


Chapter 37

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations: Enhancing Women's Representation in Governance in Nigeria

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Overview

Over the years, African countries have had to grapple with the challenges of growth and development as it relates to issues of poverty, inequality, insecurity, infrastructural deficiencies and hunger. These challenges cannot be overcome without unlocking the potential and utilising the unused resources and capacity that lie in the hands of African women as the under-representation of one-half of the population not only limits the diversity of governance and development but also contradicts one of the central tenets of representative democracy (Caul, 1999).

Most African countries have not been able to meet the international best practices of at least 35% affirmative action for women's representation. For instance, in a survey of Africa's 54 countries, Nigeria ranks the lowest, coming 54th with a 5.45% female representation, while Rwanda ranks first with 47.95%. On the list of the five worst-performing countries, Algeria came second after Nigeria, with 6.20%; Benin Republic, 7.40%, while the Gambia and Liberia followed with 8.60% and 11.00% respectively. Senegal came in second place in the overall ranking after Rwanda with 44.20%; Mozambique followed with 42.60%, then South Africa and Burundi with 41.60% and 39.60% respectively (IPU, 2020). Thus, the valuable contributions imminent in the potentials of women remained untapped and has been argued by researchers over the years to be responsible for the underdevelopment of

African countries and constitute negations to the importance of participation and representation of women in politics as adduced below:

- First, the absence of members of historically disadvantaged groups such as women from political institutions and governance is increasingly regarded as evidence of injustice. This can be associated with what Stevens (2007) calls the 'agency' argument- since women constitute half of any country's population; that alone reserves them the right to constitute half of the decision-making bodies. Hence, Kangiwa (2015) instructively notes that women cannot advance where there is gender discrimination and injustice. Equal opportunities therefore promote respect for the differences of individuals or a class of individuals just as they enhance their sense of belonging to a particular society and this advances the growth and development of such society.
- Secondly, the fair representation of women is necessary for efficiency as its leads to maximisation of all the resources of the country since inequality and discrimination against women breed underdevelopment. This, Mill (1999) points out, that participation of both the majority and the minority (especially the disenfranchised women) has to be ensured for a government to be competent and efficient. Women bring resources into politics and governance, namely: values, experiences and the unique expertise that differentiates them from men and a political system that does not utilise both genders' experiences and resources is incompetent and failing legitimacy (Myeni, 2014). Efficiency can only result from a situation where society deliberately promotes equal opportunities and creates an enabling environment for people to fully develop without being discriminated against based on differences of religion, gender, ethnicity or race (Olanrewaju, 2018).
- Similarly, women's full and fair representation and participation in decision-making is essential to ensure that they promote and defend their specific needs and interests, promoting gender-sensitive governance and enhancing access to and control over local resources for both (Stevens, 2007). As evidenced from research, discrimination against women fosters low self-esteem and increases the level of poverty with adverse effects on women's empowerment (Anyoha et al., 2015). The full integration of women into society without any form of discrimination should be promoted, since society benefits when everyone can fully contribute to the development of the nation. It was succinctly put that, having women rather than men in office makes government demonstrably more responsive to women's interests (Sapiro, 1981).
- Furthermore, inclusion of women in politics improves the quality of democratic deliberation; public policy can be improved by having a more diverse set of representatives who can influence the political agenda.

Therefore, the extent of women's representation in government has considerable political consequences. The validity and trustworthiness of democracy will be in question if women, constituting half of the population, remain absent from the different institutions of a society (Panday, 2008).

It has therefore become imperative, as evident in extant literatures, that Africa can only achieve the desired growth and development efforts when the continent is capable of harnessing all its resources: material, men and machine; and especially if women are able to participate actively in economic, social and political life. Relatedly, Okoro (2013) recommends that for Africa to witness ultimate peace, discrimination against women in African societies must be ended.

Key gender policy commitments

African governments have made important commitments to gender equality and to closing the gender inequality gap. Some of the policies adopted include amongst others:

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN, 1979)

The CEDAW is an international treaty aimed at promoting women's rights by providing equal rights to men and women to enjoy all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights as well as encouraging countries themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women. This will include the incorporation of the principle of equality in their system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate laws prohibiting discrimination against women, to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination by persons, organisations or enterprises (UN, 1979).

Article 5(a) of the CEDAW enjoins states to eradicate all social and cultural barriers which perceive men as superior to women, thereby subjecting them to abuse. Okongwu (2021) adds that the Convention affirms that discrimination against women still exists, and it violates the principles of equality of rights (UN, 1948). Therefore, the provision of the conventions covers the protection for the civil and legal status of women and addresses the impact of cultural factors on gender relations such as cultural stereotypes, customs and norms which give rise to constraints on the advancement of women. It also aims to target cultural practices that define the public domain as men's sphere and the domestic field as women's domain. This convention

was signed and ratified by most African countries showing their commitment to the promotion of gender empowerment within the African continent. Part of the criticism of the CEDAW is that it has been insufficient in protecting African women against discrimination and it had Western values which did not address issues faced by rural women in Africa (Akiyode-Afolabi & Amadi, 2008).

