

WOMEN EMANCIPATION DRIVE IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL CUM POLITICAL TRAJECTORIES AND PREJUDICES.

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Abstract

The patriarchal nature of many societies in Nigeria has tamed the aspiration or to a very large extent, clipped the wings of most women in their quest to rise to greatness. Nigeria's participation in the 1995 fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing led to a stronger and louder advocacy for women emancipation. This paper looks into culture and its components, status of women in Nigeria's cultural and political setting, historical overview of women emancipation, statistics of women traditional rulers in the pre-colonial era, women emancipation/activist groups in Nigeria, notable women groups in the pre-independence and post-independence eras, factors affecting women emancipation drive in Nigeria and deconstructing the downward trajectories and prejudices against women in Nigeria. Secondary and tertiary sources were used as reference materials in the course of writing the paper.

Keywords: Women emancipation, Culture, Patriarchy, Politics, Discrimination.

Introduction

Cultural belief systems in various communities in Nigeria view women as just helpers, house wives and home makers who are primarily married for procreation or giving birth to children. This belief system over the years has placed women in a disadvantaged position that makes it difficult to change the narrative that held sway for ages. The role of women in any society irrespective of the stereotyped cultural beliefs cannot be overemphasized. Their existence and importance in the family set up and beyond is a catalyst for different facets of developmental strides which is beyond procreation in a domestic setting. Discriminatory socio-cultural and traditional practices disempowered women coupled with disarticulation of women by colonial tendencies laced by oppression and exploitation coupled with prejudices (Oni, 2014) According to (Agbalajobi, 2010) about 51 percent of women in Nigeria are involved in voting during elections at various levels. Yet, women are grossly underrepresented in both elective and appointive positions. Available records/statistics shows that overall political

representation in government of Nigeria is below 7 percent which is not encouraging. The 35% affirmative action in Nigeria which sought for a more inclusiveness of women in both public service, elective and appointive positions is to a very large extent a mere paper work with little or no concrete measures taken to ensure its actualization.

The Concept of Culture

Culture has no single universally accepted definition. It is defined by several authors at different times based on their perceptions and context. "Culture is the way of life of a social group; the group's total man-made environment, including all the material and non-material products of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next" Hogan, (2006). According to Ezewu, (1983) culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Culture is the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetic objects, method of thinking, of eating and of talking as well as customs and institutions into which a member is born. Ukeje, (1973). Culture includes all that man acquired in the mental and intellectual sphere of his individual and social life. The culture of people is the way of life of that people, the things that are desirable and undesirable to them, their habits of life, work of art, music, history and so on.

From the various definitions above, we can conclude that culture encompasses man in all his preoccupation with nature, particularly as he reacts to situations in his environment. Worth noting is that there cannot be culture without society and the environment plays a vital role in the culture of a society. Each society has its own culture which has developed throughout its history and is passed from one generation to another. This means that everyone born into a particular society will have to learn the way of life the society. Culture is shared, learned, dynamic, systemic and symbolic.

Components of Culture

Culture is made up of many aspects which are largely interrelated.

- i. **Inductive Aspect:** This aspect of culture includes the knowledge of all that has been inductively derived or invented and that has been tested and practiced. Specifically, it includes material objects, tools and machines, as well as skills, techniques, knowledge and methods. It simply refers to the aspects of culture that are invented by man and have been practiced over time.
- ii. **Aesthetic Aspect:** Aesthetic aspect of culture consists of works of art, symbols and vestments of rituals. All ritual carvings and items we often find in museums belong to this aspect of culture.
- iii. **Control Aspect:** This contains all those things or actions that exercise control over the behavior of group members, such as moral standards, religious and political sanctions, laws and so on.

Status of women in Nigeria's cultural and political setting

Women are accorded low status in most societies/communities in Nigeria. This is evident in their participation in different spheres of life cutting across politics, education, the economy, recruitment into armed forces and so on. Culturally, women play second fiddle in virtually

all ramifications of life. Some use them as tool for pleasure and procreation. In some religious circles, they are not to be seen, let alone heard of. The society is structured in favour of men. The preference of men over women in the society reduces the chances of women to excel or be heard of.

