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NIGERIAN WOMEN LIBERATION STRUGGLES: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

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ABSTRACT

The journey of liberation struggles for African women are multi-faceted. In addition to the experiences of colonial domination and subjugation, African women were also confronted with the challenges of harsh traditional and cultural practices that not only encouraged discrimination but hindered their personal development. In a bid to secure their rights and voice in their particular societies, African women, seen for instance in the case of Nigerian women have been engaged in liberation struggles. Just like women in other parts of the world that have made great strides beginning from the period of first wave feminism to the third wave feminism, Nigerian women have focused on their own peculiar situations and have gained grounds economically and otherwise. In spite of the challenges confronting them, Nigerian women to a considerable extent have emerged strong and successful in the post-colonial era shown in the records of their significant achievements in areas such as education, employment in formal sectors and participation in politics. In the 21st century Nigeria, it is clear that the battle is yet to be totally won, but the fact remains that Nigerian women are today breaking the glass ceiling and venturing into 'areas' once seen as sacred and reserved for men. Against these backdrops, this paper examines the women liberation struggles, achievements and contributions in the Nigerian society as well as the challenges still confronting them to reach their desired goals. It seeks to look back to the struggles of Nigerian women from the 20th century to the present time to bring to limelight the milestones, the challenges confronting them.

KEY WORDS: Africa, Nigeria, Women, Liberation, Struggles, Achievements, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

At various times in history women have banded together to form movements in order to liberate themselves from the shackles of marginalization, suppression, oppression, subjugation or domination. In the Western literature, the history of women struggle has been described in the context of waves. There is the first wave feminism (which began in the early 1900s and ended when women won right to vote in North America in 1920). The second wave feminism (began in the 1960s and ended in the late 1980s when women won such rights as reproductive choice and decriminalization of abortion in Canada in 1988). The third wave feminism (emerged in the early 1990 and is continuing today; the third wave recognised that the issue of women liberation should touch all races and classes, and must involve the peculiarities of women challenges). What is noteworthy is that just as the white women or women in the Western world engaged in their own peculiar struggles and played recognizable roles in their societies, African women were not left behind in the struggles. The journey of liberation struggles for African women are diverse. In the period of colonial rule, African women suffered marginalization, exclusion as well as oppression in their respective societies by the colonial masters. In Nigeria for instance, colonial administration relegated women to the background, which means they had to struggle to return to their 'former' positions. Prior to the colonial era women occupied important roles in the traditional political lives of their communities. Women were actively engaged in politics and held decision-making roles in the governmental institution in their respective regions (Adu, 2008). It was the introduction of colonial administration after 1900 that sentenced women into a political coma (Adu, 2008), which invariably led to a struggle for survival on their own and some 'external support.' In order to liberate themselves, women in some cases had to organise a protest to voice out their grievances to the colonial authorities, seen for instance in the Aba Women's riot of 1929.

In addition to the colonial suppression and domination, Nigeria women (just like women in other countries in Africa) were confronted with the challenges of harsh traditional and cultural practices that not only encouraged discrimination but hindered their personal development. Records of women's struggles to correct acts of discrimination and violence have been in existence since the 19th century. In a highly patriarchal African society, gender roles are constructed and classified, where women are meant to be managers of home, and informal sectors, and men meant to be managers of public offices or formal sectors. Ever since men have claimed dominance over

women in patriarchal societies as seen in Africa, women have had to fight for the rights to 'be heard publicly' and enjoy basic human rights. The prevalence of unequal power relations resulting in disproportionate distribution of rights and privileges to women has been a great issue of concern leading to different interventions by women and women groups to eradicate such inequalities (Nigerian Group, 2011). Even in the post-colonial era, women had continued to fight to regain their places (once enjoyed in pre-colonial era) or gain a better and higher place in their societies as well as rise above traditional limitations and hindrances.

In spite of all the challenges confronting them, Nigerian women to a considerable extent have emerged strong and successful in the post-colonial era shown in the records of their significant achievements in areas such as education, participation in the formal sectors and presently in politics. In the 21st century Nigeria, it is clear that the battle is yet to be totally won, but one fact that cannot be disputed is that Nigeria women are today breaking the glass ceiling and venturing into 'areas' once seen as sacred and reserved for men. Today, Nigeria can boast of women that are ministers, members of parliament, vice chancellors, head of parastatals, directors of agencies, among others. This paper will examine the Nigerian women liberation struggles, achievements as well as their challenges in Nigeria. With the introduction as Section I, Section 2 will examine the theories of feminism/women liberation. Section 3 discusses the place of Nigeria women in pre-colonial and colonial era. Section 4 analyses the contributions/achievements of Nigerian women from the post-colonial era up to the 21st century. Section 5 examines the challenges of Nigerian women and the bridges left to be crossed for full enjoyment of their basic rights and equal representation in all facets of the society. Section 6 is the conclusion and recommendations.