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000)

The MDGs were a set of eight goals derived from the Millennium Declaration by the World Bank in 2000, which were adopted by all the 191 United Nations Member States (including all African member countries) and pledged to meet the MDGs by 2015. Goal 3 specifically provided for gender equality and the empowerment of women. It specifically called for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary schools. Indicators of achievement of this goal are the ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary school; the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector; and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (African Partnership Forum, 2007). According to MDG Monitor (2016), developing countries have made appreciable progress in this regard; however, there is a lot to be achieved in eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education even after the expiration of the target year of 2015. The next phase therefore is to replicate this success across all fields of human endeavour. The Sustainable Development Goals that replaced the MDGs in 2015 still has gender equality has a critical element (UN, 2015).

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs replaced the MDGs in 2015 and has gender equality and empowerment as a critical element). Goal five calls on countries to, by 2030, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Several other goals such as 1, 2,4, 6, 8 and 11, which respectively cover poverty, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, employment amongst others, made specific reference to gender in their targets. This, to Odera and Mulusa (2020), depicts the fact that a lot of developmental issues require gender specific considerations. Targets one and two of Goal 15 expect countries to eradicate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls in both public and private spheres of life. Cultural practices that cause harm, like female genital mutilation (FGM), widowhood practices and forced marriages should also be abolished (Olusegun & Oyelade, 2022).

Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) came after the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 (UN, 1995). The resolutions affirm the commitment to promote an active visible policy of gender mainstreaming in all the policies and programmes of governments in 12 critical areas: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, economic disparity, power sharing, institutions, human rights, mass media, environment and the girl child (African Partnership Forum, 2007). The most far-reaching commitment of the BPFA was that member states agreed to ensure that “each woman and girl can exercise her freedoms and choices, and realize all her rights, such as to live free from violence, to go to school, to participate in decisions and to earn equal pay for equal work” (UN, 1995).

African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights

The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (‘the Charter’) which was enacted in 1981 to protect the rights of people in Africa including women (AU, 1981). The Charter provides a framework for the protection of human rights in Africa such as civil and political rights, socio-economic and cultural rights, and individual and collective rights (Ekhatator, 2015). On the African continent, the African Union adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women to also guarantee the comprehensive rights to women including the right to take part in the political process, to social and political equality with men, improved autonomy in their reproductive health decisions, and an end to female genital mutilation. The Maputo Protocol, as it is also called, has been signed and ratified by thirty-six of the fifty-four African countries (AU, 2023); however, it has not been ratified by fifteen countries, while three countries have neither signed nor ratified it (AU, 2023). The Charter however was found to be inadequate in addressing in detail the various discriminatory issues that African women encountered in their daily lives such as being victims of harmful cultural and widowhood practices. It failed to address the problems of inequality in laws on property and customs in relation to inheritance and succession. The major limitation of the Charter is that the non-discrimination provision can only be invoked in relation to the implementation of a right under the Charter (Akiyode-Afolabi & Amadi, 2008).

Bottlenecks and operational challenges of gender empowerment policies in Africa

In spite of the existence of the above policies and conventions, gender inequality is still prevalent in African countries. In other words, existing laws

do not protect women from the discrimination that they face in every aspect of their lives. UN Women (2019) put the issue in context when they asserted that these conventions and other efforts have failed to see an increase as a result of barriers such as patriarchy, religion, electoral violence and economic situations which exclude women from participating in politics and the decision-making processes. It is therefore, the contention of this study that gender inequality has continued to hold sway in spite of these legislations or conventions over time because of the following reasons:

Non-Domestication: most of the conventions and treaties have only been ratified but not domesticated, making them inadequate to protect women's rights in African countries. For instance, by virtue of Section 12 of the Constitution of Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999), treaties which have been signed and ratified will not have any effect until there is a corresponding law made by the National Assembly. The situation in most African countries is the non-domestication of these conventions mostly because of the absence of sufficient political will (Olusegun & Oyelade, 2022). For instance, the CEDAW, though ratified, does not have any effect and is inapplicable if there is no law addressing the purpose of the Convention. More so, existing laws have not been effective because of the lack of enforcement by the appropriate authorities. Factors which impede enforcement include lack of awareness of the existence and provisions of certain laws, failure of women to seek justice, costs and delay in the justice system as well as inadequate political will to enforce laws (Onyemelukwe, 2018).

