

# Gender Considerations in Contemporary Nigerian Politics

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**Abstract:** - A number of Scholars believe that a certain involvement in social and public affairs is essential for a woman in order for her to perform her motherly role effectively. Her role as educator necessitates her performing a role in the public affairs of society. She must participate in those affairs outside the scope of the house, vis-a-vis politics. They believe that this public involvement and participation in politics is important for a better and superior performance of her more private role as wife and mother. The essence of education in general, whether it takes place at school or at home, is to create a good human being and a good member of society. Now, if a woman is expected to educate future generation and prepare them for their future life as good human beings, she must be given a basic training and a basic experience of what public life is and what public interest is all about particularly as it affects politics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to revisit Nigerian political history with two fold aim of finding out what factors helped or hindered women's political participation from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present time, and to assess the implication of this for future political participation by women in the drive towards democratization. Women in Nigeria during this century have displayed mixed attitudes towards political participation. They were very active during the pre-independence period but since that time there has been a marked reduction. This pattern is not dissimilar to what obtains elsewhere in Africa.<sup>1</sup>

## II. OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's roles in political activities in Nigeria during the present century are assessed for three periods- the colonial years, pre-independence period and the post-independence era. The colonial period is deemed to have stretched from the first decade of this century to the 1950's, the pre-independence years cover the period when party politics began to take root-Women's Political Activism in Nigeria this is from the mid 1950 to the mid-1960s. The post-independence period covers the twenty odd years up to the end of the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

## III. WOMEN DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

From the early 1900s to about 1950, the British colonial administrators did their best to introduce the British system of governance to the area they named Nigeria. The spatial and temporal configuration of that entity is well documented and need not to take our time except to note that its peculiar development led to the adoption of different systems of administration in the four areas that were eventually joined together to make Nigeria. The Southern lands were administered in four different ways: Native authority in the West: Lagos/Town Council for the Lagos Colony and the Warrant Chief System in the East. Indirect Rule was adopted in the wide expanse of the North. In all of these, Europeans collaborated with Africans whom they appointed, to carry out the task of governance.<sup>3</sup>

We ought also to note that Colonial Officers, products of their own culture from the UK, were meant to apply conditions such as social division of labour and a higher level of education of women prevailing in their home Country Nigeria. All the same, the question which we are concerned with here is: how did women fare under this system and what were their responses to Colonial policies and measures that touched on their welfare?<sup>4</sup>

## IV. COLONIAL POLICIES AND THE IMPLICATION FOR WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

The Colonial administration formulated policies governing finance, administration, the environment, trade, health etc. Some of these policies were problematic for women particularly those in the South, who as the documentary accounts of the time showed, did not hesitate to make their views known. They took issue with policies covering environment, taxation, pricing of products, education, etc. In this overview we consider only three of those which occupied the energies of southern women. These issues covered taxation, education and representation. Of these three, conflicts relating to taxation were not to be resolved until well after independence. It was an issue of great concern to the generality of women. Their main position was that women should not be separately taxed from their husbands. This was regarded as unacceptable from a social,

cultural and economic point of view. Women did not hesitate to voice this opinion.<sup>5</sup>

As early as 1915 to 1918 the Colonial government was already facing what could be considered as a legitimating crisis. There were claims that funds had to be found for social development such as water provision, Schools, Roads, and Hospitals etc. These were tasks the Colonial government set out to accomplish. In Western Nigeria, one way of carrying this out was by using forced labour. Forced labour is a hated option everywhere; therefore it was not long before protests against the system were mounted. Forced labour had to be abandoned. In its place the institution of taxation became the accepted option, though its establishment was done on a piece meal basis.<sup>6</sup>