THEORIES OF FEMINISM/WOMEN LIBERATION

To speak of liberation is to admit that some form of slavery, oppression, imprisonment, subjugation and confinement exist. Throughout history in all part of the world, women have been subjected to all forms of subjugation, discrimination and oppression, which triggered the beginning of feminist movement in the Western world, and later spread to other parts of the world, Africa inclusive. Internationally one of the most remarkable developments in the capitalist era has been the emergence and growth of the women's movement (Avanti, 2006). The women's movement has challenged the present patriarchal, exploitative society both through its activities and through its theories (Avanti, 2006). One of the important characteristics of

the contemporary women's movement has been the effort made by feminists to theorize on the condition of women (Avanti, 2006). Thus, feminists' theories include a diverse range of approaches, perspectives and frameworks that suites different situations, and proffer different ways of eradicating the problems of gender inequality. As Oakley (1981) pointed, feminist perspectives collectively share a concern with identifying and representing women's interests; those interests judged to be insufficiently represented and accommodated within the mainstream. What is important is that they share a commitment to give voice to women's experiences, liberation and end women's subordination. There are various feminist perspectives that offer a starting point of the different ways of conceptualising gender in social and political theories, and some of them are discussed below.

Traditional or Conservative perspective

According to this perspective, the causes of gender inequality are due to biological sex differences, including hormonal differences (example greater testosterone production in males) or reproductive capacities (example child bearing). The conservative perspective stresses that social behaviour is based on these biological sex differences. In other words, these biological sex differences can be amplified to explain social behaviour such as greater strength and innate aggression among males as well as innate nurturing and care giving among females. This conservative perspective did not offer any strategy for social change, believing that men and women's behaviours reflect evolutionary adaptation of sex differences.

Liberal Feminism/Perspective

Liberal feminist thoughts have enjoyed a long history in the 18th and 19th centuries arguing for the rights of women on the basis of liberal philosophical understanding. The movement for equal right for women especially the struggle for the women's right to vote that started with the first wave feminism, was primarily based on liberal thought. Liberal feminism was conceived within a liberal-bourgeois tradition that called for women's equality of opportunity and freedom of choice (Eisenstein, 1981). The liberal basis of women's movement was made clear in the writing of such liberal thinkers as Mary Wollstonecraft where she argued that unless women were encouraged to develop their rational potentials and to rely on their own judgment, the progress of all humanity would be retarded (Avanti, 2006). The argument was in favour of women getting the same education as men so that they could be imbued with the qualities of rational thinking and should be provided with opportunities of earning and leading an independent life (Avanti, 2006). The liberal feminist initial concern was to get laws amended which denied equality to women in the sphere of

education, employment etc. But, as legal and educational challenges were being surmounted, they shifted their emphasis to struggling for equality of conditions rather than merely equality of opportunity. This meant the demand that the state plays a major active role in creating the conditions in which women can actually realise opportunities. For instance, the struggle for Equal Rights Opportunities is being led by the liberal feminists.

Liberal feminism is founded on political liberalism, which holds the view of the ideals of liberty, equality, justice, dignity and individual rights. This perspective purports that gender inequality is due to women blocked opportunities to participate in various aspects of the public spheres such as education, employment and political activity. There are two types of liberal feminists and both approaches rely on legal remedies to address gender inequality: the classical and the welfare. Classical liberal feminists support limited government and a free market as well as political and legal rights such as freedom of expression, religion and conscience. Welfare liberal feminists favour government involvement in providing citizens particularly underprivileged individuals with education, housing, health care and social security. The major criticism of the liberal feminist is that it tends to be more mechanical in its support for formal equality without a concrete understanding of the conditions of different sections/classes of women and their specific problems. It is also restricted to changes in the law, educational and employment opportunities, welfare measures etc and does not question the economic and political structures of the society, which give rise to patriarchal domination. It also believes that the state is neutral and can be made to intervene in favour of women when in fact the bourgeois in the capitalist countries and the semi-colonial and semi-feudal states are patriarchal and will not support women's struggle for emancipation (Avanti, 2006). In essence, the state is defending the interest of the ruling class who benefit from the subordination and devalued status of women (Avanti,2006).

