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GETTING WOMEN ELECTED

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIA'S LEADING POLITICAL PARTIES

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Women's representation in Nigeria's leading political parties

The All Progressives Congress (APC), a merger of the Congress for Progressive Change, the All Nigeria People's Party and the Action Congress of Nigeria, emerged as a party in 2013, three years into President Goodluck Jonathan's second term. It benefited from palpable discontent among northern elements in the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who believed that Jonathan's continued stay in office, especially his intention to stay beyond 2015, violated the party's zoning formula. This feeling of discontent saw the emergence of the so called 'new PDP', many of whom eventually joined the APC between November 2013 and January 2014. Influential members who crossed over included the then Senate President, Bukola Saraki; the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara; his predecessor and former Governor of Sokoto State, Aminu Tambuwal his Kwara State counterpart, Abdulfatah Ahamed, former Governors Rabiukwakwanso (Kano), Murtala Nyako (Adamawa) and Danjuma Goje (Gombe) and former Chairman of the PDP, Barnabs Gemade.

The diversity and spread of their constituent groups gave APC – almost overnight – a national spread and grassroots structure that is rare in a new party. As a result, it quickly became the second largest party in Nigeria. With the convergence of influential politicians from the six geopolitical zones, the APC rapidly gained acceptance in states across northern and south-west Nigeria in particular. The 2015 general elections tested and confirmed the position of the APC as the party to beat.

Having won the first four elections since the return to democracy in 1999 the PDP has lost the presidential vote in the past two elections. However, it remains a relevant political force and has been a strong reference point in the practice of democracy in Nigeria since 1999. In fact, it can be argued that PDP has been a leader when it comes to women's involvement and inclusion in the democratic process in terms of appointment of women in political offices and in ensuring passage of the National Gender Policy (2006). Nonetheless, the PDP has failed to meet the minimum 35% benchmark laid out in that policy.

Neglecting gender in Nigeria

A view shared by Ayomo who argues that, “truth be told, the two major political parties in the country [APC and PDP] claim to love the women folk dearly. They wax lyrical tunes and political messages to show their interest in advancing the political interest of women in the country, but unfortunately, this is where it ends”. In the final days of the Jonathan Administration, the Bill to End Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) was signed into law. That was seen as a huge break-through for human rights defenders, especially women’s rights activists, to whom the VAPP Act was the biggest achievement relating to human rights, since the passing of the Child’s Rights Acts in 2003.

Women focused organizations and the efforts of female legislators, particularly the seven female-Senators in the National Assembly, to promote and push the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill through Senator Biodun Olujimi in 2014 however, were less effective. The promoters of the Bill felt that it was critical given that after 16 years of unbroken democracy in Nigeria, there was no significant change in the gender profile of both the national and state executive and legislative branches. Senator Olujimi was one of just 22 women in the National Assembly (seven of 109 senators and 15 of the 360 House of Representatives members). The Bill was designed to address gender disparity in

many spheres of Nigerian life, including the gap in the participation of men and women in politics, governance and public decision-making.

However, the disdain with which the Bill was met reflected the predominance of conservative and patriarchal views among Nigerian legislators. Before the Bill failed in the second reading, Nigerians were treated to a farcical debate where majority of Senators from the Northern part of the country objected to its contents on the grounds it went against their religious belief, specifically that a wife could contest the leadership of the family.

The importance of women’s participation in public decision-making cannot be overstressed. Apart from the fact that it is their right, their inclusion in leadership positions, whether in government, corporate bodies or the social sector, brings diversity of perspectives to the solution of societal problems. The annual Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme has consistently shown that countries which score high on gender equality and women empowerment also tend to achieve high performance on the Human Development Index. It is therefore not surprising that Nigeria with only 6% of women in the legislature ranked 157th in the 2018 ranking.

PDP, women and the 2019 elections

The PDP has a constitution which details the laws guiding its affairs. Sub-section (7) of the character and ethics section states, “in nomination for party offices at least 35% shall be allocated to women.” While this is expressly stated there has been no real work towards its implementation.

Despite having two decades to set a good example for other parties in terms of it being gender responsive, the PDP has so far failed to do so. Of the 1,487 positions contested for in the 2019 general elections, the party had only 68 women as candidates. Of those 46% won their seat. These figures do not compare favorably with 2007 when nine female senators and 27 female representatives were elected into office from 93 candidates who stood. Despite positive steps in its final two terms in office - under the Yar’Adua government seven women held significant cabinet or ministerial positions and Goodluck Jonathan appointed women to hold 12 of the 41 ministerial portfolios; a significant improvement but one that fell short of his own 35% promise - progress on greater inclusion of women in the PDP has stalled, and even reversed.

