

Women and Contemporary African Political Development

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Abstract- This paper analyses the participation of women in contemporary African political development. It highlights and analyses the changing trends in the participation and contribution of women in political development in the light of new challenges, initiatives and dynamism of politics in Africa. The paper discusses women active participation in Africa Decolonisation process, women in post colonial Africa politics and the challenges they encounter in a male dominated political world. Challenges such as civil wars, genocide, military rule, gender inequality etc, that has slow down the participation of women in politics. The paper further illuminates how African women participation in politics have progress from majorly cheer leading role during the early post colonial era, despite their active participation in the decolonisation process of their countries to a more active political role. This paper did not fail to mention the lagging Africa countries in women representation.

Indexed Terms- Decolonisation, Colonial, Women, Politics and Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

Africa's women have always been strong pillars in the society. Right from the pre-colonial period, Africa women have made various contributions to the development of their societies, either politically, economically or otherwise. However, in recent years, with the practice of democracy in most African countries, the role of women in political development began to increase. Harriet Harman, a prominent political representative in the United Kingdom, argues that, women are central to the new breed of politicians who offer Africa the opportunity for a deeply rooted, uncorrupt democracy. She goes on to argue that because women are not traditionally seen

as authoritative figures, they tend to go about politics in "bottom up" fashion, by building their constituencies confidence in them and not by relying on money to buy their support. (Harriet, 2005)

While there is merit in the above argument, it should be noted that the drive to promote women in decision making position worldwide, gained momentum during the 1980s and early 1990s, through a series of international conference on women. Further impetus came from the fourth world conference on women, held in Beijing, China, 1995, which called for at least 30 percent representation by women in national governments. In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, world leaders pledged to "promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and diseases to stimulate development." (Gumisai, 2004:4)

II. WOMEN IN AFRICA DECOLONISATION PROCESS

Women's struggle took place in various forms in many African states from the 1950s, through the 1990s, where the last vestiges of white minority were eliminated in Southern Africa. This period saw the emergence of nationalist movements in the form of political parties; many African women could no longer stay aloof and watch the men. They were no longer satisfied with playing the role of kingmakers or powers behind the throne. Some of the effort and activities of some of these women in Africa is that this section shall be looking at.

In Ghana for instance, the leader of the Convention People's Party, relied heavily on women in the urban and rural areas, during the struggle for independence. The women section of the CPP was formed simultaneously with the party itself. The CPP

provided for wider involvement of women in politics inside the then Gold Coast (later known as Ghana). In 1951, the CPP selected Leticia Quake, Hana Cudjoe, Ama Nkrumah and Madam Sofia Doku, as propaganda secretaries, who travelled around the country conducting political education meeting and recruiting people into the party. By the time of independence in 1957, women such as Mabel Dove, Ruth Botsio, Ama Nkrumah, Ramatu Baba, Sofia Doku and Dr Amateifo were playing leading roles as organizers, politicians and journalists. In 1960, they consolidated the various women mass organization into the National Council of Ghana. After Ghana became a republic in July 1960, the conference of women of Africa and of Africa descent was convened in Accra, the capital. (Abayomi, 2010 :5)

Similarly, in Nigeria, there were women who played prominent role in decolonization process. Among the front-liners in these crusade were Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Mrs Olufemi Ransome-Kuti, Miss Aduni Oluwole, Mrs Wuraola Esan, Mrs Janet Mokelu, Lady Abayomi Oyinka, Alhaja Gambo Sawaba and Madam Ekpo Young. Most of these women were either active members of the defunct political parties or leaders of the women's wing of the parties. (Arifalo, 2003:110)

The first Nigerian female politician to be elected into a legislative assembly in Nigeria was Margaret Ekpo. She organized the Aba Women Association. She was a fierce opponent of colonialism and a strong advocate in demanding equal right. In 1945, she and Janet Okala, worked hand in hand with Kuti to organize strikes and demonstrations against objectionable government policies. Ekpo joined the NCNC in 1944, as one of the foundation members and was one of the NCNC delegate member, to constitutional talks in 1953.