Radical Feminism/Perspective

In contrast to the pragmatic approach taken by liberal feminism, radical feminism aimed to reshape the society and restructure its institutions, which they saw as inherently patriarchal (Avanti, 2006). Providing the core theory for modern feminism, radicals argued that women subservient role in the society was too closely woven into the social fabric to be unraveled without a revolutionary revamping of the society itself (Avanti, 2006). Radical feminists such as Kate Millet challenged the power relationship between men and women in the society, where men dominate women. In her book *Sexual Politics*, she made the claim that personal is

political. By that, she meant that the discontent individual women feel in their lives is not due to individual failings but due to the social system, which has kept women in subordination and oppresses her in so many ways; thus her personal feelings are therefore politicized by the patriarchal dominated system. According to Millet's argument, patriarchy was men's control over women in the private and public world and to eliminate patriarchy men and women must eliminate gender that is sexual status, role and temperament as they have been constructed under patriarchy (cited in Avanti, 2006).

The radical perspective evolved in the 1960s from the women liberation movement. According to this perspective, the cause of gender inequality is based on men's need or desire to control women's sexuality and reproductive potential. The arguments radical feminists such as Barry (1979), Rich (1980) and Millet (1971) in her statement 'personal is political', bring sexuality to the centre of analysis of female subordination. The radical perspective had argued that the process of gender formation is founded on the power relations between men and women, in which men view themselves as superior to and have the right to control women. Two types of radical feminism have been identified: libertarian and cultural. Radical libertarian feminist assert that an exclusively feminine gender identity will most often limit a woman's development as a full human person. They encourage women to become androgynous individuals who embody both good masculine and feminine characteristics. The cultural radical feminist argue that women should be strictly feminine and not try to be like men. The suggested strategies for social change according to the radical feminists include overthrow of patriarchal relations and establishment of women centered social institutions. The major criticism for the radical feminism is that it abandons history altogether, ignores the political and economic structure, concentrates only on the social and cultural aspects, and projects the situation as the universal human condition (Avanti, 2006). Moreover since the radical feminists have taken men and women relationship as the central contradiction in the society and all their analysis proceeds from it, it then makes men (look like) main enemies of women.

Marxist and Socialist Feminism

For both the Marxist and socialist feminism, gender oppression is an obvious feature of capitalist societies. Depending on whether one is a Marxist-feminist or a socialist feminist, the weight that one will give to capitalism as a necessary or sufficient cause of that oppression will vary (Eisenstein, 1981). Marxist feminism places gender in the context of production methods. The burden of physical and social

reproduction in the home are operated and reinforced in a male dominated economic and political order. According to the Marxist perspective, the causes of gender inequality are due to hierarchical relations of control with the increase of private property and ownership among men. Class relations exist within gender relations. An example of class relations found in gender relations is housework. Traditionally, housework has been delegated to women, and such work does not produce surplus value or profit and it is not considered as labour most times. It is Marxist perspective that focused on the work related inequalities among men and women and also enhanced our understanding of the trivialization of women's work in the home, for instance raising children, caring for the elderly and doing domestic chores. On the other hand, socialist feminism helps to synthesize Marxist feminism. In other words, socialist feminism attempts a synthesis between two systems of domination, which is class and patriarchy. That is to say that both relations of production and reproduction are structured by capitalist patriarchy (Mitchell, 1971; Hartmann, 1979). Socialist perspective integrates concepts such as male domination and political economic relations. Socialist feminists focus on gender, class and racial relations of domination. Within the socialist feminist perspective there are two major ideas: two-system explanation of women's oppression and interactive system of women's oppression. While the two-system explanation maintain that patriarchy and not capitalism (as argued by the Marxist), may be the woman's worst enemy; the interactive system argued that both capitalism and patriarchy are equal contributors to women's oppression; they are interdependent.

NIGERIAN WOMEN STRUGGLES: PRE-COLONIAL ERA

The history of the contribution of Nigerian women to their country's development dates back to the pre-colonial period. Although traditionally African women were confined to the so called subordinate positions, Nigerian women were able to make invaluable contributions to societal development politically. They had individually and collectively played dynamic and constructive roles and thus contributed tremendously to societal development (Awe, 1992). Despite the societal classification of women's role as domestic in the pre-colonial era, women still waxed very strong in political and economic sectors. The virtues exhibited by some women like queen Amina of Zaria and Moremi of Ife in pre-colonial society is an attested fact. Queen Amina reigned in A.D. 1576 and possessed equal access to authority as the men. Ajayi (2007) noted that she was influential in the political development of the emirate of Northern Nigeria. As history has it, she conquered

many cities and built walls around them. This she did after the design of her own city of Zazzau, and that is what is called today fortification in Hausa land. In spite of the fact that women's participation in public life are restricted more in the North due to Islamic religion, the legend of Queen Amina cannot be hidden and it still lives on till today. Among the Yorubas, Princess Moremi who lived in the second half of the 16th century earned herself a political position in Ile-Ife through her solid personal achievement. Also Madam Tinubu ruled in Lagos from 1830-1887 and was a seasoned political stalwart who used her political weight to support Akintoye the rightful king of Lagos over his feud with Kosoko and helped in returning him to the throne instead of Kosoko.

