whole range of social organization, not just the interactions between individual men and women in the sphere of personal relationships, or in terms of biological reproduction. In all aspects of the social activity, including access to resources for production, rewards or remuneration for work, distribution of consumption, income or goods, the exercise of authority and power, and participation in the cultural, political and religious activity, gender is important in establishing people's behaviour and the outcome of any social interaction. As well as institutions between individual men and women, gender relations describe the social meaning of being male and female, and thus what is considered appropriate behaviour or activity for men and women (Pearson, 2000).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Theories are a vital tool in the conduct of research work particularly in social science field of study. Even the introduction of scientific theories to advance the course of studying human-related issues and events has greatly influenced the perception and interpretation of terms, concepts and phenomena in this field of study. Russet et al in Asika (2006) perceive theory as an intellectual tool that provides us with a way to organize the complexity of the world and help us to see how phenomena are inter-related. Theory simplifies reality, helping to separate the important from the trivial by pointing out what we really wish to look at and what we may safely ignore our present purposes. For an in-depth understanding of patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria, a threat to national development, the theory of feminism will be adopted into the analysis.

Feminist theory is a major branch of theory within sociology that is distinctive for how its creators shift their analytic lens, assumptions, and topical focus away from the male viewpoint and experience. In doing so, feminist theory shines a light on social problems, trends, and issues that are otherwise overlooked or misidentified by the historically dominant male perspective within the social formation. Feminist theory focuses on analyzing gender inequality. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art, and aesthetics (Khanna, 2003). Prominent amongst think tanks in this field of study include Katherine Hepburn, Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, Firestone Leonard among others (Felman,1993).
Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within Western society, ranging from culture to law. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women’s right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality prenatal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny; and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women (Humm, 2003).

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Since the advent of colonialism in Africa, women have always been exposed to varying forms of discrimination due to the simple fact of their 'femaleness', which ought to have been understood on the basis of its mutual usefulness (Obbo, 2005). It is observed that most African countries have not had specific laws or policies to stem the tide of gender disparity. However, the colonial hegemonic philosophy, dependent political ideology and identifiable socio-economic exigencies are seen as factors aiding the prevailing distinctions between men and women in our society (Adeniran, 2006).

Ideological factor

Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women’s relationship in all spheres including politics. It transforms male and females into men and women and constructs the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged (Eisenstein 1984). Adrienne Rich defines patriarchy as:

“… A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.” (Roc, 1977)

The society is so patriarchal to the extent that if a man dies in politics or electioneering process, he is better honoured than a female in a similar situation. The society will praise him and not her. This to a large extent has discouraged a lot of women from participating in electioneering, in such a case children are left motherless, who will then cater for them? It is easier for a man to remarry than for the woman. When it comes to the decision, of participating in politics, all odds must be weighed because the woman has a lot to lose than the man in politics. The gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere.

This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women’s political participation globally. However, this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality. The boundaries between public and private are often blurred in the daily lives of women. Nonetheless, domestic domain continues to be perceived in the North as well as in the South as the legitimate space for women while public space is associated with men. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in a given culture and society. Although the gender role ideology is not static rather remained in a flux while intersecting with economic, social and political systems of a particular society, women continue to be defined as private across countries which resulted in their exclusion and disempowerment.

Political factors

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics. Vicky Randall defines politics as an “articulation or working out of relationships within an already given power structure”, which is in contrast with the traditional view of politics that defines it as an activity, a conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated among citizens. This conception of politics restricts political activity only in public arena and the private sphere of family life is rendered as apolitical. This public-private dichotomy in the traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from the public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics they are entered as mothers and wives. Male domination of politics, political parties and culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women’s political participation.

It important to also mention that most successful women in politics are those with supportive husbands, those who have become husbands, those without husbands, and those who are through with childbearing, those who have mingled with the military, and daughters of past politicians/leaders. Specific names were mentioned, including Dora Akunyili (supportive husband), Iyabo Obasanjo (divorcee and daughter of the past president), Condoleezza Rice (single lady), Sara Jubril (widowed), and Hillary Clinton (wife of the former president). These names go a long way in showing that women are actually in the known about the trend of women participation in politics irrespective of the odds against them. Politics in Nigeria has been described as a terrain meant for the hardened (Akinola, 2009), and where candidates cannot fund elections themselves without recourse to godfatherism (Obbo, 2005). Godfatherism involves a patron-client or
servant-master relationship which cannot be free of violence, especially in the area of controversies where a candidate fails to comply with earlier agreed negotiations and contracts. Politics of godfatherism hardly favours women. No women can stand the resultant consequence of not yielding to the godfathers’ demands, as we have seen in Oyo and Anambra states. Electioneering in Nigeria has been characterized by violence, electoral irregularities and various criminal activities.