In the same vein, Ransome Kuti was heart and soul in Nigeria politics. The first attempt at a formal women's association was made by Mrs Kuti when she inaugurated the Abeokuta ladies club. She was deeply interested in provision of increased facilities for the enlightenment of women. Mrs Kuti was a fearless and rugged fighter and was a petrel of Nigeria politics. She was a founding member of the defunct NCNC, when it was formed in 1944. She was

the president of the women's wing of the party in the former western region and president of the Nigeria's Women Council and also the treasurer of the NCNC, western working committee. She was also, a member of the delegates sent to London to protest against the Richard Constitution. (Arifalo, 2005:111)

Noteworthy also, is the contributions of Gambo Sawaba, in the decolonization process of Nigeria. Her experience in certain respect was different from that of other women in politicians in Nigeria. Her father came from Ghana, while her mother came from Bida. She entered politics at the age of 17 and went to jail for the first time at the age of 18. She spent three months of political tutelage under Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti. She vigorously championed the cause of Northern women, where she agitated female franchise. She condemned the marriage of under age girls and the use of forced labour. She was also an advocate of western education in northern Nigeria. (Arifalo, 2005:115)

South Africa also, witnessed the impact women during the days of apartheid struggle and racism. During this period women were active in trade unions and women's federation. Participation in politics during this period was not that meaningful, since Africa voting rights were virtually non existent. However, with the rapid growth of apartheid, came the formation of South African Women (FSAW) in 1954, its members represent some 230,000 women, drawn largely from congress alliance, but especially from the ANC's women's league. Its major aim was to work for the majority rule and end the policy of apartheid, and build a multiracial women's organization that would work for the rights and freedom of women. They carried out so many campaigns, such as the boycott of schools controlled by government in 1954, black consciousness movement in 1970; they did not end "Bantu education" and have accept passes that was introduced in 1950, even though they withstood the final imposition for eleven years. However, in the light of all odds against them, in those major campaigns, it would be concluded that on balance, the women did make an effective contribution to the struggle for liberation and one of its front liner was Winifred Mandela.

III. WOMEN IN POST COLONIAL AFRICA POLITICS.

The post colonial era in Africa has been faced with so many challenges such as civil wars, genocide, military rule etc, that has obstructed or slow down the participation of women in politics. However, in recent years, Africa has witnessed quantum leap of political development of women, as more women began to participate actively in politics. Hitherto, they have contributed to liberation struggle for their country, however, it should be noted that women played essentially a cheerleader role in politics during the early post colonial era, in most African states. Women were the enthusiastic supporters who thronged campaign rally ground at the height of elective office. There is general agreement that women's wing of the various parties performed well in mobilizing women for party activities, including voting en masse on election day. As influential as the role was in the euphoria of competition for elective office, the content of political education merely emphasized the supportive role of women in mobilizing votes for party candidates, who were, in the main, men, rather than women seeking elective office themselves. (Adesina,1996:98). Thus, women were more active in political rallies and go out to vote activities, but did not seek and could therefore not win elective positions.

However, as noted in the introduction, with international campaign and the practice of democracy in most Africa countries, women political participation has improved tremendously, both in elective and appointed public offices. Increase has been seen mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa countries. As UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM's) progress of the worlds women report shows Sub-Saharan countries, actually boast significantly higher levels of women's representation in parliament and national assemblies. Although some African countries have made great progress, others are still lagging behind the world average. (Gumisai,2004:4) It is in this light that, this section shall be examining the progress of women in political offices in some African countries.

