

## **Centenary of the Nigerian Woman: the Task Ahead**

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### **Abstract**

**T**he contributions of Nigerian women to socio-political and economic development in Nigeria have been severally acknowledged. The centenary celebration of the country was another opportunity to re-echo these contributions. But there are more tasks ahead. The celebration therefore should be a period of reflection, recollection and stock taking; a time for Nigerian women to revalue themselves in order to realized their God given potentials as well as re-define new strategies that will help them realized their dreams. This paper reviews the contributions of Nigerian women in the socio-economic and political struggle, not only in making Nigeria to find its feet as a viable nation, but also in making the female gender not only to be heard but also seen. A 100year has just rolled by. There are still rooms for more advocacies to re-awaken women to realize that, their role goes beyond the kitchen and the fun-fare that have come to becloud the concept of women empowerment. Given this context the paper recommends that, Nigerian women and advocates of women empowerment should sensitize and educate women on the need for girl-child education as this will transcend into socio-economic and political empowerment. It will improve the general wellbeing of Nigerian women and help them actualized their dreams of gender equality, and national development.

**Keyword:** *Women empowerment, Advocacy, Centenary celebration, Gender equality, National development.*

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### **Background to the Study**

Nigerian women like their counterparts in other African countries, make immense contributions to their society through, the tripartite roles of production, reproduction and community roles they play in ensuring the continuity of the social system (Bilkisu 2010). Ozon-Eson (2000), citing several sources corroborates that: "from time immemorial, women have always participated in social, political and economic development of all types of societies from the primitive times of hunting and gathering to the present industrial period. Notwithstanding, their contributions most times go unnoticed, devalued and not appreciated neither does the society has formal ways of remunerating them just like their male counterparts. This to a large extent is blamed on the patriarchal nature of African societies (Arop, 2014).

Thus, Nigerian women over the years have enthusiastically committed themselves to the progress and growth of the society despite being victims of male domination, bullying, sexual abuse, sexual violence, oppression, intimidation by in-laws, genital mutilation and most recently, abduction, insecurity and torment of every sort. Nevertheless, the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), brought a re-assessment of the roles played by women in their society. In Nigeria the awareness about the role played by the Nigerian women to Nation building gained momentum in the latter half of 1980 and the awareness was further enhanced as a result of the effective participation of women in the international conference in Beijing. Dr (Mrs.) Babangida Better Life Programme for rural women (BLP) started this process by mobilizing women from rural areas for greater participation in development processes. Subsequent administrations have made various attempts at empowerment of women also, President Jonathans' Transformation Agenda and his wife Patience Jonathan Women for Change Initiative was an indication of governments' commitment to positively better the lots of Nigerian women.

### **Objective of the Study**

1. This paper will examine some of the socio-economic and political contributions of Nigerian women over the years to Nation building.
2. The paper will state the need of Nigerian women to re-strategize to meet contemporary challenges.
3. Suggestions will be made on the ways to enhance the social, economic and political status of women in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This study relied mostly on secondary sources; library materials, interviews of scholars in related field of study and media discursions on gender issues.

### **Socio- Economic Contributions of Nigerian Women**

In Africa, patriarchy has contributed to relegating women to the background. The belief in most parts of Africa is that "it is a man s' world" he is simply the best, the man takes credit for creating wealth whereas the women are seen and describe as wealth consumers.

Economic emancipation of women has an adverse effect on the advancement of women and indeed the entire nation. Over the years there have been a glaring imbalance in access of Nigerian women to economic, social and political participation and this to a large extent is responsible for large majority of women living in poverty in developing countries and Nigeria in particular (Heyzer, 2014).

Traditionally, in Nigeria, women have been making contributions to the development of the society. At the family level, women act as housewives, mothers and in some cases heads of families. Women in Nigeria are faced with the challenge of caring for the overall wellbeing of all family members including the men, children and elderly ones (Dolphyne, 1991)

The Nigerian economy during the pre- colonial era was at the level of subsistence and women contributed effectively to this economy. Nigerian women during this era never had any formal training but, they were able to eke a living through local craft and trading; they participated in local and long distance trade in different parts of Nigeria. They were actively involved in development activities such as farming, agriculture and trading. Processing food, pottery making, in most states like Cross River, Ebonyi state, Delta rest largely on women; in Northern Nigeria for example, the women in purdah were involved in food processing and carried out trading activities through their children.

It was rare to find a woman who totally depended on her husband, most times in some families; it was the women who supplied the means of substance for the entire household. The economy of Nigeria during the colonial period was based on exportation therefore, the contributions of Nigeria women to economic growth of the nation was seriously undermined; and they were placed on a disadvantage position. The strategic economic role the women had played during pre-colonial era was greatly affected; the expatriate firms like Liver Brother, John Holt and United African Company (UAC) took over the markets that were previously dominated by the women. Women were unable to access medium and large scale loans for business and agriculture, the loans were given to their male counterparts who often times misapply these loan for other purposes than which the loans were mend for (Curtin 1964 cited in Attoe 1993).

