

A Sociological Interrogation of Muslim Scholars' Views on Women Participation in Politics in Sokoto, Nigeria

¹**A. G. Umar Kari, & ²Haruna Shehu Abubakar**

¹*Department of Sociology, University of Abuja*

²*Hausa Service, British Broadcasting Corporation*

Article DOI: 10.48028/ijprds/ijargpgm.v3.i1.01

Abstract

Concerned by the relatively low, nay insignificant, level of political participation among women in Northern Nigeria in general, and Sokoto in particular, this study set out to identify, dissect and interrogate factors responsible for the situation, especially the perceived role religious dogma and the Ulama (the Muslim religious cleric) play (through their preachments and interpretations of divine injunctions) in keeping women away from the political realm. The study is anchored on the Structural-functionalist postulations on political participation, which explains how class structure and division of labour determine an individual's degree of involvement in the decision-making process. Data was largely obtained through the In-depth Interview method, but additional information was gathered through Questionnaire administered to a sample of purposively selected cross-section of Ulama in Sokoto city. Findings of the study show among other things that as a religion, Islam provides and guarantees what in contemporary times constitutes political rights for both male and female almost in equal measure (including the right to participate in election as well as seek nomination for political offices); this notwithstanding, however, factors such as divergent opinions of the Ulama on the matter, lack of or insufficient education, unfavourable traditional – mainly patriarchal – cultural beliefs of the Hausa/Fulani, and poor political consciousness – rather than expressed religious injunctions – are actually the real reasons for the poor political participation of Muslim Sokoto women in politics. Accordingly, the study recommends massive and sustained political education and enlightenment campaign specifically targeted at the womenfolk in Sokoto and beyond, which primarily focus on the political roles and rights of both sexes (as enshrined in Islam), and which should be carried out by both state and non-state actors (including the Ulama).

Keywords: *Sociological Interrogation, Muslim religious and Political participation*

Corresponding Author: **A. G. Umar Kari**

Background to the Study

Scholars, analysts and commentators have observed that throughout human history in many communities, climes and countries women tend to under-participate in politics, and this trend cuts across all societies of the world, in spite of differences in norms, values, faiths, levels of civilization, among others, although the nature, rate and pattern of the under-participation differ from one place to another. In most third world societies, especially in Africa, women face obstacles in their quest for political participation due mainly to factors rooted in the social and cultural environment (Umar and Kari, 2018). In particular, the prevailing view in many Muslim-dominated societies is that women's nature (*Fitrah*) is more appropriate to carry out familial roles while that of men is more appropriate for dealing with other issues of human life (Keskin, 1997). Religion has been cited by several scholars as being one of the major socio-cultural factors that both influence and inhibit participation of individuals in events and processes, including politics (Imam, 1991; Uchendu, 1993; Pettygroove, 2006; Khalid, 2011, Ahmed, 2019, etc).

After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, government decided to enfranchise women. But the *Ulama* of the Al-Azhar University, Cairo issued a "*fatwa*" (an analogical deduction of religious laws) which kicked against the move. The content of this *fatwa* stated that the unstable nature inherent in women made them unfit to participate actively in politics. The proposed government's decision to accord suffrage to women was therefore in their opinion Un-Islamic and as such cancelled on religious ground (Koray, 2005).

Ironically, unlike Egypt, which ostensibly is a secular state, Pakistan, in spite of its touted adoption of the Islamic system of government, allowed full participation of women in political activities to the extent that a woman, Benazir Bhutto, twice served as prime minister (1988 – 1990 and 1993 – 1996). Also, in neighbouring Bangladesh, which is also predominantly Muslim, two women and members of the same family (wife and daughter of the country's founding father, Mujibur Rahman), Begum Khaleeda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, have been prime minister.

In Nigeria, there was a remarkable disparity in the levels of participation of Muslim women in politics between the first and the second republics, particularly in the predominantly Muslim North. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) which won the elections and held power from the end of colonial period until the coup in 1966 strongly argued that Muslim women could neither stand for election nor even elect candidates of their choice, because women seclusion was traditional not only in Hausa land but in Islam. Thus, to argue against seclusion was considered as anti-Muslim and anti-Hausa/North (Imam, 1991). However, this position changed in the build-up to the second republic and women were accorded the franchise. During the 1979 presidential election, notable Muslim scholars tried to mobilize women to vote for Shehu Shagari as a Muslim candidate, arguing that this was "part of their Islamic civic duty." As a result, Northern women turned out to vote for the first time in an election, unlike in the Christian South where women had been voting much earlier (Khalid, 2001).