There were other examples of women in Yoruba land (the western part of Nigerian) that made impacts in the 16th and 17th centuries. These women held authoritative positions and possessed ruling powers as male kings. Examples of women *Obas* (kings) include Ooni Luwo of Ile-Ife who was known for her tyrannical reign and the *lobun* of Ondo, a "powerful woman chief who has equivalent power and received same treatment as the male king (Falola, 1995). Other positions women occupied include the "*Ayaba* and *Oloris* (King's wives), *Iyalodes* (Women's leaders), *Iyalajes* (Market Women's Leaders), *Yeye Obas* (King's mother), and *Iyaoloshas* (Godess priests) (Ajayi, 2007). These Yoruba women held positions that gave them similar responsibilities as men. According to Nigerian Group (2011), pre-colonial Nigerian women occupied a position complementary, rather than subordinate, to the men.

NIGERIAN WOMEN STRUGGLES: COLONIAL ERA

Women's marginalization, like many other problems in Nigeria, has a deep root in the system carved and imposed by colonialism. Before the advent of colonialism women were not seen as 'weaker' sex but they were seen as a force to be reckoned with. The traditional system, which gave women the chance to have a say in the public domain was disrupted during the colonial era and the power lost has never been fully regained. The colonial masters came from a society that paid little attention to the role of women, expecting them to play a secondary role that was essentially supportive to male efforts. Ezeani (1998) posited that the basic premise of the colonial gender ideology was the domestication of women. They were not to function in the public domain like the men. For instance, when western-type education was initially introduced, it was considered useful only because it prepared boys to be able to qualify for employment as clerks, interpreters, teachers, catechists, evangelists, stewards, cooks etc either for government offices commercial houses or

service of the missionaries, and girls were not considered fit for such employment opportunities (Onwuka 2008). The western education brought sharp dichotomy or contradiction in women's role during the colonial era. This however, uplifted men in the social ladder and relegated women to the background. The colonial administration created a patriarchy government in which women were not allowed to hold any authoritative positions (Adu, 2008). The colonialists also introduced certain rules and regulations, which weakened the enjoyment of social, economic and political rights of women. Women's representation in the public sphere was very low even though women were granted the right to vote in the 1950s in the South and in the North in the 1980s. According to Odah (2003) when the colonial government introduced electoral politics, Nigerian women were excluded. Ityavyar (2001) had argued that with the colonial assault on the political right of Nigerian women, one would not be far from right to suggest that colonialism is the midwife of the political marginalization.

However, Nigerian women were able to organize themselves in groups like the market women associations to fight a collective cause. The economic and political suppression of women during the colonial era gave rise to the women's protest in Eastern Nigeria. The Women's protest of 1929 (also known as the Aba Women's Riots), in which Igbo market women protested British taxation, was a notable example of women using their traditional power against colonial rulers. The Abeokuta market women protests in 1948 came almost two decades after the Aba riots. Women revolted against colonial taxes and the failure of the traditional rulers to defend their interests by challenging the colonial masters. For example, the Alake of Abeokuta was the person ultimately responsible for tax collection, and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, formed the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) where the 'elite' Abeokuta women joined in solidarity with the market women of Egba land to work together to find a way to stop the practice of excess and unnecessary tax collection (Nigerian Group, 2011). It was through such anti-colonial resistance struggles that the different foundations for women's emancipation, equality and empowerment were initially laid, such as the National Women's Union (NWU), the first national women's organization founded in 1947. The Union had prominent female leaders such as Margaret Ekpo and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti who created a political niche for Nigerian women through their active roles in mainstream political movements and individual organizations (Okeke and Franschet 2002 cited in Nigerian Group, 2011). In the Northern part of the country, strong figures like Gambo Sawaba played

prominent roles in the struggle for women rights and became a leading light for women in that part of the country. She, alongside Margaret Ekpo, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, other leading political leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Malam Aminu Kano and many others were at the fore-front of relentless agitation for Nigeria's independence from Great Britain, which later came into place in 1960.