While various countries have made symbolic efforts to encourage women to enter into politics, others

have taken a more direct and regulated approach. Since the 1990s, countries across the world have started implementing quota system to ensure the representation of women in politics. According to the United Nations report, only about 30 countries have enacted female quotas in politics. The report also outlined what they considered to be the three most prevalent quota systems in Africa; Constitutional quotas, some countries including Burkina-Faso and Uganda have constitutional provisions, reserving seats in national parliament for women, Election law quotas, provisions are written into national legislation, as in the case of Sudan, lastly, is the political party quota. Parties adopt internal rules to include certain percentage of women as candidates for office. This is the case with the governing parties in South Africa and Mozambique. Kenya 2010 constitutional article 81b states, "not more than two thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same sex". Similarly, in Mauritania, new gender quota in the local government Act, requires one-third of candidates in local elections to be women. At the regional level, Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries set a quota of 50% female representation, of which South Africa leads with 45%, Mozambique 39.2% and Angola 38.6%. (Abi Adeboye, 2012)

Rwanda, in particular, attracts a very special attention. This is because, Rwanda is one of the world rankings of women in national parliaments, with 49 percentage of representation compared to a world average of 15.1%. In 2004, the country commemorated the genocide of 1994, when Rwanda women suffered death, humiliation, persecution and sexual abuse, during a 100 day massacre that left more than 800,000 people dead. As the country under goes a period of reconstruction, women are taking active role. They not only head about a third of all households, but have also taken man jobs that were formerly in the preserve of men, like in construction and mechanics. However, their most notable achievements have been in politics. During the 2004 general elections, the first after the genocide, 15 women were voted into non reserved seat, in addition to the reserved seats of 24, bringing the total number of women in the lower house to 39. The constitution also reserves 6 out of the 20 seats in the upper house for women. In 2008, female representation in the

parliament, increased to 56%. (Gumisai 2004:4) The huge achievements was due to the president lobbying of Rwanda women, who helped draft the new constitution and developed voting guidance that guaranteed seats for women candidates. They were also able to push for the creation of a government ministry of women affairs to promote policies in favour of women interest.

It is pertinent to note here that, one out standing female actor in the political scene of Rwanda is Odette Nyirammor, a physician and senator who served as minister of state and social affairs in the Paul Kagame government from March 2000 to October 2003. Amidst a power struggle that ensued after Rwanda independence, Odette watched helplessly as members of her family were slaughtered. Her experience shaped her resolve to get involved in politics because she knows that effective change begins with policies, she has been in Rwanda parliament since 2003 and has vowed to continue working for the good of Rwanda. (Amina, 2012:12)

Similarly, as noted above, South Africa has made promising advancement in representation, despite its history and violence and racial tension. Unlike Rwanda, South Africa does not have constitutional quotas for women representation in politics. Their 1996 constitution, only stipulates that the republic is founded on certain values, including non-sexism. Despite lack of explicit national quotas, women representation in local government has been on the rise, with a representation of 19% after the 1995 elections, 29.9% after the 2000 election, and an impressive 40% after the 2006 election. (Gumisai, 2004:4)

This increase is typically attributed to efforts made by the country's ruling party, the African National Congress, (ANC). Since 1994, the ANC has pledge a commitment to having women represent 30% of their elected officials at all levels. The party was able to achieve an average women's representation of 46.1%. This has led to a general increase in women's representation at the national level as well as. Women represented 27.75% of the national assembly in 1994, 30.5 in 1999, 32.75% in 2004 and an astounding 43% in 2009. (Gumisa, 2004:4) So while South Africa does not have constitutional quota like Rwanda does, the

influence of the voluntary quotas has helped pushed national politics, towards close to equal representation.

Apart from its legislative improvement on women participation, there have been recorded cases of outstanding performance also. Typical of such is Zachele Ramagwaza Msibi and Bayeka Mbce-Kgositesile. Zachele is the first female chairperson of South Africa Inkatha Freedom Party (IFFP), which is mostly a male dominated political party. Her work with the party helped open doors for other women, as she implemented project to improve the financial wellbeing of women in Zululand municipal. Despite her desire to see women well represented in the political arena, she believes firmly that women must fight for their rights and secure elections on merit, and not some gender quota system. Bayeka on the other hand, was deputy president of South Africa under Thabo Mbeki, and before then the speaker of the National Assembly, from 2004-2008. She played several prominent role in South Africa and has been very vocal about women issues. (Amina, 2021:12)