Since Nigeria's independence (1960) no woman has ever occupied the position of Prime Minister, President, Head of State or Vice President of the country. According to Orizu, (2022)

At the federal parliament, current statistics shows that women constitute only 11.2 percent of the membership in both chambers of the 9th National Assembly, with seven females in the Senate and 11 in the House of Representatives. Out of the total 479 members of the federal parliament, only 19 were originally female members in the two chambers. But with the demise of a female Senator, Rose Oke in 2020, the number had reduced to 18. In all, there are seven serving female Senators and 11 House Members.

This is a glaring indication of abysmal women representation in Nigeria despite the 30% and 35% affirmation as captured in the Beijing platform for action and the National Gender Policy respectively. There are suggestions that colonial rule undermined women's status in Nigeria which is true to an extent. However, we cannot blame the Colonial powers for all our predicaments because women's status in post-independence era did not significantly improve.

Historical overview of women emancipation

Women and men have always existed side by side, though this co-existence has always witnessed inequalities and discrimination against women owing to culture, tradition and even legislation. In most societies, women were not free to own property or receive equal pay for equal work. However, international efforts to address or mitigate the problems involving the status of women began to gather momentum. Worth noting is that in 1883 a conference was convened for the first time at Hague on Private International Law where some matters of family laws were discussed and ratified by the member states thus:

The Convention of 12 June 1902 governing conflicts of Laws concerning marriage the Convention of 12 June 1902 governing conflicts of Laws and conflicts of jurisdiction concerning divorce and separation. The Convention of 17 July 1905 concerning conflicts of Laws relating to the effects of marriage on the rights and duties of spouses inter se and on the spouses' property. These instruments were drafted by the delegations of sixteen European countries and of Japan as the only non-European member of the Hague conference (Siehr, 2003).

In Nigeria, the struggle for women open dissatisfaction drive for emancipation dates back to both the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. There were women during the pre-colonial era who occupied exalted traditional and political positions. There were the Luwo Gbadiya of Ife, who was the Ooni (Oba) of Ife in the pre-colonial days; the Iyayun of Oyo, who was the Alaafin (Oba) of Oyo; Queen Amina, who was the ruler of Zaria; the Eye-Moi, who was a regent-monarch in Akure; Queen Yawaro of Daura; Queen Kanbasa of Bony; and

many others. (Adebukola&Adebimpe, 2020)the table below shows the women traditional rulers in Nigeria during the pre-colonial days.

Table 1: Statistics of women traditional rulers in pre-colonial era

S/N	Name	Town/Village	LGA	State	Type of Rule	Date
1	Luwo Gbadiaya	Ife	Ife Central LG	Osun	Ooni of Ife	Pre-colonial days
2	Iyayun	Oyo	Oyo LG	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
3	Orompoto	Oyo	Oyo LG	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
4	Jomijomi	Oyo	Oyo LG	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
5	Jepojepo	Oyo	Oyo LG	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial days
6	Queen Amina	Zazzau		Kaduna	Emir	Pre-colonial days
7	Daurama	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
8	Kofono	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
9	Eye-moi	Akure	Akure	Ondo	Regeant-Monarch	Pre-colonial days 1705-1735AD
10	Ayo-ero	Akure	Akure	Ondo	Regeant-Monarch	Pre-colonial days 1850-51 AD
11	Gulfano	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
12	Yawano	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days

13	Yakania	Daura	Daura Emirate	Kastsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
14	Walsam	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
15	Cadar	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
16	Agagri	Daura	Daura Emirate	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial days
17	Queen Kanbasa	Bony	Bony LG	Rivers	Queen	Pre-colonial days

Source: (Kolawole, 2013)

The details in the table above show that only few women had leadership responsibility at the highest level. The role that women played during the colonial era cannot be snubbed. Notably, the Aba women riot of 1929 in eastern Nigeria which led to the death of over 50 women as a result of imposition of heavy tax and highhandedness of warrant chiefs which forced them to resist the policy.

Women Emancipation/Activist Groups in Nigeria

Women's advocacy for a fair society devoid of male overbearing dominance in both cultural and political sphere is a worthy call for a fair and just society. The struggle for women emancipation in Nigeria gained momentum not only in the post-independence era alone. There were women's activist groups that were active during the pre-independence era.

