



WOMEN AND POLITICS: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Women's underrepresentation in politics presents a serious challenge to various countries of the world, both developed and developing countries alike. Study after studies have shown that marginalization of women in politics retards the political, economic, and social development of human society. Patriarchal prejudice or sex stereotyping, poor political socialization, lack of preparation, the nature of the political atmosphere obtainable at a particular time in a particular country, and balancing of work life and family are obviously not helping matters at all. It is the findings of this essay that unless these problems are urgently tackled, women's underrepresentation in politics will continue to rear its ugly head globally. The research proposed an educational system that cultivates and promotes gender equality at all levels of education, mostly at the primary and secondary school levels, and the complete involvement of women in politics at the grassroots levels.

Keywords: women, politics, underrepresentation, participation, marginalization.

Introduction

The woman is a person and an individual who contains within herself the value and the purpose of her existence, who is provided with the same rights and the same freedom as man. This is the decisive and fundamental view of women (Amold, 1963:23). Severin Boethius defined a person as an individual substance of a rational nature. He is most perfectly a rational subsistent, according to St Thomas Aquinas. (Batista 1998:248). Plato of Athens (428/28 B.C.) cautioned that: There is no occupation that belongs to either man or women as such. Although they have different sexes, they have same nature and should have the same occupation, for many women are better and competent at many things than men. Natural gifts are found here and there in both creatures and as such, both should be given equal opportunities at all level. Women should be trained as guardians, as soldiers, in music, in gymnastic and receive equal education (Plato 1974:173).

Man (male and female) is a bundle of possibilities. The gift of nature is scattered in both sexes, and the marginalization of women as a result of sex amounts to a huge waste of resources. The transformation of the society requires that men and women pursue their personal liberation, not individually as liberal feminism proposes, but collectively as a society (George 2005.453). Haralambos Holborn strongly opines that: All human beings have certain features -capacities for reason, moral agency, and self-actualization. The existence of these capacities can be secured through legal recognition of universal rights. The inequality between men and women assigned



by sex are social constructions, having no basis in "nature" and social change for equality can be produced by an organized appeal to a reasonable public and the sue of the state (Holborn 2008:101)

The system that enthrones men solely on the top of social and political ladder (patriarchy) and gives men the impetus to consider women as socially, politically and economically inconsequential, powerless, inferior, and incapable of fulfilling any meaningful or reasonable public responsibility is grossly and truly slippery, destructive and impotent. Such is also the fate of any belief which indoctrinates men to uphold the unproductive view that though all humans are said to be equal, men are more equal than women; and as such, have the legitimate right to lord it over them. A society built on patriarchal prejudice vehemently limits the right of women in politics, mostly the right to vote and be voted for. Patriarchal style of politicking, call it sexism or male chauvinism restricts women from taking active political participation and creates hopeless audacity in the minds of fickle men to maintain domination in Government at all levels and branches. Such a system that sees women as social misfit and social dolls stands to be pitied (Acholonu1995:6). Hence Plato warns that: ...that which has law and order in the state is the cause of every good, but that which is distorted or ill-treated is often the ruin of that which is well ordered the careful considering, arranging as well as ordering of common principle of all institutions relating to men and women greatly contribute to the happiness of the state (Plato1974:161).

Let us bring the matter home. This, I believe, will give room for proper analysis and understanding of the topic under elucidation. Now, marriage is the Union of a man and a woman for procreation and lasting or enduring companionship. The questions that hanker after good answers are these: why is it that men and women, in the process of forming or establishing and building a family (mini-state), join hands together? Why should men nurture and nourish the view that, in the process of establishing and building a state, women are unimportant? Kofi Anaan, a onetime United Nations Secretary General, States that: Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women. No other Policy is likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition, and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDs. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier, they are better fed, and their income, savings, and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, whole countries (Why we invest in women).

It is a virus in men's reasoning to view politics as their own sole domain. Is the state not a larger size of the family? If in the process of establishing and building a family, the man sees himself as naturally incapacitated to do it all alone, that is, it is not fundamentally or primarily only a male thing, why should he be downright myopic to see women as totally inconsequential in the building, management, and development of a nation? This actually plagues my imagination. Men and women, ab initio, are complementary in their roles to conquer and dominate the world. I am not a thorough -going promoter of feminism, especially the Western brand of Feminism. I am only questioning practices in human society which fall short of human dignity. Human society is man and women owned society. The obvious marginalization of the female gender in politics



will continuously prove counterproductive. As a result, it calls for urgent attention. Hence C. Opara submits that the human society at its best is a social experience wherein human person, male and female, come together to affirm their unity and oneness. Hence, the continual repression of the fundamental rights of women is unethical. There ought to be a reversal of our customary moral codes, given that men and women are complimentary part of one wholeness (humankind), the subjection of women to unnecessary discrimination is counterproductive. It is equivalent to cutting off one's nose to spite one's face, and it clashes with men's rationality to seriously question. Here is a wise Igbo proverb that explains it all: 'o ji mmadu n'ala, o ji kwa onwe ya,' meaning whoever is holding somebody on the ground (to prevent him/her from rising) is holding himself. Peace, development, and conflict resolution can be attained when men and women work together (Opara 2000:189).