Similarly, in Nigeria, there are records of overt political participation of women in politics. Initially, this was, in the main, largely unimpressive and limited in impact. In the first republic for example, there were only three female legislators in the various parliament in the country and no female minister and during the second republic, one was elected into a 57 member senate, while eleven others sat on a 445 member house of representatives. During this period, women featured in appointive political positions, however, in the main, appointment into political office was compensatory for key party roles played by these women. The third republic saw women coming out to contest gubernatorial and even presidential primaries. (Adesina, 1996:98)

Nigeria Unlike Rwanda has not come out with a particular quota for women, it however, recognizes that democracy and good governance requires that men and women have unrestricted access to spaces of power, while they can realize their political value. Section 42 of the 1999 constitution, guarantees every Nigeria (male and female), the right to freedom from discrimination and freedom of association, which by extension includes political association and

participation by all level ground. The same constitution stipulates that free and fair elections be conducted with utmost transparency and security of all participants. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006:27)

In respect to this, there has been an increase in women's appointment into decision-making positions both within the public and private sectors. In the federal cabinet, women now constitute about 20% as against the 12% reported in the previous years and holds key portfolios, such as finance, women affairs, aviation, petroleum, education etc. Presently about 225 of federal permanent secretaries are women, against the 10% of 1999. Key parastatals of the country are being headed by women. With regards to elective posts, there is a marginal increase in the number of women elected into the upper and lower houses of the national assembly, between the 1999 elections and that of 2003. The numbers of female deputy governors, local government chairperson and councilors has risen also.

Worth mentioning is the contribution of three prominent women in the Nigeria political scene, are; Sarah Jubril, Dora Akunyili and Ngozi Okonja-Iweala. Ngozi was Nigeria coordinating Minister of Finance, and has been slated as the woman to change Africa's economic future. She was the first female to be appointed into such a position and that of foreign affairs. Her greatest feat in office in October 2005 was her influential role in working out a deal, which lead to an \$18 billion debt write off for Nigeria. Similarly, Dora Akunyili was the one who headed. The Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and was recognized for the great achievements she made during her administration. She further took her political career to another level, by contesting the Anambra Central Senatorial Seat, on the platform of All Progressive Grand Alliance, although she lost, but it was a great achievement. In the same vein, Sarah Jubril has made tremendous impact on the history of Africa women in politics. She remains the first and only woman to aim for the presidency. In 1992, she was an aspirant under the defunct Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the botched third republic; she also aspired in 1998, on the platform of the People Democratic Party (PDP) and lost the ticket to Gen, Olusegun Obasanjo. In

2003, she took her ambition to the Progressive Action Congress (PAC), and became the first woman to contest a presidential election in Nigeria. She later returned to PDP, to jostle for the party ticket in 2007 and 2011 respectively, which she lost in like manner.

Worth mentioning also, are the activities of some great women in these contemporary times in Africa that are contributing to political activities of their countries. Women such as; Nana Konadu Rawlings, the first lady of Ghana during her husband, Jerry John Rawlings rule as head of state, and later as the first democratically elected president of Ghana. But she is most politically noted for her works with the 31st December Women Movement, an organization which empowers women and promotes their welfare, at both the local and national levels. Angela Mokombo Eboum of Congo, who took her first shot at a presidential run in 2011. She is the founder of the political party, League of Congolese Democrats (LIDE), the party under which she ran for president. Her campaign emphasized the need for women involvement in political process, she also believes that the role of women is vital in promoting peace in the family, country and world at large and must be acknowledge. Furthermore, is Mariama Bayard Gamatic, who lost the recent Niger presidential elections, but she will still go down in history as the first Nigerian woman to run for Commander-in-chief. She attributed her low turnout in January elections to failure of the media to cover her campaign. Her score was the lowest of all candidates; however, Gamatic views her candidacy as a stepping stone for other women in the in the region to follow. (Amina 2012:12) And of course, the notable landmark of madam, president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, the first female president in Africa can also not be swept under the carpet. Others includes; Manie Elise Akousauci Gbedo, currently the vice president of Benin Republic, Adlato Djala Nandigna, the acting president of Guinea-Bissau.