Socio-cultural factors

Indeed, to a considerable extent, gender has been a subsidiary issue in Nigerian society. The traditional social structures have been offering limited incentives for amending the existing distribution of power between men and women. As observed by Nmadu (2000), the Nigerian society (pre-modern and contemporary) has been significantly dotted with peculiar cultural practices that are potently inimical to women’s emancipation, such as early/forced marriage, wife-inheritance and widowhood practices. Moreover, to Bhavani et al. (2003), such unequal social and gender relations need to be transformed in order to take women out of want and poverty. As daughters self-identify as females with their mother and sisters, and sons as males with their father and brothers, gender stereotyping becomes institutionalized within the family unit (Haraway, 1991). Also, the dominant narratives of religion in both colonial and post-colonial Nigerian society indeed privileges men to the detriment of women, even in educational accessibility. As such, our society remains entrapped in ‘history of analogy’ whereby it is either exoticised or simply represented as part of European history (Mamdani, 1996). CEDAW articles (1979), therefore, acknowledge that whatever socio-cultural norms that deny women equal rights with men will also render women more vulnerable to physical, sexual and mental abuse. The subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men is a universal phenomenon, though with a difference in the nature and extent of subordination across countries.

Gender role ideology does not only create the qualities of femininity and masculinity, it also places them in hierarchal fashion in which female sex is generally valued less than male sex because of their socially ascribed roles in reproductive sphere. The gender status quo is maintained through low resource allocation to women’s human development by the state, society and the family. This is reflected in the social indicators which reflect varying degrees of gender disparities in education, health, employment, ownership of productive resources and politics in all countries.

Economic factors

The economic sector of our society is one area where discrimination against women has been richly pronounced. According to the CEC Report (2007), the role of women in employment and economic activities is often underestimated because most of the women work in the informal sectors, usually with low productivity and incomes, poor working conditions, with little or no social protection. It observes that the female labour force in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005 was about 73 million, representing 34% of those employed in the formal sector, earning only 10% of the income, while owning 1% of the assets. However, the denial of women’s inheritance and land rights has made their economic participation considerably constrained and by implication, their educational aspiration (Nmadu, 2000). Politics is increasingly becoming commercialized. More and more money is needed to participate in politics. Women lack access to and ownership of the productive resource, limiting the scope of their political work. To Eade (1996), such government’s macroeconomic policies like liberalization of petroleum sector and removal of subsidies e.g. on fertilizer, have always created distortions, in spite of strides women (rural dwellers) make in self-reliance. To this end, Ake (1996) believes that the contradictions between the latent and manifest functions of public policy have often been the bane of all emancipatory agenda in Nigeria.

DIMENSIONS OF GENDER INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIA

Women and education

Education is said to be a vehicle that breaks the shackles of poverty thereby leading to transformation, development and progress (Ilkoni, 2009). With the 2005 MDGs’ first deadline for attainment of gender parity in primary and secondary schools’ enrolment already missed, the ability of women and girls to empower themselves economically and socially by going to school, or by engaging in productive and civic activities is still being constrained by their responsibility for everyday tasks in the household division of labour (CEC Report, 2007). In Nigeria, educational facilities are generally believed to be inadequate, and access, limited for many, especially girls and women (Uku, 1992). According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2005), Nigeria was classified as a low development country in respect of equality in educational accessibility. Female Adult Literacy Rate (ages 15 and above) for the country was 59.4% as against male, 74.4%; the Combined Gross Enrolment for Primary, Secondary and Tertiary schools for a female was 57% and male, 71%. Consequently, Ojo (2002) affirms that women are fewer than men in certain socio-economic activities. According to him, the percentages of female workers in some selected professions were as follow architects, 2.4%, quantity surveyors, 3.5%, lawyers/jurists, 25.4%, lecturers, 11.8%,
obstetricians and gynaecologists, 8.4%, paediatricians, 33.3%, media practitioners, 18.3%.