In terms of contesting for elective positions and getting appointed or nominated into or holding political appointments, Nigerian women have fared relatively far worse than men since Independence. Available statistics revealed that women`s overall political representation in government was ever hardly above 10 percent (Agbalajobi, 2015). This is in spite of the existence in all the states of a ministry for women affairs with usually a woman as commissioner, as well as deliberate measures by the political parties toward encouraging women aspirants vying for elective positions (such as waiving of the usually exorbitant nomination fees).

On the whole, the role played by women in politics and the extent of their participation, differs from region to region and sometimes within the same region. In Sokoto, the focus of the study, in this fourth republic, no woman has been elected as governor or deputy, federal or state legislator, or local government chairperson or deputy. This is notwithstanding that at least 50 percent of all eligible voters in the state are women, and an appreciable proportion of them always turn out to vote during general and local elections.

The basic assumption of the study was that the relatively poor involvement of women in politics among Muslim women in Northern Nigeria was due to the activities and influence of the very influential Islamic clerics who, through their sermons and preachments and interpretation of Islamic precepts apparently harped on the *Fatwah* that women have little role to play in public affairs.

The Research Problem

It has been observed that many studies on women political participation focused mainly or even exclusively on factors (political, economic, environmental, socio-cultural, etc) militating against the participation. However, this study looked at things slightly differently by zeroing in on the issue from the prism of the influence of religious cleric, i.e., whether the Islamic cleric were to be held wholly or partly responsible for the relatively poor involvement of Muslim women in politics. The city of Sokoto, North-West Nigeria, was chosen as a case study. Built in 1809 by Caliph Muhammadu Bello, Sokoto has been the “Seat of the Caliphate,” a historically conservative and iconic city that is regarded as the spiritual capital of all Nigerian Muslims.

The study was guided by the following questions:

- i. What really is the position of Islam on women participation in politics?
- ii. What is the position of Muslim scholars in Sokoto on women participation in politics?
- iii. Does the position of the Muslim scholars account for the relatively poor participation of Sokoto women in politics?

Theoretical Framework

Functionalist analysis on political participation, that is associated with Lester Milbrath and Robert Dahl, forms the basis of this research work. For Milbrath, members of society can be divided into four categories in terms of political participation and each category has a function. First, the politically apathetic who are “unaware literally” of the political world around them. Secondly, those who are involved in 'spectator activities” which include voting and taking part in discussion about politics. Thirdly, those involved in transitional activities

which include attending a political meeting or making a financial contribution to political party and finally, those who enter the political arena and participated in “gladiatorial activities” such as standing for and holding public and party offices. These levels of political participation are not uniformly distributed throughout population.

In general, the higher an individual’s position in the class structure the greater his degree of participation. Thus, men are likely to have higher levels of political participation than women, whites than blacks, married people than single, members of a club or party than non-members, long-term residents of a community than short term residents. Milbrath maintained that those with low levels of participation often lack the resource and opportunities as well as experience of higher education which brings greater awareness of political process to become directly involved in politics. Milbrath estimates that in the USA 30% of the population are politically apathetic, 60% attain the level of spectatorial activities, from 7 to 9% are involved in transitional activities, while only 1 to 3% participate in gladiatorial activities.

As Robert Dahl argues, an individual is unlikely to become involved in politics if he thinks the probability of his/her influencing the outcome of events is low. Secondly, levels of political participation appear to be related to the degree of involvement and integration of the individual in society. Thus, an individual is unlikely to become involved in local or national politics if s/he does not feel a part of either the local community or wider society. This may explain why Muslim women who are often isolated as housewives, and indoctrinated to accept and internalise apolitical beliefs and attitudes, rarely participate in political activities.