Women have been sidelined in internal PDP politics, and this is reflected in the drop in numbers of women who occupy elective and appointive positions. While there is increased female interest in politics and power, there are not clear internal party structures in place to allow women to contest on a level playing ground.

The PDP National Working Committee (NWC), as with most political parties in Nigeria, is not an inclusive mechanism. Aside the role of the woman leader, which cannot be assigned to a man, women lack leadership opportunities to have their voice heard in internal party debates.

The position of the woman leader is usually reserved for women solely to mobilize other women both within and outside the political party to vote for the party during elections. They are, for the most part, left behind when it comes to critical decision-making processes. The tightly controlled nature of the position makes it difficult for her to be a strong voice for women without being accused of anti-party activities. The absence of internal party democracy directly effects the nomination



process. Women rarely emerge as consensus candidates. Consensus candidates usually emerge due to the very strong financial influence on the political party. This process is not favorable and not beneficial to women and Nigeria's democracy. Many female members feel that caucusing amongst the male members determines the outcome of the general decisions of the party.

Ahead of the 2019 general elections, PDP gave out nomination forms to women free of charge in order to increase their participation. But this did not provide sufficient backing to ensure their emergence as elected representatives. In fact, the free nomination forms did not add value to women's aspirations and candidacy because the percentage of women who emerged as elected representatives did not increase. Furthermore, female aspirants were still required to pay for the expression of interest forms. In 2019 this ranged from N100,000 for a State House of Assembly position to N2 million for the presidential position.

But even those who got on the ballot and then won the primary election were not guaranteed to stand. One of the party's female aspirants at the post-2019 election conference on women political

participation claimed that she won her primary poll, only to have her name replaced with that of a male aspirant. In such instances, women lack the power to question the party's decision, largely due to the cost waiver granted women on the payment of nomination form. And where financial support was needed to boost women's ability to emerge as the party candidate, the party failed to provide it. The PDP does not have a visible budget specifically targeted at enhancing female candidacy and leadership within the party. According to a female aspirant who contested in 2019, "all the support ends with the nomination form, no other support comes from the party".

For those female candidate(s) elected to represent the party, they did not receive any tailored support to aid their election campaign that was different to that of their male counterparts. Even after the elections, female PDP candidates who challenged the results of the election at tribunals were displeased by the fact that unless they made a conscious effort to reach out to the party stakeholders, they would not extend a hand of support to them despite the expensive nature of the campaigns and the hefty legal fees they incurred.

APC, women and the 2019 elections

The APC has not, either by appointment or through election, fared better than the PDP in encouraging women's political participation. After the 2015 vote there were 22 women in the National Assembly, but most of them were members of the PDP. This did not improve in 2019 and in fact women's representation decreased both as an overall percentage and as a percentage of APC representatives. According to a report released in March 2019 by the Centre for Democracy and Development only 62 women were elected as of June 2019 or 4.17% of elected officials. With those affiliated to the APC amounting to just 23.

This was despite First Lady Aisha Buhari, in an unprecedented move on 3 January 2019, launching a 500 member Women and Youths Campaign Committee to support the re-election of President Muhammadu Buhari. With women candidates as part of the team, it was envisioned that besides campaigning for the President, the Women and Youth Campaign Committee would ensure that a considerable number of women were elected. However, there is little evidence that this group did anything different to bring more women into elective

office. Or if it did anything unusual, there is nothing to show that it succeeded. Instead, women suffered to the extent that on 15 June 2019, three days after President Buhari was inaugurated for a second term, Esther Adedoyin Eshanumi, the leader of the APC Women Aspirants Forum complained that they had been marginalised in the 2019 vote.

Eshanumi's verdict was not an exaggeration. Across the states, including APC strongholds, women recounted tales of frustration, and in some cases, outright rejection by a party to which they had been loyal. Amaka Okpala Chibueze, who aspired to represent Oshodi/Isolo Constituency 2, in the Lagos State House of Assembly lost out in one of the most shambolic primaries ever in the history of electioneering in the state. When she started off, the only candidate to beat was Ladi Ajomale, the son of the State Chairman of the Party. The then occupant of the seat, Mr. Jude Idimogu was a member of the PDP and was adjudged not to stand a chance in 2019. But as the elections drew near, Idimogu defected to the APC and won the ticket. It turned out that his victory was the fulfillment of a promise made

by APC godfather, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who had assured him of the position in return for his defection to the APC. Neither Ajomole nor Okpala Chibeze were even listed as aspirants in the controversial primary election. Another example was given by Dabota Godswill Jumbo who was the APC consensus candidate for Bonny Constituency of the Rivers State House of Assembly, who was also impacted by “internal party crisis” between party factions that led to litigation and court orders against her.