Table 2: Notable women groups in the pre-independence era

S/N	Name of group	Acronym	Year founded	Purpose	Current status
1.	Lagos Market Women's Association	LMWA	Mid 1920s	An organized pressure group designed to ensure market women's economic interests	No longer active
2.	Nigerian Women's Party	NWP	1944	To protect women's interest and participation in political representation	No longer active
3.	Women Movement in Nigeria	WN	1952	To obtain political recognition and secure equality and fair representation	No longer active

4.	Federation of Nigerian Women Societies	FNWS	1953	To fight the government's introduction of separate tax rates for women	No longer active
5.	National Council of Women Societies	NCWS	1959	To unite Nigerian women under one umbrella in a bid to seek political recognition	No longer active

Source: (Adebukola&Adebimpe, 2020)

The pre-independence groups are currently no longer active possibly because of the euphoria of an independent Nigeria or weak leadership succession. The pre-independence groups fought for women emancipation from dual specter of cultural and colonial actors who accorded women little or no rightful place in the society.

Table 3: Notable women groups in the post-independence era

S/N	Name of group	Acronym	Year founded	Purpose	Current status
1.	Women in Nigeria	WIN	1983	Initiation and implementation of research to emphasize women's full social, political and economic rights in the country	No longer active
2.	Better Life for Rural Women		1987		No longer active
3.	Women's Consortium of Nigeria	WOCON	1995	To focus on gender, health and human rights	Active
4.	Kudirat Initiative for Democracy	KIND	1999	To promote women's participation in forging a democratic state in Nigeria	No longer active
5.	Women in Business	WiMBiz	2002	To work towards women and active leadership in	Active

				the corporate organizations	
6.	Women Arise for Change Initiative		2003	To help and encourage women to come together and stand up against misuse and abuse by a male dominated society	Active
7.	Moremi Initiative	MILEAD	2004	To provide mentoring, research and advocacy	Active
8.	Wellbeing Foundation Africa	WBFA	2004	Empower women on the fundamental necessity of gender equality and improve access to quality health services and health outcomes	Active
9.	Women's Technology Empowerment Center	W-TEC	2008	Use technology to nurture Nigerian girls and women to increase their economic power and to speak about issues that affects their lives as female	Active
10.	Women for change initiative		2010	To promote total restoration of the dignity of womanhood politically	Active
11.	She Leads Africa	SLA	2014	Empowering African women in leadership	Active

				and financial independence	
12.	Female in Nigeria	FIN	2015	An online safe space for women to share their struggles with being female in Nigeria	Active

Source: (Adebukola&Adebimpe, 2020)

Table 3 above shows some notable women groups in the post-independence era. The groups are many compared to the pre-independence era. The women emancipation drive has taken a new gear with wider advocacy coupled with the advent of the social media which gives their activities wider coverage in terms of sensitization and advocacy. However, one could say that not much has been achieved as expected. However, some gains were made and one of the notable milestones in the women's struggle was the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1989 by late Maryam Babangida which was later transformed into a full-fledge ministry in 1994 as a result of conscious support from the wife of late General Sani Abacha who was the then Head of State. The creation of the Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development and the National Center for Women Development is to an extent remarkable institutional mechanism that brings visibility and ray of hope to women's issues attracting government budget at both national and state levels for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in Nigeria.

Factors affecting women emancipation drive in Nigeria

It is imperative to note that the Beijing women's conference which took place in 1995 emphasized on full empowerment of women and equal opportunities accorded to men. Nigeria came up with the 2006 National Gender Policy as a follow up to the Beijing Conference as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which emphasized and advocated for the need for women to be fully part of the decision- making process (Afolabi, (2019). There are a number of factors affecting women emancipation drive in Nigeria. These factors include but not restricted to:

- i. **Ineffective solidarity among women groups:** It is sad to note that women don't show solidarity to their women counterparts in most cases. A surprising scenario in the political sphere in 2011 during the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) presidential primaries in Abuja where Mrs. Sarah Jibril who was the only female candidate got only one vote out of over 5,000 votes cast. The female delegates failed to support the only female contestant. Mrs. Sarah Jibril voted herself without any support from other female delegates. This calls to question the readiness and sincerity of women to their cry for marginalization.
- ii. **Inadequate financial support:** Any serious advocacy requires financial support to carry out a wide-reaching coverage and impact. "despite the waivers given to women aspirants by some of the political parties, for instance, financial burden is still unbearable for female politicians...they could do little or nothing to outweigh their male counterparts." Okoronkwo-Chukwu, (2013) virtually all the women

groups depend on men to fund their activities because men dominate virtually every sphere of Nigerian economy.