Methodology

Data for the study was sourced by means of In-depth Interview and complemented by questionnaires. The target population comprised the *Ulama* (Muslim scholars) in the city of Sokoto. They are people noted for their Islamic scholarship and who are being looked upon for spiritual guidance and education. They are the interpreters of the Law of Allah contained in the Qur’an, Hadith (prophetic traditions) and Islamic works written by earlier Muslim scholars. The *Ulama* are well-learned people within the Muslim community who are recognized as ‘authority’ that give final judgment on all issues concerning Islam and Muslims, be it spiritual or mundane, using Islamic jurisprudence by delivering “fatwa’ (Islamic rulings based on understanding and analogical interpretation of Islamic Laws). The number of chief imams (*Ulama*) in the study area was 36 according to statistics from the office of the Director of Da’awah in Sokoto State Ministry for Religious Affairs and Special Duties. This number therefore constituted the population of the study. Six respondents out of the number were randomly selected as sample for the in-depth interview. In addition, 120 questionnaires were administered on other Islamic scholars, of lesser status than that of the main respondents.

Findings

The aggregate findings from both the In-depth Interview and Questionnaire data are as follows:

On the position of Islam on women political participation

The dominant view is that Muslim women are not only permitted to partake in politics but also have roles to play under ideal Islamic political set-up. Muslim women have right to partake in running the affairs of their community but with condition of being qualified and fit for the task. An example was cited that during the reign of Caliph Umar Bin Khattab a woman, Ashifau Bint Abdullahi, was appointed by the caliph to oversee the affairs of markets in Medina. This argument can be stretched further to infer that women can be appointed to head various organizations and units within government and the state.

Also, Islam permits women to vote and be voted into political offices. To buttress this, a *fatwah* by Yusuf Al- qaradawi, in his book “*Al-Muhawarat Al-haliyah*” (Debate on Current Issues) posits that preventing women from voting is an alien practice in Islam, because voting is an Islamic civic responsibility upon every Muslim as stated in the Qur`an thus:

“A witness should not refuse to give testimony when invited to testify (Q:2:281)

An interpretation here is that voting for or against a candidate is tantamount to giving testimony for or against the eligibility of such a candidate to lead the *Ummah*. Politics in Islam means any activity aimed at safeguarding the interest of the public, both spiritual and mundane. Safeguarding the mundane needs of the public means to cater for their welfare, safety and security as well as to guarantee right and freedom, while that of spiritual means to guide citizens according to the dictates of their Creator so that they can achieve salvation and happiness in the next life which is the end purpose of a Muslim's life. On the basis of this, therefore, any activity that has to do with general welfare of the *Ummah* is political and involving in it is political participation; hence, women are automatically permitted to get involved in politics.

It is also pointed out that Muslim men and women have equal rights to participate in politics. The Holy Qur`an has enjoined believers irrespective of gender to command others to do what is right and shun what is evil – a task that largely rests on the shoulders of those in authority. Muslim women should therefore not be left out in taking part in politics, particularly in determining who should lead and be vested with decision making in society. The legendary 13th century Muslim jurist, Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, has said that in selecting a leader for the Muslim society, qualities such as piety, honesty, integrity, ability and so on should be the yardstick – by implication gender is not one of the qualities.

However, there is equally the view that women political roles in Islam are very limited due to their special biological needs compared to men, given that a leader needs to be of better state of mind and body than followers. There is a *hadith* (saying of Prophet Muhammad) that women have lower intellect than men, and that in fact in Islam, testimony of two women is considered equal to one man`s. By and large, however, there is a consensus among the respondents that Islam permits women to participate in politics with little let or hindrance.

On the Extent of Women Political Participation in Islam

There are quite divergent views on this.

One of the contending views is that a woman is eligible to hold any political office except that of the overall executive head of state or a governor. However, according to this position, some Muslim jurists are of the view that a woman can be made a president under such political system in which president is a mere figure head; but the actual executive power lies in the hands of another officer – often a prime minister. According to this view, however, under the presidential system of government where the president has the final say, Islam frowns at placing a woman in position of head of state or a governor. This limitation has nothing to do with regarding women as inferior to men, but rather it is because of the natural differences in biological and psychological make-up between a man and a woman.

Another view holds that Muslim women can be voted into state and national assemblies or appointed into executive positions in order to partake in the decision-making processes of either legislative or executive councils. Their presence in councils is not only permitted but also encouraged as it forms a part of the fundamental duty of “commanding for righteous acts and forbidding evil ones” which is compulsory upon every Muslim. This perspective further states that during the reign of Caliph Umar bn Khattab there was a stakeholder` meeting chaired by the Caliph aimed at specifying the amount to be paid as dowry to women. A woman in attendance stood up and challenged that decision. This denotes that women did participate in the political processes of the early Islamic state. However, the perspective still maintains that in Islam women are not eligible to hold the overall executive position or to be an Imam due to their physiological makeup; that Islam does not permit women to hold such offices as chief executive, a chief judge, or a chief imam; but that it is permissible in Islam for women to occupy certain political positions that can be best handled by women on condition that they are educated and competent.