However, Omolewa (2002) shows that this inequality has its root in the colonial system of education which was primarily geared toward meeting the manpower need of the colonial government that obviously alienated women from educational and economic opportunities. Women in Nigeria are harder-hit than men by poverty due to the nation nonchalant emphasis placed on female education, and the prevalence of early marriage which tend to further impoverish the womenfolk and subject them to statutory discrimination (Ojo, 2002). To Mamdani (1996), the incidence of poverty is more rampant among the female-gender in Africa because of discrimination in educational opportunities. On the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), Nigeria ranks a disparaging 123rd position with the Estimated Earned Income for female as low as the US $614 and the male, US $1,495 (UNDP, 2005). Lack of education has been a strong visible barrier to female participation in the formal sector.

The social pressures on females such as early marriages, and other extraneous factors, as well as consideration of female education as secondary to that of boys and certain inhibitive religious practices in some parts of Nigeria, are the major causes of the high illiteracy rate amongst women. As the impact of teenage pregnancy and early marriage makes abundantly clear, girls are at a double disadvantage in educational access, especially in the north, where these practices are most widespread (NDHS, 2003). Education gives women the opportunity to be less dependent on men and to have more control over their sexual and reproductive health, often resulting in fewer births and a greater spacing between births, which is both healthier for mother and child. Where women lack education and information about family planning and have a low social status, there is a much higher prevalence of unintended pregnancies; the biggest risk factor associated with this being unsafe abortions.

Women and the economy

By the virtue of the population of Nigeria, the potential female labour force is 50% but the actual value is 31%. The proportion of women in the formal sector is very minimal. This is noticeable in the industries and the civil services; statistics indicate that in the Federal Civil Service, which is the highest employer in the country, women are mostly found in the junior categories (Ajin, 2002). Women are mainly involved in petty trading, selling wares in the market and street hawking in urban areas. According to statistics 78% of women are mostly engaged in the informal sector, which are farming and petty trading. Despite this, their contribution is not commensurate monetarily. The women's unpaid labour is twice that of men, and its economic value is estimated to be up to 30% of the nation's Gross National Product.

Women self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, particularly in Nigeria with a very high birth rate as well as the cultural roles associated to women - the role of childbearing, child raising and homemaking. Nigerian women, like their counterparts, around the world, face a lot of discrimination that limits their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices (Salaam, 2003).

Women are mostly involved in farming and food processing. They do not have access to land but can only use the land at the benevolence of their husbands and brothers. Women also have limited access to agricultural inputs. Women tend to be disadvantaged, because when compared with men, they do not have access to obtaining credit facilities and so are rarely engaged in the production and marketing of lucrative cash crops, such as cocoa, which tends to be a male preserve. The legal protection granted by the constitution and the Labour Act has little or no effect in the informal sector - agriculture and domestic services where the vast majority of women are employed.

Women and politics

The various Nigerian constitutions guaranteed the rights of women to participate in active politics; however, the last decade has witnessed a relative increase in women's participation. This is only when we measure the increase in participation with certain standards such as the number of women who vote in elections, the number of public offices held by women, a number of women-related policies implemented by government etc. Over the years, there has been a remarkable increase in women's participation in politics in Nigeria considering these standards, yet there is inherently a pronounced level of under-representation of women in politics when compared with their male counterparts (Nkechi, 1996).

Women's aspiration to participate in governance is premised on the following ground; that women in Nigeria represent half of the population and hence should be allowed a fair share in decision-making and the governance of the country. Secondly that all human beings are equal and women possess the same rights as men to participate in governance and public life. The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law. The 1999 Nigerian constitution by virtue of Section 40 states the following: Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interests: Provided that the provisions of this section shall not derogate from the powers conferred by this
Constitution on the Independent National Electoral Commission with respect to political parties to which that Commission does not accord recognition. Section 42(1) of the same constitution states further 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. Section 77 of the Constitution also states: (1) Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, every Senatorial district or Federal constituency established in accordance with the provisions of this Part of this Chapter shall return a member who shall be directly elected to the Senate or the House of Representatives in such manner as may be prescribed by an act of the National Assembly. (2) Every citizen of Nigeria, who has attained the age of eighteen years residing in Nigeria at the time of the registration of voters for purposes of election to a legislative house, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for that election. From the foregoing, it appears that there is nothing in the constitution, which excludes the participation of women in politics in Nigeria. Yet when it comes to actual practice, there is extensive discrimination.