NIGERIA WOMEN IN THE POST-COLONIAL ERA: ANY ACHIEVEMENT?

A closer look at the post-colonial Africa shows that women are making great and significant impacts in their respective communities or countries as the case may be. While the battles of women liberation and full representation are yet to be totally won, in the 21st century Africa, women are already breaking the glass ceiling. Today, the journey of liberation struggles for African women is changing the face of Africa, with women elected or appointed as Head of State in countries like Liberia and Central African Republic, and great numbers of elected as members of parliament. Different from what was seen in the colonial era (when women had no say or place in the governing of the society; when women were only meant to be seen in the kitchen and home fronts; when women only had to manage with the informal sector; when women were denied access to education with the belief that they were only meant to marry and bear children; when women were rarely seen in the political participation), Africa women have ventured into 'areas' once seen as sacred and reserved for men. The roles and responsibilities of African women in post-colonial period have witnessed tremendous changes than it was in the pre-colonial and colonial era (Aina, 2004).

In 21st century Nigeria for instance, changes have been witnessed in the enrolment of women in education, employment in formal sectors as well as participation in politics. Two major areas (education and employment in formal sectors) are examined in details below.

Education

Education, especially formal education is an important area where women positions and placement in each society could be judged. Okeke (2000) noted that formal education especially higher education, has significant influence on women's social status as it places them in positions where they can get better and quicker access to male authorities. According to Akomolafe (2006), education is the bedrock of women empowerment. One sure way of empowering women and reducing gender inequality in today's fast changing world, especially in a developing society like Nigeria, is by getting more women educated and employed

(Acha, 2014). Education empowers both men and women in many ways, especially their capacity to control and make decisions about their own lives. The skills and learning girls and boys acquire in school help to create "pathways" to better employment opportunities and decision outcomes. Through education, one learns how to communicate, negotiate and engage with the wider world.

In the colonial era, Nigeria women were not given that 'opportunity' to acquire formal education (as discussed above). It must be noted that formal education as an institution was introduced to Nigeria during colonialism and the curricula emphasized religious instruction and clerical skills for boys and domestic science for girls (Attoe, 2002). In the post-colonial era, progress has been steadily achieved especially in terms of girls' access to schooling. There have been increases on the number of girls that enroll in school in Nigeria. The overall literacy rate in 1991 Nigeria census for the sexes combined is about 57 percent; the corresponding rate for the men was 66 percent while the rate for women was 48% below the national average. In 2003, 61 percent of women and 79 percent of men were literate. The gender gap in literacy decreases from older to younger cohorts with literacy rate among young adults aged 15-19 at 61 percent for women and 79 percent for men compared to literacy rates among older adults aged 45-49 at 22 percent for women and 60 percent for men (National Population Commission, 2009). For the NDHS survey, those who have attended school beyond the primary level are literate, and in that line the 2004 data indicates that in the range of age 15-19 years, 70 and 98 percent of women and men respectively are literate while 38 and 57 percent of women and men respectively for age 45-49 years are literate.

With the Nigerian government launch of free Universal Basic Education in partnership with UNICEF in 1999, more females are encouraged to acquire basic formal education. Although there is still a great gap in the northern regions where culture and religion are being used as an excuse to marry off girls early; and where girls education are sometimes hampered by the insurgency. For example according to UNICEF report in year 2002 in the northern state of Sokoto, the gap between male and female literacy was very high. Females had only 15% compared to the 59% male literacy rate. At the turn of the 21st century the overall number of out-of-school girls has been nearly cut in half and women and girls are spending more time in school than ever before. At independence the overall school attendance for both boys and girls was low, with girls almost absent.

At the end of 2015, which was the target date of Millennium Development Goals, the net attendance

rate for primary school was 71 percent, with boys at 89 percent and girls at 82. Nonetheless, there have continued to be a clear north-south divide in female education. In a number of southern states such as Anambra state, the girls outnumber their male counterparts in school today, due to the boys increasing interest in trade and the quest to make 'quick money.' The UNICEF survey noted that nationally while greater percentage of girls today finish primary schools, the number that proceeds to secondary and tertiary tend to reduce due to sometimes financial reasons; and in financial cases girls may be dropped for marriage. In a developing country like Nigeria, the direct and indirect costs of schooling represent one of the most significant barriers to education for both boys and girls, particularly those from poor families (UNICEF, 2005). What is discernible is that the trend of educational enrolment is not as positive for secondary schools, with percentage share of female enrolment standing at 44 percent in 2003, and even lower for the northern region. For example, the net secondary school attendance ratio is abysmally low for females in the North West (10 percent) (National Planning Commission, 2007).