- iii. **Political and social practices:** The patriarchal nature of most societies where women are looked down upon as mere house wives and religious beliefs that mostly favours men hinders women from achieving the desired result and expectations. (Okpeh, 2005) argues that the broad network of patriarchy or hierarchical organization that cuts across economic, political, religious, social, financial and industrial spheres, under which an overwhelming number of top positions in the society are controlled, dominated or occupied by men.
- iv. **Religious barriers:** Both Christianity, Islam and Traditional religions do not accord women much role in public life.
 Pervasive gender stereotypes and religious interpretations in many societies have contributed largely to undue subordination of women under the tutelage of men.... For instance, the Old Testament texts in the Holy Bible (Genesis 2:18) has been interpreted to see women as helpmates for men and not leaders themselves, while leaving out other instances where women leadership reflected. This position is also reflected in the Quran, that “men are guardians over women by what Allah has favoured some over others...” (Surat al-Nisa 4:34). Udegbe, (2010).
- v. **Political Violence:** Since the return of democracy, elections in Nigeria has been characterized with one form of violence to the other. This ugly trend scares women from active participation in politics due to the severe or dangerous consequences of violence before, during and after elections which is a major setback to the women.

Deconstructing the downward trajectories and prejudices

Despite the existence of institutional frameworks geared towards deconstructing age-long prejudices against women, much needs to be done. There are some gray areas in some Acts in the country that need to be addressed.

Regulation 124 of the Police Act requires a woman police officer, who is desirous of marrying, to first apply in writing to the Commissioner of Police requesting permission to marry and to give the name, address, and occupation of the person she intends to marry. This regulation does not apply to men, therefore discriminatory against women and requires urgent attention of revisit (Ezeilo, 2014).

Arguably, women and children receive the brunt of insecurity in Nigeria than men and the major actors in perpetrating violence are men not women. Women are not well represented in taking security-related decisions. It is sad to note that “women in top positions in the military were never appointed Chief of Army Staff; Chief of Defense Staff; Chief of Naval Staff; and Air Marshal. Also, there have been no women Inspector General of Police or Controller General of Immigration or Commandant General of Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps, and Director General of the State Security Service (SSS) among others” (Afolabi, (2019).

It is imperative to take the following steps by the relevant stakeholders so as to mitigate or completely stop the stereotype, prejudices and discriminatory practices against women in Nigeria:

- i. Appointments into various offices or positions in Nigeria should be done using the lens of gender sensitivity and equal treatment of women in order to avail a reasonable number of women the opportunity to showcase their capacity and potentials. “As of December 2022, women constituted 61.3 percent of the Rwandan parliament (lower or single house). This makes it the country with the highest share of women in parliament worldwide, followed by Cuba (53.6 %)” Statista, (2023). An African country (Rwanda) has taken a remarkable step with a world record. Nigeria should borrow a leaf from Rwanda.
- ii. The education of the girl-child should be given top priority so as to develop their growth rate in the society. This will give them more knowledge on how to strive to become better citizens.
- iii. As a way of encouraging women, mere signing of international protocols on women’s right is not enough. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should be amended to give women certain percentage in all elective positions and appointments in the country.
- iv. Women should not just relax and wait for those who are marginalizing them to surrender powers to them on a platter of gold. They should actively participate in politics and have a wider network and synergy to advance their course.
- v. Violence or thuggery before, during and after elections often scare women from participating in politics. Political thuggery which is mostly perpetrated by some men should be stopped by both sponsors, perpetrators and the security personnel.
- vi. Religious groups and their leaders across all faiths should encourage women participation and give them moral support to thrive.
- vii. Women on their part should make concerted effort by supporting their credible women counterparts who present themselves for elective positions so as to water down the saying that “women don’t support women”.

Conclusion

This paper examined how women in Nigeria are discriminated against which is backed by the patriarchal nature of the society and religious beliefs. The role of women at home and in the society cannot be overemphasized. Women are actively involved in taking care of the home, performing socialization functions, contribute immensely to healthcare services, trading activities, agriculture as well as religious matters and politics. The paper noted that there is no significant increase in women participation in policy matters and decision making looking at the quantum of women in decision making positions in Nigeria despite signing International Protocols and creating a ministry for women. Women emancipation drive has been going on from pre-colonial, colonial and in the post-colonial era but has been largely affected by the age-long patriarchal nature of most societies in Nigeria. There were women who became traditional rulers in some societies the past in Nigeria, sadly, men have taken over today. There is need for a paradigm shift.

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