Few and almost insignificant number of women were elected to various posts in the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections held in the country. Men dominate most public offices to date. Female gubernatorial candidates have emerged but none has ever won and same goes for the Presidency. Legislative representation has witnessed the presence of women yet they remain under-represented when compared with their male counterparts. Following two decades of military rule, statistics reveal that women only secured 3% representation in contested positions in 1999, 4% in 2003, while in 2007 they made with only 6%. Few and almost insignificant number of women were elected to various posts in past four general elections held in the country between 1999 and 2011. The result of the survey shows that no woman was elected as governor of any state in the federation. We only had few women as members of Houses of Assembly across the country and as members of the upper house (Senate) and a lower house (House of Representative) of the National Assembly.

In a related development the first and only female Speaker of any House of Assembly in Nigeria, Mrs Margaret Ichen was frustrated out of office in Benue State. Women have not received much support from the men because those who have found themselves in one position of authority or the other are frustrated out of office or forced to step down (Nkoyo, 2002; UNESCO, 1999).

There is a National Gender Policy that commits to ensuring Affirmative Action for women, however, women's representation remains below the 35% target. Suffice to mention that, the manifestos and constitutions of political parties in Nigeria rarely mention Affirmative Action for women, and when they do, their commitments are lower than the benchmark set by regional and International Conventions. Women Participation in Nigerian politics is an issue of great importance. Women have been put in the background politically for years; this has engendered a consciousness of women under-representation in public life.

Women and human rights violation

Over a decade now, numerous cases of women's rights violation such as acid baths, the murder of women, rape, widow abuse, and physical assaults, have occurred in Nigeria. Unfortunately, it is only extreme cases of women’s rights violation which results in death or permanent disability that earns the media attention and the police interests. Critical cases such as female circumcision or genital mutilation, wife battery, marital rape, sexual harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, incest, termination of employment as a result of pregnancy, etc. are not considered problematic enough to be highlighted in the media as well to be taken seriously by the police(Salaam, 2003).

More so, the victims of violence, especially domestic violence and rape, hardly report to the appropriate authorities. For instance, wife battery is considered a private affair between the husband and wife. Moreover, the tradition or culture and religious beliefs in Nigeria as a typical patriarchal society see the wife as a property of her husband, who has moral right to beat her as a penalty for insubordination and or perceived wrongdoing. In the case of rape, women consider it a social stigma if their ordeal becomes a public knowledge.

Women and religion/culture

Generally, religion is used as an instrument in defence of a class society and patriarchy. It discriminates against women. As a result of the theocratic character of the governance of the northern part of Nigeria before the advent of the British colonialists, Islam has been institutionalized as a culture - the way of life - of the majority of the people of the region.

Islam, like most religious beliefs, gives hope of fantastic heaven – the paradise - to the adherents. Knowing well the emotional attachment of the northern Nigerian Muslims to religion and the psychological equanimity they derive from it, politicians ruling the northern Nigerian states introduced Sharia law in order to enhance their political prospects and divert attention away from their own looting and failure to improve living standards. Of course, Sharia as the religious law gives a central place to paternalistic interpretation to women’s appropriate roles and socio-political arrangement
of the society. Sharia law conflicts with national secular principles, especially in relation to women’s rights, on which Nigeria is formally based. It places a lot of restrictions on the rights of women. The major victims of this political Sharia are women. We fight against discrimination on the basis of religion, gender, ethnic origin or race. In this sense, the right of Muslims to practice those aspects of Sharia, which pertains to worship, mode of dressing, naming of children and other personal or family matters must be respected. However, religion should be a personal affair and should be separated from the state. This is even more imperative in a multi-religious society like Nigeria. The failure to adhere to this principle by successive capitalist governments in Nigeria is one of the main reasons for the rising wave of ethnic and religious conflicts in the country, particularly since the beginning of the introduction of Sharia law by some states in the year 2000.

EFFORTS MADE SO FAR TOWARDS WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

Women over the years have made several efforts to change their conditions but such efforts have been sporadic, uncoordinated and unsustained. Deliberate organized efforts aimed at changing the status quo of women is a recent phenomenon. World conferences with women issues top on the agenda have been held at various times. There was the 1975 conference at Mexico City, 1980 at Copenhagen, 1985 at Nkrobe, 1995 Beijing conference and even the recent women summit held on 18th October 2014 at Abuja at the instance of Dame Patience Jonathan, the wife of the former Nigerian president, all geared towards women improvement. These conferences have succeeded in bringing gender issues to global attention (Omolewa, 2002).