Poll tax was the first to be introduced in 1918 when the Native Revenue, Southern Provinces Ordinance number 29 was passed. This required girls aged 15 and above to be taxed, while for boys the age at which they became liable to pay tax was fixed at 16 years. To ensure that the right age group was taxed, girls were often accosted and sometimes even stripped naked to see if they were mature enough to pay. Old women who could not pay the tax were made to raise Chickens in lieu. In the Calabar area, widows were to pay for their sons who had no income of their own. Even though women protested for a long time about the poll tax, the system was continuously enforced in Ijebu Ode, Lagos, and Calabar etc. In fact Mba (1982) noted that in 1947, about 76,000 were collected by the Native Authority in Ijebu Ode with women contributing about 21 % of this.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the poll tax, there were several other taxes which women were forced to pay. These included water levy, market levy and others. The taxation issue was a very vexing one which led to several protests including the now famous Aba riots which involved an estimated 5 million women in the southern part of the country. The depth of feeling about taxation can be seen in a letter written by a Miss Okezie concerning the Aba riots and quoted by Mba. It indicated that women's anger was aroused by the order to pay tax alongside their husbands, and that this, plus other misunderstandings, led to mass meetings and demonstrations which eventually culminated in the Women's War of 1929 (Ogwu Umunwanye). As many as 55 women lost their lives in that riot.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the protests about taxes, women complained about tax collectors. In 1938, at Okigwe in Eastern Nigeria their complaint was that the tax collectors were corrupt. But by 1940, the Income Tax Ordinance for the whole Colony required that women pay a flat tax of five shillings their income exceeded 50 shillings Women's protests against these taxes: led to a statement made by the Commissioner of the Colony that is England women paid taxes. To this one of the leaders of the Lagos women, Madam Pelewura, replied that English women had the vote otherwise they would not pay tax. In 1949 women's flat rate tax was

abolished in Ijebu land for the sake of peace. 1962 (saw the elimination of the water rate b) the colonial government, only for another market tax to be slapped or women in 1962.<sup>9</sup>

Lagos market women protested and 282 women were arrested, though the charges were dropped later (Daily Express 15 February 1962). Again in 1985, thousands of women protested against taxation in Ondo (a western State) over a ten day period. They succeeded in forcing tax revisions on the basis of wealth, for self-employed women (Eames 1988). The taxation issue was both vexing and protracted, spanning over 50 years. Until this decade, women consistently protested about taxation and raised the pertinent but ancillary questions about representation and corruption. Women wanted to know exactly what money collected as tax was used for. Which took decisions about what to do with their money?<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the taxation issue, the question of representation also began to receive attention by women, which thought that there was no point in paying tax if Colonial government policy consistently excluded them from Women's Political activism in Nigeria government. Mba (1982) notes the general negative effects of colonization on women's position and their lack of representation in the governance of civil society. In fact, according to her "it was as though women have been rendered invisible to the exclusively male colonial administrators".

Traditional positions were not recognized and soon certain titles that women held slowly went into limbo. The different systems of administration operating in the four regions characteristically failed to include women. To make their views known, women from the East and West used different methods to register their dissatisfaction with the colonial system of government. In the East, women continuously protested about the Warrant Chief system.<sup>11</sup>

This system, which was imposed by the colonial government, differed drastically from the traditional system of governance. In the new system, inadequate attention was paid to methods of redress, especially for divorce cases. The women found the Warrant Chiefs both oppressive and corrupt. The Warrant Chiefs, as it were, owed allegiance to nobody. The colonial administrators did not care very much about what they did to their own people. In fact, part of the Aba women's riot was as a result of this particular administrative structure and authority system in Eastern Nigeria. After the 1929 Aba riot, the colonial government succumbed to agitations to include a woman as a district officer in their own administrative set-up. So by 1930, one Miss Palmer was employed from the UK and given special responsibility for girls' education.<sup>12</sup>

In Lagos, many of the women's traditional positions, either in the Oba's (Traditional Ruler) court or as members of the committees set up by the Oba, were all slowly eroded. For women this was an irksome development. Indeed they did not hesitate to speak their mind whenever they had the chance and continued to organize themselves to seek consultations with

the administrators. In Abeokuta, for example, the women managed to get themselves back into the Egba Central council after mounting consistent protests. This was possible because the Abeokuta women's Union under the firebrand leadership of Mrs. Kuti, was able to fight the whole system to a standstill. In fact their fight alongside the Majekobaje Society eventually led to the removal of Ademola, the Alake (the traditional ruler) of Egbaland.<sup>13</sup>

In the same vein, Lagos market women alongside some male groups, helped to agitate and successfully petition colonial administrators to reinstate a deported ruler Eleko Eshugbayi. Also in Lagos, concern with women's representation made the Women's League to appeal, as far back as 1923, for women to be employed in the Civil Service. It was not until 1941 that some small concessions were made for the employment of women in the junior civil service. Women's employment to senior grades was severely frowned upon. The administration could not consider a position where women would have to control staff or a labour force that had men in it. However, in the 1950s, a few women were employed to the higher levels of the Civil Service.<sup>14</sup>