Even those who did make it on to the APC ticket face challenges. In Kaduna State APC women won five primary contests. Whilst attendees at a post-2019 national conference on women’s political participation praised the governor for his efforts to promote women they noted that “Kaduna State politics is highly complex with ethnic and religious factors at play and very strong”. None of the five who made it through the primaries got elected. In Imo State, despite having the APC’s Rochas Okorochoa as the incumbent Governor and the prominence of Aisha Buhari’s Women and Youths Campaign team, no APC woman made it to the State House of Assembly, the House of Representatives, or the Senate. Previously the ruling party provided the most assured springboard for women’s entry into elective public office, but in Imo this was not the case in 2019. A former State House of Assembly aspirant in Edo State, Nosa Aledeselu blamed it on the increasing desperation of the wealthy class to push themselves into elective office, “many businesses are experiencing a downturn, and the unemployment rate has increased,

making the legislature a place where making huge sums of money without much effort is possible”.

But it is perhaps not a surprise that women’s participation did not feature strongly in the agenda of the APC given that it, as a party, was more focused on addressing internal issues that threatened the survival of the party. In public the party focused on not only capturing women’s votes but also committed to increasing their number in elective positions. But the rhetoric and the reality were quite different. The ongoing failure to enact the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill and the President’s refusal to assent to the eight National Assembly amendments to the Electoral Bill foreclosed any hope of special attention to women’s inclusion in politics in the manner youths enjoyed with the assent to the Not Too Young to Run Bill.

The APC committed on paper to waive expression of interest and nomination form fees. But women generally rejected the financial waivers, because they had become an excuse for women’s marginalisation. In response, the party reinstated but halved the financial requirements for women aspirants and candidates and promised to mobilise and campaign for them. Even though the amount was halved the sums were still significant, and in some cases not applied at all. In Anambra State, Onyinye Okongwu who aspired to the Idemili North seat of the State House of Assembly revealed that only 5% of the expression of interest fee was waived for her.

Happiness Williams who aspired to represent Owerri Central Federal Constituency (Imo State) in the House of Representatives argued that the financial waivers for women aspirants and candidates should not have been removed as they were counterproductive. “Asking women to pay had no advantage. It did, and would continue to give men an edge because not only do men have the money, they also get support from their fellow men. Do you know that on the day of the primaries, when we noticed that the fees had been increased, I witnessed that the male aspirants were getting bank alerts from here and there, and the women were simply perplexed. That’s how bad it was. Financial waivers for women should be reintroduced, and the Trust Fund for women should be made to work because it has virtually gone comatose...Happiness Williams further noted that the current administrator of the Fund should explore ways of attracting money, because if we continue the way we are going right now, a time will come when there will be no women aspirants, the situation is that serious.” she concluded.

A concern shared by Barrister Nkechi Chukwueke, former Special Adviser on Women Ethnic Groups Mobilization and Empowerment to ex-Lagos Governor Babatunde Fashola. “The party structure and concessions didn’t do much for women. It is painful to me personally that the women in the Lagos State House of Assembly have remained essentially static, four in 2015-2018 and five now; and in the National Assembly dominated by APC, there are only 14 women; it’s a far cry from the 22 elected in 2015”. She also lamented the fact that only seven women made it onto the ministerial list, describing it as “not good enough.”

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Conclusion

Nineteen years since the first attempt to address women's exclusion from national life through a National Policy on Women, produced under the then Minister of Women Affairs, Aisha Ismail, the gender inclusiveness it sought to promote, remains elusive, especially in women's political participation. The PDP has a structure written down in their constitution and spelled out in their 2019 manifesto their commitment to including women in governance. However, little or nothing has been done to make these commitments a reality. The APC is also falling short when it comes to gender representation at all levels of elective office in Nigeria.

Despite the 2006 National Gender Policy which introduced formally an affirmative action principle of 35% of women in political and governance arena. Women political participation still look elusive in the country. The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill is the latest attempt to address this shortcoming. It is designed to provide legislation that seeks to eliminate all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex and gender in private and public spaces, affirms women's rights to equal opportunities to realize their full potential and provide protection for their bodily integrity and human dignity. However, given that its passage has stalled in the legislature, not just its passage, but its implementation seems a long way off for now.



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