The major point stressed here by most of the respondents is that Islam does not permit women to be at the peak of the mantle of leadership or hold such positions as a chief judge or imam. Apparently, this is due to their biological and physical weaknesses in contrast to their male counterparts. Biological processes such as conception, child bearing, menstruation, among others, are the factors that made Islam to discourage most active participation of women in politics. Women are even exempted by Islam from observing very important religious obligations such as prayer and fasting while undergoing such biological processes. Furthermore, women are naturally more emotional than men are. Therefore, emotions such as sympathy, fear, love, and hatred could easily influence their decisions, unlike men. A leader in Islam should be a philosopher who is above the influence of his feeling, and able to internalize the interests of his subjects and serve as a symbol of virtue to his people. Even in times of war, Muslim women are exempted from taking part in battles unless if they choose to do so. The perspective that women must never hold the apex executive and military positions in a community or society is apparently based on *Fatwah* of the three out of four Islamic schools of thought (Maliki, shafii and Hanbali) itself drawn from a *Hadith* in which Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said that “a nation shall not prosper if a woman is made its leader.”

In contrast, some of the respondents were of the firm view that there is no limit to what political office a Muslim woman should hold provided that she merits it; that Islam is a flexible

religion which injunctions can fit into any social reality at any given time; but that there are certain positions, which are tailor-made for or best held by women (such as government agencies that deal with purely women affairs like women's health, girls' education, women's rights, marriage, etc). An example was cited of how Prophet Muhammad sought for advice from one of his experienced wives – Umm Salma - on how to deal with an imminent rebellion by some of his followers at the Treaty of *Hudaybiyyah*; which shows that the prophet held a woman as a political adviser. In another instance the Prophet appointed a woman – Samirah Bint Nuhaq Al-assadiyyah - as a market police chief. She patrolled the market to ensure maintenance of law and order. Thus, the basic contention here is that Muslim women can participate in politics, especially in modern-day democracy in which parliaments and courts could check the excesses of an executive leader. A corollary to this is the argument by few of the respondents that it does not really matter the gender of a person leading the executive arm since it is the constitution that rules.

On whether the Ulama/cleric in Sokoto should be held responsible for low level of women political participation

It is very tempting to do this: first, because the *Ulama* are quite influential and command a large following, their words and positions on issues are taken to heart and adhered to by lay followers and the *Ummah* (the Muslim community) or, at least, a section of it; but, also because many among them hold, canvass and spread (through preachments, sermons and interpretations of religious precepts) the position – even though disputed – that women have limited or, at least restricted, roles in the political space (as discussed above). Some openly preached against women partaking in certain aspects of the political process (particularly active involvement in politics and vying for certain positions in government and some political institutions).

However, the study found that several other factors account for (or reinforce the controversial positions of some of the *Ulama* on the matter) the relatively low level of political participation of Sokoto women. These include the following:

- a. The belief that certain aspects of and practices inherent in “secular” politics conflict with local culture, debase womanhood, expose female politicians to danger and ridicule, and prevent them from performing their household duties and responsibilities as wives and mothers. Examples were cited of endless, often nocturnal, meetings, campaigns and rallies that are quite tasking, and which sometimes can turn rowdy or even violent, and generally busy schedules of politicians, considered as unacceptable by many husbands and parents.
- b. Certain poor, abhorrent and socially unacceptable conducts and attitudes of some politicians, often amplified or presented as the typical or defining values and virtues of politics, which turn some people – particularly women – off and discourage them from participating in politics.
- c. The patriarchal nature of society provides that women must seek permission from men – parents and husbands – before they engage in certain activities, including politics. The permission is sometimes denied, or even if given restrictions and conditions are attached to it which may adversely affect active and robust

participation. To compound the problem, men hardly support determined female politicians (who they invariably see as a threat to their dominance); rather, they conspire to emasculate or frustrate them.