In 1954, the United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women went into force, enshrining women's equal rights to vote, hold office, and access public services as provided for male citizens with national laws. Women, in the government of the modern era, are underrepresented in most countries worldwide, in contrast to men. However, women are increasingly being elected to be heads of state and government. More than 20 countries have women holding offices as the head of a national government, and the global participation rate of women in national-level parliament is nearly 20%. Several countries are exploring measures that may increase women's participation in government at all levels, from the local to the national (Gender equality).

Women have been notably underrepresented in the executive branch of government. The gender gap has been closing, albeit slowly. The first women, other than monarchs, to hold head of state positions were in socialist countries. The first was Khertek Anchimaa-Toka of the Tuvan People's Republic from 1940 to 1944, followed by Sukhbaataryn Yanjmaa of the Mongolian People's Republic from 1953 to 1954, and Soong Ching-ling of the People's Republic of China from 1968 to 1972 and 1981 (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) 2005).

Following the socialist countries, the Nordic countries have been forerunners in including women in the executive branch. The second Cabinet Brundtland (1986-1989) was historical in that 8 out of 18 cabinet members were women, and in 2007, the second cabinet and Stoltenberg (2005-2014) had more than 50% women (UNRISD 2005). In 2003, Finland had a historical moment when all top leaders of the country were women and also represented different political parties: Social Democrat, Tarja Halonen, was president; Riitta Uosukainen from the National Coalition Party was Speaker of the Parliament. And after the parliamentary election of 2003, Anneli Jaatteenmaki from the Centre Party was on her way to becoming the first female Prime Minister of Finland. By June 22, 2010, Mari Kiviniemi of the Centre Party was appointed the second female prime minister of Finland.

The present Danish Government is a coalition between the Social Democrats, the Social-Liberal party, and the Socialist People's Party. All three parties have female leaders. Helle Thoming-Schmidt is the Prime Minister. The world's first elected female president was Vigdis Finnbogadottir of Iceland, whose term lasted from 1980 to 1996. In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf



of Liberia became Africa's first elected female head of state (UNRISD 2005). In the Legislative arm of government, women's representation across the globe is also notably poor. According to a 2006 report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 16% of all Parliament members in the world are female. In 1995, the United Nations set a goal of 30% female representation. The current annual growth rate of women in the National Parliament is 0.5% worldwide. At this rate, gender parity in National legislatures will not be achieved until 2068.

The top ten countries in terms of the number of female parliamentary members are Rwanda with 56.39%, Sweden with 47.0%, Cuba with 43.2%, Finland with 41.5%, the Netherlands with 41.3%, Argentina with 40.0%, Denmark with 38.0%, Angola with 37.3%, Costa Rica with 36.8%, and Spain with 36.3%. Cuba has the highest percentage of countries without a quota. In South Asia, Nepal has the highest rank in women's participation in politics, with 33%. In the United States in 2008, the New Hampshire State Senate became the first upper house legislature to possess an elected formal majority. The United Kingdom and the United States are roughly in line with the world average. The House of Lords has 139 women (19.7%), while there are 125 women (19.4%) in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom (UNRISD 2005).

Local Government has been witnessing an increasing focus on women's representation at the local level. Most of this research is focused on developing countries. Government decentralization often results in local government structures that are more open to the participation of women, both as elected local councilors and as clients of local services. A 2003 survey conducted by United Cities and Local Government (UCLG), a global network supporting inclusive local government, found that the average proportion of women in local councils was 15%. In leadership positions, the proportion of women was lower: for instance, 5% of mayors of Latin American municipalities are women. According to a comparative study of women in local government in Asia and the Pacific, women have been more successful in reaching decision-making positions in Local Government than at the national level. Local Governments tend to be more accessible and have more available positions. Also, women's role in local government may be more accepted because they are seen as an extension of their involvement in the community (UNRISD:2005).