The international conference gave the problem of women a global outlook and emboldened them to articulate the issues of critical concern and lobby for attention and assistance. This made the International and National Institutions and agencies more responsive to women’s needs and aspirations. The international conference on population and development held in Cairo in 1994 was a major breakthrough in the empowerment of women. It identified the empowerment of women and improvement of their status as essential to the realization of the full potential of economic, political and social development of any given human society (Nkoyo, 2005).

The Beijing conference is centred on upholding the earlier conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The Beijing conference recognized the need for the empowerment of women and equality between men and women as prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all the peoples of the world. In Nigeria, several bodies and organizations have emerged with the objective of empowering women, protecting and promoting their interest. The defunct Better Life for Women Programme, the Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), the National Women’s Commission (NWC), the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), are Governmental Organizations (G.Os) that were all geared towards women empowerment.

There are also non-government bodies with similar targets. Many African countries have formulated policies to promote women empowerment and development. For instance, Nigeria has adopted a "National policy on Women". This is to promote and protect the rights of women and increase their participation in government. The National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) document expresses government’s commitment to 30 percent representation for women and the Federal Government is trying to keep to that policy (Adeniran, 2006). All these and other efforts put in place have not yet yielded enough fruits as the majority of women remain underpowered even though some have received the supposed vehicle (Education) through which empowerment could be conveyed. This is mainly due to some variables that constitute obstacles/barriers to empowerment that have not yet been removed and the Modus Operandi of the exponents of women empowerment.

GAPS IN GENDER EQUALITY DRIVE

There exists gender imbalance in developing countries. Several direct and related policies have not been translated to anticipated equality and development. While so many governments accented to the numerous treaties, yet the implementation aspects have not been effective, leading to little or no impact on the set objectives. Treatment of women is yet to be fairer. Many of these policies on poverty reduction, fertility reduction, maternal mortality reduction, etc can be more effective if bold steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women and or reduction on the discrimination against women. In fact, if there is a bottom-up approach, which encompasses grassroots participation in the decision-making process, the interventions affecting gender issues might be less and its unintended consequences drastically minimized. It can be noted that majority of related indicators are unfavourable to women: child health maternal health, HIV infection, rural-urban residence, early marriage, household headship, literacy, man-hours at work, wages, income, employment, means of production, senior positions, and parliamentary seats. The law and rights of women is another aspect where a gap exists. The overriding influence of custom and tradition on statutory laws and the admixture of both are especially obvious. For instance, the non-discrimination clause in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
is not taken into cognizance when executive policies are being formulated. All statutory laws should have a uniform impact on closing the existing gaps in gender issues such as property inheritance rights, divorce, reproductive health rights, discrimination against women and harmful cultural practices can really make a big difference for gender concerns.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The need to empower Nigerian women cannot be over-emphasized particularly in a democratic society which recognizes the need for individuals to develop their potentials and contribute to the overall development of the nation. It is therefore imperative that awareness is created for the benefit that could be derived from women empowerment and as well as assist women to realize their potentialities in order to contribute meaningfully to national development. The empowerment of Nigerian women towards national development should be a matter of top national priority, which demands the attention and genuine commitment of every responsible member of the society. To promote women empowerment towards national development, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1) Firstly, the government should reinvigorate its political will and efforts towards promoting gender equality and women empowerment through reshaping the legal and institutional framework to hinder gender discrimination. The legislative system should remove impediments to gender equality and reform laws that discriminate against women, such as laws and cultural practices or laws on inheritance, labour market participation, discrimination in certain job opportunities and employment policies.

2) Secondly, educational opportunities should be given to girls and boys equally through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and more so, particular attention should be accorded in areas that provide women with better market skills. Also, there is a need for the reform of labour laws and regulations with the view to realignment with the new development model and new gender agenda.

3) Again, the media should assist and expose the evil of discrimination, violence and crime against women, unjust cultural and traditions in both English and local language services.

4) There should be equality in the sharing of political offices on the basis of quota system between competing candidates. This will enable both men and women of having equal chances of control in such public offices.

5) Money politics should be discouraged in Nigeria while women who want to take an active part in politics be encouraged to do so without any fear or favour.

6) The doctrine of the Affirmative Action and CEDAW should be strengthened so that they could have considerable impacts on the political landscape of Nigeria thereby curtailing any form of discrimination against women.

7) There should be structures put in place such as the legal funds. These structures will enable women politicians challenge any form of electoral malpractice in Nigerian political terrain.

The aforementioned recommendations, if comprehensively followed, will no doubt enhance the political status of women in Nigeria thereby giving them an edge over their male counterparts in the 21st century and beyond.

REFERENCES