A third issue which women, especially in the south, were concerned with during this period was the issue of their children's education, with particular reference to girls. The women took a keen interest in this and were ready to fight against any policy that threatened the successful enrolment, participation and completion of their education. In Eastern Nigeria, women agitated over school fees policy, to such an extent that payment of fees had to be suspended. The Christian women in Eastern Nigeria and even Muslim women in Western Nigeria all made individual efforts to sponsoring education.<sup>15</sup>

In addressing these three issues of taxation, representation and education for girls, women demonstrated clearly during the colonial period that they were capable of standing up to demand that changes be made for their specific welfare. Without let or hindrance, women were able to make their voices heard and opposed the system of taxation imposed on them. They exercised the right to oppose the rulers imposed on them and insisted that they had the right to be consulted and to participate in the decisions that affected their lives.<sup>16</sup>

They repeatedly reminded the authorities that their participation on an equal footing with men in areas which affected their lives was not negotiable. They may not have got everything they asked for, but Nigerian women during the period under review were no push-overs. Clearly women in colonial Nigeria through their protests and agitations displayed a determination and sense of purpose in voicing their wishes. They were sufficiently disciplined to sustain their demands, keeping up the momentum until the administrators met those demands. Surely this was a period when women can be said to have developed a political discourse which helped them in achieving some set goals. After all this is what political participation is all about.<sup>17</sup>

## V. FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIAN PARTY POLITICS FROM 1945 TO 1960

This period marked the beginning of political party formation and the nationalist move towards self-government and independence from the colonial administration. It could be deemed to have started after the Second World War and ended with independence in 1960. Before women got embroiled in party politics their activism in organizing politically active associations had fully been recognized. There were about 8 such associations, some with over 16 branches across the country.<sup>18</sup>

## VI. WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTIES

This period presented a mixed bag of blessing for Nigerian women as far as mobilization for political activity was concerned. On the one hand, they had the support of the men in tackling the colonial government; but on the other hand, women unwittingly became pawns in the power game. Despite their being politically active and mobilized during the earlier decades of the century, their participation in party politics proper did not take shape until after World War II. They registered their interest in politics, either by forming political parties or by joining already formed male-dominated parties.<sup>19</sup>

The first women's political party was formed by Mrs. Abayomi in 1944 as an interest group that sought to protect and promote the interest of all women in Nigeria. Even though the party took Women's Political Activism in Nigeria government to task over specific issues, its members came to believe that the colonial government was an unacceptable system of authority, and were not directly interested in Nigerians taking over the reins of government. A matter of concern to the party was the way the colonial administrators handled job vacancies. Vacant posts were filled by officials from the UK. There were only a few positions which African men were nominated to fill. Lagos was the one area where a limited male franchise was given and men had the chance to elect members to sit on the board of the Lagos Town council in 1919.<sup>20</sup>

The question of representation, especially women's franchise, became more important with the intensification of nationalism. In the 1940s in Lagos colony, men with landed property could participate in the elections for some limited positions on the Lagos city Council; by the mid-1950s this was replaced by universal franchise for men. These concessions were not lost on the women who intensified their requests. Again, the granting of the franchise for women came in a piecemeal fashion. The Port Harcourt area in Eastern Nigeria was the first area where women with property were allowed to vote. By 1954 most, Southern Nigerian women were eligible to participate if there was any position to be filled by elections. As for Northern Nigeria, agitation for the franchise did not start until towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Women from the south provided strong support to women

from the North and together they vigorously campaigned for their franchise. Needless to say, women were regularly thrown into jail, especially after independence, over the franchise issues. It was only in 1977 that the franchise was universally extended to women. After the implementation of the Macpherson Constitution of 1951, the representation question was intensified.<sup>22</sup>

## VII. WOMEN'S WINGS OF MALE DOMINATED PARTIES

Another way in which the Nigerian women participated in the politics of this period was by joining other political parties. The interim period, following this first period up to 1960 when Nigeria became independent, was marred by unprecedented interference with the whole women's movement. The political parties led and dominated by men and the way they played the politics contributed to this interference. Eventually this led to the development of phenomenon of first ladyism that characterized the last fifteen years. The presence of the military just a few years in of independence did not help matters either if anything it further dampened women's interest.<sup>23</sup>