With the acquisition of education, women are now venturing into areas such as politics and academics. There has been a gradual increase in the political participation of women in Nigeria. The year 1999 marked the beginning of a new dawn as Nigeria returned to civilian government after the demise of military rule (Ngara and Ayabam, 2013). With the re-introduction of democracy, there has been a drastic increase in women political participation in both elected and appointed positions. For instance, during the 1999 general elections, out of 11,881 available positions throughout the country, women won just 181 positions (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2003). Women are represented in key Ministries, Parastatals and Agencies of the federal government unlike in the 1960 where only one or two women could be seen and sometimes no women representation. Women have headed the Ministries of finance, education, petroleum, Aviation, women affairs, and all these progress cannot be delinked from the educational achievements made by women.

Nigeria also witnessed the appointment of women vice chancellors in universities, the first was Prof. Grace Alele William of the University of Benin. Overall, more women are now acquiring education as more parents are becoming better informed on the importance of girl-child education. Research has shown that educated parents are more likely to send their children to school, both girls and boys alike (UNICEF, 2006) but the next challenge for both boys and girls in

Nigeria is getting a job that after graduation due to high level of unemployment in Nigeria.

Employment in Formal Sectors

At Nigeria's independence, women were almost absent in all decision-making processes and development activities in the formal sectors. According to the National Policy on gender and development women's concerns received little attention in national planning in Nigeria until the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women. According to the 1991 Census, women were responsible for the reproduction of the labour force and for the production of over 70 percent of the nation's food supply. According to the National Policy on Women (2000), women provide an estimated 60-80 percent of the labour input in agriculture especially in food production, processing and marketing. The data show that women were relegated to the informal sector and less productive sectors of the economy. For many women, unpaid chores in and for the household take up the majority of their working hours, with less time spent in remunerative employment (UNDP, 2006).

Apart from the informal sector, where women engage primarily in farming, the formal sector which I refer to here as 'sector where women receive wage employment' has been dominated by men. However, in the National Planning Commission survey in 2007, the proportion of women in nonagricultural wage employment has shown promise with an increase of 79 percent. There have been progress in recent decade in women engaging in global labour force and this has been the result of the increase in education of women. Available employment data indicates that educated women are becoming increasingly favoured in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector (National Planning Commission, 2007), as most firms and organisations are working towards giving women fair representation, even though their numbers are still insignificant compared to the number of males counterparts.

AFRICAN WOMEN LIBERATION STRUGGLES: THE JOURNEY SO FAR AND THE REMAINING BRIDGES TO CROSS

The journey of liberation struggles for Nigerian women has been positive but the battle is yet to be won. The glass ceiling is gradually being broken day by day as women ascend top positions in formal sectors and politics. Education for the girl-child is no longer seen as waste of time and resources; the then argument that the solution to male unemployment is the sacking of all employed women who are 'selfish' to hold other jobs in addition to marriage (cited in Obbo, 1980: 8) no longer holds water. There is now the

realisation that women who work not only ward off starvation but reduce a kind of unhealthy dependence. The political arena once seen as the domain of men has been ventured into by women, and they are making significant contributions to their wards and constituencies. Overall, the 21st century Africa has witnessed women in high-level positions and among the decision-making bodies, although still insignificant compared to men.

However, we must have a correct understanding of women liberation or emancipation (of you like). It is not a mechanical equality with men such as acquiring habits recognised as male like drinking, smoking et cetera. It is not the equality, which is being preached or advocated for. The genuine liberation/emancipation of women is one that entrusts responsibilities to women that involves them in the productive activity and different areas where they have been sidelined, such as the formal sector, politics and education. The genuine liberation is one that men agrees that women should truly have a place; that women should be respected and considered without seeing them as those that should be confined to a particular sector (informal sector). Women, have engaged in this struggle for freedom and liberation because of the belief that sometimes freedom is not just granted, but have to be fought for and conquered. Women have tried to put forward their demands and have mobilized support to win many of such demands. For progress not to be stalled, and for the views of those that make up more than half our society not to be sidelined, Africa renaissance agenda must think women. Nonetheless, there are still challenges women need to surmount. There are still bridges that block easy passage of Nigerian women to total freedom.

Bridges to Cross?

Undeniably, there are still many issues that confront Nigerian women, which limit the enjoyment of their rights. These are discussed below.