Socio-Cultural Hindrances to women Participation in Politics

There are many obvious hindrances as to why women shun running for elected office positions like men. These barriers negatively impact the active desire of many women to vie for notable elected office ranks in government. These hindrances range from gender disparity or sex - stereotyping, political socialization, lack of preparation for political activity, to balancing work with family (Heather 1996:242)

1. Sex Stereotyping: This is the misleading presupposition that masculine and feminine qualities are interlaced in leadership. The aggressiveness and competitiveness intrinsic to politics make people assume that active participation in elected office positions requires masculine features. In politics, femininity is erroneously conceived as a mark of feeble and powerless leadership. This particular problem can be remedied when women employ every fiber of their feminine (women)



features to solicit the support and votes of the electorate during electioneering campaigns (Heather 1996:242).

2. Political Socialization: This problem hinges on the idea that during childhood, women are introduced to socially constructed norms of politics. Sex stereotyping starts very early in life and disfigures a child's political socialization. It makes girls take politics as a male province or sphere of influence. The known agents of socialization are: family, school, higher education, mass media, and religion. The roles played by each of these agents in shaping the understanding and minds of the people to either enter politics or shun it are pivotal and truly enduring. Women who feature prominently in politics are people who are mainly born into a political family. As a result, the kind of political upbringing they received is devoid of weak gender-role norms (Jacquetta 2012:102).

3. Lack of Preparation for Political Activity: This builds upon the concept of political socialization by determining the degree to which women become socialized to pursue careers that may be compatible with formal politics. Careers in law, business, education, and government appear to be common occupations for those who may later decide to enter public office (Jacquetta 2012:102). People feel as if women cannot do both things at once, and that being a mother and a woman of high power are never compatible. Employment as a lawyer or perhaps as a University Professor is significant due to the potential political connections, known as "social capital," that these occupations create (Happy Mother After). The assumption is that women in such occupations would acquire the necessary preparation and connections to pursue political careers (Heather 1996:242)

4. Balancing Work and Family Life: The work-life balance is invariably more difficult for women as they are generally expected by society to act as the primary caregivers for children, as well as for maintenance of the home. Due to the demands of work-life balance, it is assumed that women would choose to delay political aspirations until their children are older. Research has shown that new female politicians in Canada and the U.S.A. are older than their male counterparts. Again, a woman may choose to remain childless in order to seek a political career. Furthermore, mobility plays a crucial role in the work-family dynamic. Elected officials are usually required to commute long distances to and from their respective capital cities, which can thus be a deterrent for women seeking political office (Jacquetta 2012:102).

5. Ignorance: In the developing countries where women are still struggling to live above male domination, it is very common for society to see a woman who is a politician as a prostitute. Women, if they are not married and have attained a certain age in life, are seen as prostitutes when they join politics. This notion or belief is very common among the developing societies of the world. In Nigeria, a happy and fulfilled mother is no other person than that woman who is comfortably married; whose husband has no fear as regards her availability in her marital home; and whose role as a family caregiver is attested to by everybody in the society. Many men in this kind of society are not ready to put up with women who are actively involved in partisan politics. Apart from the restraints from men, it is very common for women to throw rotten eggs at their fellow women who are active politicians. In fact, women are the greatest obstacle to themselves whenever the issue of the underrepresentation of women in elected office positions is raised.



What deters many women from vying for elected office positions is the fear of what their fellow women would take them to be. This is very true in Nigerian society. My candid advice to such women who dare to stand out and exercise their political rights is to shun what people would say. Let them know that vying for elected office positions is a service to God and humanity. It is a noble way of defining one's existence.

Problems Militating Against Women's Participation in Politics in Nigeria

1. There is a huge financial involvement and a negative act by our desperate politicians. Violence and dirty tactics are employed by the male counterpart to force women out of the race.
- 2 Religion: For example, in Zamfara State, where religion, especially Sharia have taken root, women are not allowed to mix with men in public, and separate public transport has been provided.
3. Godfatherism: The roles played by Godfathers in Nigerian politics also go a long way in affecting the politics of Nigerian women. These people provide the financial and physical muscle campaigning in return for political favours. Godfathers would rather invest money in men than women.
4. Most political parties want those who match violence with violence, those who can coerce people to vote for them, and men are widely known to be more prepared to engage in violence than women, for example. When Dorathy Wike Nnoye contested in the 2007 election in Rivers State, on the day of the election, she was elbowed out by men who acted as thugs and miscreants (Women in Politics-online).

Generally, one is likely to conclude that the Babangida era marked a watershed in the history of women's struggle in Nigeria. When Maryam Babangida institutionalized the office of the first lady in 1987, she took the issue of women to an unimaginable level. She transformed it into an intensive, supportive mechanism for the presidency. She became the first working first lady and launched the Better Life for Rural Women program. The committee at various levels liaised with and motivated the women to initiate and execute self-help development projects. She transformed the institute into an intensive, supportive mechanism for the presidency. Here are some other examples of women who made an impact in the country. Mrs. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, while she was in the Finance Ministry, saved the national records of billions of naira as a result of the hard work of the public sector. Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili also made a landmark in the history of Nigerian politics. Prof. (Late) Dora Akunyili, the NAFDAC boss, also performed very well in office. Mrs. Nnenadi Usman, who also held the post of minister, performed well.