- d. Socio-cultural factors such as low economic status, lack of education, and poor political education. Lack of financial wherewithal is particularly significant, because money is the most fundamental requirement for meaningful political participation, but is regrettably in short supply among Sokoto women.
- e. Inherent inferiority complex and political inertia among Sokoto women. This is probably a consequence of deep, massive and pervasive socio-cultural influences (including activities of the religious cleric) that frown at or discourage serious and meaningful political participation of women. Many women in the area hold a fatalistic view that their political participation is limited or restricted by religion and culture, hence they tend to naturally condition themselves to political passivity or inactivity.

Recommendations

Based on its findings, the study recommends as follows:

1. Massive and sustained political education and enlightenment campaign specifically targeted at the womenfolk in Sokoto and beyond, which primarily focus on the political roles and rights of both sexes (as enshrined in Islam), and which should be carried out by both state and non-state actors (including the Ulama).
2. To attract and guarantee female participation, party activities and functions should henceforth take cognisance of and reflect peculiarities and obligations of female members (as mothers and wives), and should as much as possible not conflict with cultural and religious values, beliefs, attitudes and ways of doing things. This is particularly so in respect of timing and venues of meetings as well as nature of politicking itself.
3. Deliberate incentivization of aspiring and budding women politicians: government policies and programmes that specifically target empowerment of female politicians should be introduced and implemented; legislative enactments should create affirmative-like slots/spaces (positions in government and the parties, seats in parliament, etc); and discontinuance – where necessary, criminalization – of any form of discrimination against female politicians.
4. Generally, governments at all levels should forthwith take all necessary steps possible toward ensuring that female politicians self-actualize and achieve their ambitions without let or hindrance. In the same vein, parents and husbands should as much as possible encourage or, at least, not constitute an obstacle to the realization of their political intentions and aspirations.
5. Aspiring female politicians in Sokoto and beyond, should always brave the odds, step out and participate in all political activities, notwithstanding the social, cultural, religious, financial, etc constraints imposed by society.

Conclusion

Controversies over women participation in politics will continue to persist in particularly Muslim-dominated societies such as Sokoto, due mainly to the diversity of views and

perspectives (especially as par the divergent positions of the influential *Ulama* on the matter). But then, it is in the nature of religion that its dogmas are often susceptible to varying – even conflicting – interpretations, hence an issue may be seen and explained differently by different learned scholars, and this ultimately cascades down to followers. This is exactly the case with position of Islam on women participation in politics, as revealed by the findings of the study. However, what is obvious is that notwithstanding the controversies, there is an increasing clamour for women to be more visible in the political space and to play more meaningful roles in the political process.

References

- Agbalajobi, D. T. (2010). Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects, *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 4(2), 075-082.
- Ahmed, I. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam*, Yale University Press, Connecticut, USA.
- Imam, A. (1985). Towards adequate analysis of the position of women in society, *Women in Nigeria Today*, Zed Press, London.
- Keskin, B. (2004). *Political participation of Turkish women*, available at www.librarycornel.edu/mideast.
- Khalid, S. (2001). *Gender purdah and political participation among the Hausas of North-western Nigeria*, Center of Democratic Research, Mambayya House, Bayero University Kano, Nigeria.
- Koray, M. A. (2005). *Women in Nigerian Politics, Nigeria under Democratic Rule (1999-2003)* Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Milbrath, L.W. (1980). *Sociology: Power and politics*, State University of New York, New York, USA.
- Milbrath, L.W. (1981). *Political participation*, State University of New York, Bufalo, New York, USA.
- Mohammed, A. & Zaid, B. A. (2014). Women and political participation: Towards attainment of the 35% affirmative action, *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(9), 65-71.
- Nessbitt-Ahmed, Z. (2011). Beyond numbers: Women's political marginalization in Nigeria, *Gender Across Borders* – Monthly newsletter, October, 14.
- Pettygrove, P. (2008). Representation without participation: Quotas for women in Bangladesh, *International Political Science Review*, 29(1), 489-512.

- Suleiman, B. (2001). *Gender, media and democracy: Center for democratic research*, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.
- Uchendu, P. (1993). *The role of Nigerian women in politics*, Fourth Dimension Publishers Ltd, Enugu, Nigeria.
- Umar, Y. & Kari, A. G. U. (2018). Factors militating against women's political participation in selected Nupe Communities of Niger State, Nigeria, *World Journal of Innovative Research (WJIR)* 5(6) (2018), 61 – 67