(i) Culture and Religion

The issues of culture and religion have been a very serious impediment to realisation of women's full potentials and rights in African societies. Patriarchy is highly entrenched in the sense that there is a wide belief that it is proper for men to command or lead and women to obey or follow. Cultural is a major barrier as women have since earlier times been assigned roles that meant only for the home and not the public sphere. It is argued that women cannot do justice to domestic work, while simultaneously engaged in wage labour (cited in Obbo, 1980: 8). This cultural position on women's roles and responsibilities in the societies is yet to be totally erased. Many African men still believe that domestic chores belong to women alone. Even though there have been changes in belief with regards to girls'

education, women still have to face the culturally assigned roles, as some men would not even want their wives to work in the formal sector but to focus on domestic activities (Osondu-Oti and Omole, 2016). In addition, religion also plays a significant role in marginalizing women. For instance, northern parts of Nigeria are overwhelmingly dominated by the Islamic religion and Islamic laws to a certain extent restrict women from engaging into certain activities that are reserved for men, for instance public offices are seen as men's affair. Some men feel strongly that women abuse the privilege of working by becoming too 'big headed' to accept the superior position accorded to men by the Bible and the Koran (cited Obbo, 1980: 8).

(ii) Gender Stereotyping and Conscious/Subconscious Discrimination in Workplaces

Willis (1991), UN (1987) and Nzomo (1994) posited that the most significant factor to the discrimination women face is the socio-cultural system of belief and myths, which informed the socialization process and the gendered education and training most men and women are exposed to from childhood. According to Nzomo (1994) the sex-stereotypes and gender segregation in employment and allocation of roles in private and public life are fundamentally a product of the early socialization process and the indoctrination of the social environment. While the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended clearly stipulates that no individual should be discriminated against on the basis of sex, religion, race, among others but in practice however, discriminatory practices against the female gender abound in all facets of life. Women are discriminated against at the early stages of life. For instance, the arrival of a baby boy in the family is heralded with great pomp and pride by the parents, but not so with the baby girl. In some parts of Igbo land for example, the songs used to announce the birth of a baby boy is different from the ones used to announce the birth of a baby girl.

In the workplaces, it has been found that male stereotyping of women is the top impediment when it comes to women's progression up the corporate ladder. There is the conscious or sometimes subconscious stereotyping, which led to the coining of such phrases as 'think leader, think male.' This is linked to the social role theory whereby women are allocated certain tasks and responsibilities at home, and are believed should settle for some jobs (secretaries, receptionists, nurse etc) if they must work at all. These stereotypical views assigned to genders acts as social norms which represent how we believe others should act as well as personal dispositions which represent our beliefs in how we should act. It is already an established fact that

people develop gender role expectations at early age which sometimes endures throughout the lifetime.

(iii) Marriage Penalty for Career Women

Adult and unmarried women are constantly reminded that the pride of a woman is the husband and not career, with the warning that they might miss out on this blessing in the pursuit of career advancement. For unmarried Nigerian women (as might be witnessed in other parts of the world), career advancement before marriage is likely to lead to what is called success penalty, that is the penalty women face in the marriage market for choosing another 'career', for attaining career heights or for being successful in the labour market. Such success penalties are pointed as difficulty in getting a husband (Osondu-Oti and Omole, 2016). While Nigerian women enrolment into University education is increasingly being accepted (especially more in the Southern part of Nigeria) by men, the increasing educational advancement of women after the first degree may be frowned at (either by the parents, society or peer groups) especially before marriage is contracted. The societal pressure for adult women (especially in their 30s) to get married, due to the so-called 'age-timing' of women have helped to ignite the fire for marriage first, and career later. The African culture where marriage is most times seen as should be the first 'goal' of every adult woman before any career makes marriage itself a penalty for career pursuit; because it invariably means that if marriage is not contracted, advancement in career should not be undertaken by women (Osondu-Oti and Omole, 2016). Hewlett (2002) had reported that "the rule of thumb seems to be that the more successful the woman, the less likely it is that she will find a husband or bear a child. In line with that argument, Dowd (2002) stated that men veer away from 'challenging' women because they have an atavistic desire to be the superior force in a relationship. For Whelan (2010), there are now generation of SWANS- 'Strong Women Achievers, No Spouse', that are seen as overqualified for love' even though, it might all be 'a myth. There is the belief by some men that successful women hardly stay under a man and they are sometimes seen as people that cannot be taken as 'wife', and this hinders women's career pursuit, especially before marriage (Osondu-Oti and Omole, 2016). And after marriage, the 'husband might be a hindrance', as there is still a popular belief among men in Nigeria (or one could say in Africa) that women should be managers of home.