Ways of Encouraging Women's Participation In Politics

Research has shown that many countries of the world are obviously worried about the issue of women's underrepresentation in government. In their concerted efforts to tackle this ugly trend, so many urgent measures have been taken.

Analysis of some of these measures is important. They include:



1. Education: There is the unquestionable truism that women with sound formal education stand the position to be better informed about infant and child nutrition, and ensure childhood immunization. It is also very obvious that such women usually delay marriage and subsequent childbirth. But children of mothers with formal education are better nourished and have higher survival rates. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF:2003). Equalization of educational opportunities for boys and girls must be seriously encouraged. These may take the shape of the abolishment of educational fees, which would require parents to consider financial issues when deciding which of their children to educate. This is mostly obtainable among children from rural areas. There should be proper encouragement of parents and communities to set up a gender-equal educational agenda. Also, the creation of "girls-friendly" schools to minimize bias and create a safe school environment for girls and young women should be encouraged (UNICEF.org). Education is a vital tool for people in society to better themselves in their career paths. The biggest hurdle to overcome for women is still on the local level, where both men and women are often recruited from the communities and have limited political skills. Empowerment comes through qualitative education. It is quality education that liberates any nation from cultural, social, and traditional barriers. If qualitative education is given to women, they are bound to be liberated from the Shackles of despair and extreme phobias that hinder them from taking part actively in politics. Democratically developed and liberal states must surely have more women who are politically conscious than developing an illiberal state (Reynolds1999:547).

2. Quotas: These are mechanisms by which governments seek to increase the number of women represented in the government. UNICEF 2003). Gender quotas for the election of legislators have been used since the late 1970s by a few political parties, through the party charter, in a small number of advanced industrialized democracies; examples of such countries are Germany and Norway. Jones (1983:3). Sex quota systems, legal quota systems, voluntary party quota systems, etc., are yielding fruit in the increase of the number of women in politics and elected office positions. Quotas may be utilized during different stages of the political nomination process to address different junctures at which women may be inherently disadvantaged. UNICEF (2003). It is possible to use sex quota systems to make it mandatory that from the pool of aspirants, a certain percentage of them must be female. At the stage when candidates are nominated, legal or voluntary quotas are enforced, during which a certain portion of nominated candidates on the party's ballot must be female. If there happen to be reserved seats during elections, they can be filled only by women. Quotas are drastically changing the number of female representatives in political power. They (quotas) have been quite useful in allowing women to gain support and opportunities when attempting to achieve seats of power. In Nigeria, during the recently concluded 2015 general election, women were given party nomination forms free of charge. Women who vied for elected office positions in the executive and legislative branches of government didn't buy the forms. It was intentionally waved for them so that women would not go through the financial problem involved in vying for any elected office of their choice. This is a strong way of encouraging women's representation in politics. The question is: How many women utilized the offer in Nigeria? It was only a handful of them. And so, we find out that the problem is primarily a lack of political awareness at the grassroots level.



3. Legislation: There have been numerous occasions where equal legislation has, in itself and through the effect that women have, benefited the overall progression of women's equality on a global scale. Though women have entered legislation, the overall representation within higher ranks of government is not established. The ministerial portfolio allocation worldwide shows that women are given softer socio-cultural ministerial positions rather than in the harder and politically more prestigious positions of economic planning, national security, and foreign affairs, which are often seen as stepping stones to national leadership. During Goodluck Jonathan's regime in Nigeria, some women were given high ministerial portfolio positions. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala was the minister of finance. She did not fail womanhood. Alison Madueke was the Petroleum Minister. She also utilized the position to a meaningful extent. There should be an inclusion of more women in ministerial positions. Motherhood and womanhood in governance can never pose a threat to the peace and security of any state. Just try it.

Conclusion

So far, it is obvious that politics is not a preserve of any gender, male or female. World peace and development demand symbiotic complementarity between men and women in all fields of human endeavor. Marginalization of women in the politics of any country is a sorry tale. Every country in the world must continue strategizing and re-strategizing on the best method that should be applied to curb the ugly trend of underrepresentation of women in politics. Politics at the grassroots must advocate for 100% women's involvement. The education of the female child must be the priority of every parent. Socialization (political) of girls must begin at an early age of the girl-child. All the agents of socialization must help a girl-child to see herself as a major key-role-player in the political leadership and social development of the world, and must live as such.

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