The period preceding independence and shortly after saw a deliberate curbing of women's activism even as the country prepared for the departure of the colonial government and the assumption of control of the administration by Nigerians. This was a difficult period for women. In fact a new dimension characterized by corruption of the voting system, rigging, gerrymandering one party hired a CIA agent and even violence was introduced into the body politic and women found themselves dissipating their energies without achieving comparable gains with the men.<sup>24</sup>

Up until the 1950s, political parties were populist in nature but they gradually assumed an elitist outlook. Five of these parties that dominate the scene during this period were the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) led by Macaulay, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon which later changed to National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Azikiwe, Awolowo's party, the Action Group (AG), the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Ahmadu Bello and Aminu Kano's Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU).<sup>25</sup>

Women received differential treatments from each of these parties, but in the main they all used women for canvassing for votes and publicizing the parties only to treat them later as pariahs. The NNDP was very supportive of market women, campaigned for universal adult suffrage and equal education for both sexes but then with the death of their leader, Herbert Macaulay, the party lost some of its luster, though the women's wing developed by Macaulay and Madam Pelewura, remained quite strong.<sup>26</sup>

The NCNC also had a women's association which had several educated women from both Eastern and Western Nigeria. The leadership was reputed to be liberal with women,

allowed them to aspire to high offices but then none of them ever really got to an elected position where they could be used to fill ministerial or other important posts. The AG also developed a women's wing by attracting prominent women organizers even when they were already registered members of other parties. Mrs. Adekogbe had to join AG from NCNC (a lot of pressure was put on her to make this shift (Mba 1982). Also Party politics brought dissension and splits among the women groups. In Lagos there were conflicts between the NCNC and AG market women.<sup>27</sup>

The two Northern Nigerian Parties NPC & NEPU also had different attitudes towards women. NPC was very conservative on the women's issue insisting that women don't need the franchise and frowned upon women's participation. NEPU was more tolerant and had a women's wing but the NPC controlled regional administration spared no time or effort in persecuting and harassing the women who participated. NEPU's women's wing as very popular.<sup>28</sup> With its socialist outlook, NEPU supported the women giving them political education and encouraged them to stand for election. NPC was diametrically opposed to the latter approach. Many women were frequently summarily thrown into jail. Women's Political Activism in Nigeria beaten up. One veteran who suffered in this way was Gambo Sawaba; on many occasions especially at election time, she would be arbitrarily accused of insulting the Emir or the sultan and then would be arrested and deliberately imprisoned. She often went to prison in the company of several other women.<sup>29</sup>

In fact no woman was ever elected to hold office in several of the parties even though some were appointed. (NCNC had twelve organizing secretaries who were women while Mrs. Kuti was a statutory treasurer). Women who were fortunate enough to be nominated for election, worked extremely hard - they campaigned vigorously for several months and traveled long distances meeting people and canvassing personally for their votes. Mba (1982) records the account of Mrs. Esan, AG candidate for an Ibadan constituency, who said she went to over 10,000 villages over a period of fourteen months and talked to people.<sup>30</sup> She lost the election to a man who stood - as independent candidate. For the 1957 elections the women were rejected outright as candidates. In the East, the NCNC considered them as risks. For example a veteran like Mrs. Ekpo was consistently sidelined as candidate. Even though she had worked hard for several years, Mrs. Ekpo was rejected in favour of a man who was not as well known. A similar fate awaited the women in Lagos, despite their past contributions to the public as members of the Town Council.<sup>31</sup>

One significant result of the outright disregard and rejection suffered by the women during the first period of party politics was the subtle ways in which their focus became diffused. The case of the Northern women who ventured into politics was even more pathetic considering that they were made to suffer not only humiliation, but also physical pain. Women politicians were regularly regarded as prostitutes and

were treated as such. Hajiya Sawaba for example, was jailed sixteen times and was physically beaten on many occasions.<sup>32</sup>

### VIII. CONCLUSION

This synopsis of political activism and events has shown that women demonstrated peculiar shades of activism that reflect not only the spirit of the times but the accompanying socio-political and administrative structures designed for those times. During the period leading up to independence one characteristic that operated in favour of the vast majority of women was that the political world was part and parcel of the economic and social world. As it happened, women largely operated in separate but functional spheres from that of men. These separate spheres allowed them to maneuver their way through regulations and controls and eventually secure changes whenever they felt their welfare was under threat.

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### FOOTNOTES

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