(iv) Lack of Money/Adequate Finance for Political Campaigns/Lack of Support from Men

In addition to other barriers women might be facing or hindering their efforts, is the lack of adequate finance or money needed to contest for political offices. Politics is an expensive venture that requires huge sums

of money to run all over the world, especially for campaigning. In Nigeria too, the amount of money one has in his/her pockets goes a long way in determining one's fortunes or successes in elections. Women may not be able to afford the enormous amount of money required to fund an electoral campaign (Wills, 1991:22). Since women are just finding their feet in educational attainment and participation in formal sector, the 'large sums of money' required for political venture might not be available for women because such venture requires years of planning, saving and getting enough support for funding. Many at times for Nigerian women, their husbands may not be supportive or approve of such venture because politics is seen as 'dirty game' that women should not dabble into. While women's presence and active participation in politics is critical to advancing gender equality, gender initiatives also require the involvement and support of male parliamentarians and political leaders. For example, if the women at the Nigerian Senate had the support of men, the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill would not have been rejected by the Nigerian Senate that makes up 90 percent of male. Moreover, in a highly patriarchal society that clings so much to culture and tradition, women that want to go into politics are often faced with negative support not just from men but fellow women too. The general challenges for all women's participation in politics have been summarized by Duverger (1975) and Nzomo (1994) as thus:

If the majority of women are little attracted to political careers, it is because everything tends to turn them away from the, if they allow politics to remain essentially a man's business, it is because everything is conducive to this belief tradition, family life, education, religion and literature. The small part played by women in politics merely reflects and results from the secondary place to which they are assigned by the custom and attitudes of our society and which their education and training tend to make them accept as the natural order of things (Duverger, 1975:129-130; Nzomo, 1994:206)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The progress that has been made by African women in their liberation struggles especially in Nigeria is positive. Women to a considerable extent have risen above the challenges of colonialism and cultural limitations. Today, girls are catching up with boys in school attendance, and in some states have surpassed them; more women are economically active, are in wage employment in formal sectors, and are in higher-level positions than before. The number of women in parliament is increasing year by year but

more efforts need to be put by women and women groups to gain stronger and higher grounds in all sectors. To achieve this, the following recommendations have been put forward. Nigerian government should go further in providing free secondary education because girls tend to benefit more from such initiatives, and suffer more when education is not free. Tertiary education should also be subsidized at the state level. Today, Imo State has given free education to its indigenes up to the tertiary level, leading to greater enrolments of girls in school, and it is expected that other states in the federation should adopt the same initiative. For women adequate political representation, Nigerian government should adopt constitutional or electoral quota representation. Quotas have proved effective in increasing the participation of women in politics in countries across the world. It could be gender quota system (that ensures that women constitute at least a critical minority of 20, 30 or 40 percent of legislators or a true gender balance of 50 percent); legal quota system (which regulates the proceedings of all political parties in a country to ensure women representation, or it could be mandated in a country's Constitution for certain percentage of women representation as in Burkina Faso, Nepal, Philippine and Uganda, or mandated by law, usually electoral as in Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sudan). There are also voluntary party quotas (decided by several political parties or one or two political parties in a country as seen to give women certain percentage as seen in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Norway. If a leading political party in Nigeria (Peoples Democratic Party for example) adopts quota, such initiative will have a significant impact on the overall rate of women representation in politics. But most of the world's political parties do not employ any kind of quota at all. The past administration of President Goodluck Jonathan used the 35 percent affirmative action and women were given more positions in his government. If such quota system has been incorporated in the Constitution, the new administration of President Buhari would have maintained the status quo but now no one talks about 35 percent affirmative action. Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations resolutions on the recommended ratio of 30:70 women to men in top political positions, but is yet to implement it, legally.

Also, the Nigerian Senate should address and pass the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill to allow women enjoy their full human rights and better representation in the society. Gender equality as we know does not mean that women and men will become the same, but rather implies equal treatment of women and men in laws and policies, and equal access to

resources and services within families, communities and society at large. To achieve this goal, a two-pronged approach of GM is often required: 1) systematically analyzing and addressing in all initiatives the specific needs of both women and men; and 2) targeted interventions to enable women and men to participate in and benefit equally from development efforts.

Moreover as part of the African renaissance agenda, it becomes important to unite and organise all dynamics forces of the society, and women must not be left behind. They have to be involved at all levels in conceiving projects, making decisions, implementing them and in organising the life of their societies as a whole. One of the major goals of the renaissance should be to build a free and prosperous society where women will be given equal representation in all sectors and at all levels.

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