On the whole, Africa women in the contemporary political scene, has being able to influence their various communities to some extent. In situations where they don't contest, they participated actively in exercising their franchise. In Rwanda, where women hold the majority of seats in the parliament, there has a focus of socio-economic issues, such as domestic

violence, micro-lending, health care and education. The government initiated Economic Development and Poultry Reduction Program (EDPRS) is reported to have moved one million Rwandans, above the poverty level.

Gone are the days when women in politics, were concentrated in ministry of youth, sports and culture, women and social affairs, and other ministries without cache. The 2000 heralded, juggernauts, as noted above, proved that Africa women were up to the task of debt reconstructing, corruption reducing, pace brokerage and even building a war torn country. As their portfolios grew, so has the impact of women in African politics. For example, without the vision of Okonja Iweala, Nigeria wouldn't have successfully, negotiated an exit debt strategy from the Paris club in 2005. Further, Liberia rapidly progressing recovery from war is attributed to President John Sirleaf's coalition-building capabilities and forthright leadership. (Abi 2012)

Not to be overdone by politicians, wives also access power, via relational connections. It has become typical for the first lady to have a pet project or two, which provides her with a platform to weigh in on policy issues. Further, members of the first ladies club meet to lend their support to causes which promote the welfare of women and children. (Abi 2012)

IV. LAGGING COUNTRIES IN WOMEN REPRESENTATION

It is imperative to note here that, while some African countries are leading the continent and world, in terms of women's representation in politics, others are falling very far behind. Countries such as Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar, had less than 10% of women representation in their house of parliament or national assemblies, following their last elections. Other countries, such as Zambia and Zimbabwe have women representation between 10 and 14%, most countries still do not. (Gumisai, 2004:4)

Liberia provide an interesting contrast, because, although they have female president, (President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf), women's representation in the parliament remains very low (around 14%), has

pushed to pass legislation to implement a national quota for women's representation of 30% in the legislature, but has so far been successful. (Gumisai, 2004:4)

It has been argued that, the above-mentioned poor performance in these countries is due to the following barriers; the prevalence of traditional and cultural practices in most Africa countries has often been cited as a large barrier for women in politics. When running for political positions, many women face intimidations, harassment and sometimes violence. Unfortunately, this stems from the expectation that women will marry young, have large family and take care of their children and husband. For women that do enter into politics, they have to juggle, fulfilling both their role at home and in the work. With the expectation to marry young, also comes the additional barrier of lower education level of women in Africa. Many girls stop going to school well before their male counterparts, which later makes it difficult for them to compete against male candidates in elections. Without access to the same education, women will continue to fight even for the same opportunities. (Gumisai, 2004:4) There is the challenge of financial constraints and HIV/AIDS, as noted by Harriet Harmon.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that, such challenges or barriers are not applicable to these poorly represented female legislators alone, but to Africa countries as a whole, this is because, despite the improved access to political positions by some women in Africa, these barriers still exist for them and may inhibit their ability to effect significant change.

CONCLUSION

The post colonial era or contemporary age, brought unprecedented opportunities for Africa women. Many countries strived to make good their ratification of the convention of Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which called for amongst other things, equal access to women in politics. To level the playing ground, some states initiated quota into their constitution, while others implemented appointments, incentives or quota at the party or legislative levels.

Unfortunately, many women in Africa face daunting barriers in their political career. As long as there is this traditional notions that women must stick to “women”, it will continue to be difficult for women to get elected and be respected by other elected officials. Significant progress has already been made in many different African countries, but equality is still very far. However, there is the need to recognize and support the role that women are playing in political development and applaud their effort as they challenge and overcome the discrimination and disadvantages that they faced.

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