Religion: several scholars such as Sibani (2017) and Makama (2013) have explained how gender inequality has been reinforced by religious provisions and practices. For instance, Sibani (2017) observes that the organisational structures of religious institutions as well as doctrines inferred from interpreting religious books have effects on the level of regard accorded to women within African societies. For instance, in Northern Nigeria the political class have misconstrued sharia provision to justify male dominance in political, economic and social spheres which perpetuate the infringement of women's rights on account of this perception (Makama, 2013). In a similar manner, Christian Aid (2015) opines that religion has been found to be a major factor in defining the responsibility of men and the association of men to leadership. Because of this dominance of religion in an African's life, it has been used as an effective tool for the subordination of women. This has largely resulted in the rejection of conventions and treaties that run contrary to these religious beliefs and doctrines. An example in this regard in Nigeria, is the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill framed to give effect to the CEDAW provisions has been rejected several times since its first introduction in 2010

by some lawmakers who believed that some of its provisions are anti-God and anti-family and has foreign imposition (Iman, 2010).

Patriarchy: Patriarchy has over time constituted a serious bottleneck that exacerbates the inequality of women and is responsible for the non-implementation of gender mainstreaming conventions and treaties in most African countries, especially Nigeria. In supporting this scenario, Makama (2013), drawing from the experiences of Nigeria, opines that Nigerians practice a patriarchal system of stratification that ascribes power to men as heads and leaders in society and families. It provides material advantages to men in terms of inheritance rights and ownership of land, thereby economically empowering a man and deprives women resources making them economically dependent on men (Makama, 2013). Any document that provides otherwise is considered to be antithetical and at variance with African culture and practices, hence its rejections. In furtherance to this, Ekpe et al. (2014) affirm that “cultural stereotype and abuse of traditional practices have created patriarchal societal structures dominated by men.” The patriarchal system normalises the fact that men are leaders in the homes and society and therefore there is a tendency that anywhere a man is seen in a position of power and leadership, it will be viewed as normal while the opposite will be an anomaly (Olanrewaju, 2018).

Poor Access to Financing: Kangiwa (2015) rightly observed that women in Africa are subjected to unequal treatment and are denied access or have unequal access to economic opportunities, status, power and privileges in society. For instance, men have assumed the custodianship of land for agricultural purposes while women who are farmers are largely excluded from modern contract-farming arrangements because they have no land tenure security, thereby affecting their agricultural productivity and economic empowerment (FAO, 2011). African women have not been able to benefit from investment and the expansion of trade in agricultural products because of the obstacles faced in terms of limited access to productive resources (land, credit, transport, extension services and so on) as women produce up to 80% of basic foodstuffs – but a survey of credit schemes in five African countries found that they received less than 10% of the credit given to male smallholders (Africa Partnership Forum, 2007). The devastating effects of poverty, discrimination and lack of opportunity affect women in multiple ways, not just their income levels but also prevents women from having the capacity to protect and fight for their rights especially when infringed upon.

Conclusion

The overall discussion on women in governance in Africa is a deliberate effort and agenda-setting aimed at promoting equal opportunities and rights of women through empowerment and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women emanating from legislations, practices, culture, religious perceptions, traditional values and stereotypes that infringe upon their rights.

Protecting the rights and ensuring adequate participation of women in political, social and economic spheres is linked to the growth and development of a country as the inclusion of women in political representation tend to improve democratic deliberation, public policy, promote justice and fair play. However, it has been agreed that the level of women's participation in politics and governance is abysmal in Africa in spite of the various legislations and conventions that exist to guarantee their fair representation.

It is therefore not surprising to note that until and unless the constraining factors affecting the effective implementation of gender-based policies and programmes are addressed, the calls and efforts to promote women's participation in Africa will be a mirage. The UN Women (2019) was categorical on this when it stated that for African countries to make progress in closing the gender gap they must address the challenges of patriarchy, religion, electoral violence and economic deprivation of women.

Policy recommendations

In view of the observed bottlenecks confronting the realisation of the effective implementations of the gender mainstreaming policies and conventions aimed at promoting gender equality and economic empowerment of women in Africa, the following policy interventions are imperative:

1. An African Inter-country Gender Commission or Committee should be established to monitor the progress of the continent on the implementation of gender mainstreaming legislations, conventions and treaties. They should also be able to strategically and collaboratively support countries challenged in translating into practice the gender policies and programmes within the African continent.
2. African countries should embrace a gender-responsive public financial management system as a fundamental element of good economic governance and democratic accountability and should be a core aspect of budget support. In this way national annual budgets are to be initiated, approved, implemented and evaluated from a gender-sensitive lens. This

is important to ensure that resources are utilised in ways that help to tackle gender inequality and the empowerment of women.

3. African countries need to adopt non-policy measures such as education and raising awareness as additional measures to eliminating discrimination and promoting equality at all levels of countries' educational sectors; basic, secondary and tertiary. As only enlightened and educated individuals (men and women) who will understand the fallacies of gender stereotypes and how it affects national growth and development.
4. The National Financial Inclusion Strategy in each of the African countries should be made more robust such that it creates an enabling environment for women in both rural and urban areas to have easy access to and control over financial services including banking, micro-credit and insurance and other financial support services, in order to enable them to develop their full economic potential.

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Women Representation in Governance in Nigeria

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