Dolphyne (1991), posits that education as well as economic independence remains a major factor that can enhance the emancipation of women as well as enhance their self-esteem. During the colonial era fewer females were educated in Nigeria. The school curriculum emphasized clerical skills for boys and domestic science for girls. Women were trained to be good housewives rather than becoming income earners in the society. The school during this era had a hidden curriculum similar to Bowles and Gintis (1976) observation of schooling in capitalist America. For them the hidden curriculum helps in impacting submissive ideology that is, women who are uncritical, passive and docile.

However, Nigerian women during the post- colonial era assumed a privileged position especially, in the areas of agricultural production. This was partly as a result of the exodus

of able-bodied men to wage labour after independence. Nigerian women contributed about 50-70 percent of Nigeria's food requirement this means that women carried the burden of economic activities in Nigeria. Yet there is no comprehensive data about women's contribution to the economy. Only recently, had women had access to agricultural incentives and innovation. Ayu (1992), in the study of Berom women in Plateau State discovered that, the women were familiar with the benefit of improved agricultural technique which will increase yield. But, they had no access to these agricultural incentives and innovations. The same study also shows that women are deprived from accessing agricultural loans because, their husbands disapprove of the idea of loan. And that when they succeed to get these loans their husbands lure them and collect the monies and misappropriate the said monies.

### **Political Contributions of Women in Nigeria**

The history of political participation of women in Nigeria, have been captured by different authors and it reveals the dynamic role played by Nigerian women in politics from the pre-colonial to post-colonial periods. During the pre-colonial period Nigerian women played active, heroic and leading roles in shaping our society (Saliu, Amali, Feyeye and Oriola, 2006)

Adul (1995) cited in Ozon (2007) observed that, during the pre-colonial periods, courageous and reputable Nigerian women like Queen Amina of Zauzza, Daurama of Duara and Moremi of Ile-Ife made sacrifices in the service of their various communities. Also, in Yoruba land, women featured prominently. The obi for instance ruled his people with the assistance of a number of women called the ladies of the palace; a group consisting of eight titled ladies. Whereas in Borno women held very important offices in the royal family example, the office of the queen mother (Megira). Among the Fulanis, the titles of Nimwoye and Sagi were bestowed on the kings' mother, paternal aunt, sister or daughter. These women had great moral authority; they settled quarrels between women especially of noble background (Leburf A.M, 1974). In Igbo land, the Umuadas are given all respect and status, consulted on issues affecting their communities and their views were respected. They wield strong power in decision making in the Igbo communities etc. (Dolphyne F.A (1991)

According to Lebeuf (1974), the role of women in every political organization has to do with their participation directly or indirectly in activities of government or societies. Nigeria women from the South had right to vote in 1954, whereas their counterparts in western Nigeria got theirs in 1958. Nigerian women in spite of their voting right and Strength still play a minimal role in the political life of the nation.

Alubo (2012) agrees that women have been excluded from political process of this country. He maintained that their presence have been a mere tokenism. Looking at the history of political participation of women in Nigeria only three women were appointed in the 1950s into the house of Chiefs (Chief (Mrs.) Margeret Ekpo, Chief (Mrs.) Olufumilayo Ransome-Kuti and (Mrs.) Janet Makelu).

Also, since the attainment of Independence to the Second Republic, only one woman was present in 36 member cabinet, 9 females were elected to the federal cabinet and only 9 females out of 312 member elected in the House of Representatives. The government of Shehu Shagari appointed only two female ministers and only three female won as member of the House of Representative.

The unfortunate trend, continued throughout the subsequent military governments. The transition to civilian rule recorded a little improvement in terms of appointments. After the 2010 elections, Only 12 female out of 109 members of Nigerians elected into the senate whereas, 30 females were elected into the house of representative out of 359 member selected (Alubo,1912). The above situation is also common in other tiers of government as women remain grossly underrepresented. Considering the history of politics in Nigeria, it is obvious that the political environment has been unfavorable for Nigerian women right from the time Nigeria got her independence. Women have been a great pillar of support to political parties. But, they have been marginalized sooner or later after victory at the pools from political process, thereby depriving them from participating in decision making that affects them.

However, the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan made very remarkable efforts to bring women into lime light and make them relevant. He is described by most women as a gender friendly president. For the first time, in the history of this country after the 2003 election 10 females were appointed as Director General of key Parastatals whereas others also got appointed as Minister of Education, External affairs and Finance respectively. Also, the approval of the first female judge of the supreme court of Nigeria is indeed commendable.

Margaret F. (1845) one of the earliest female reporters in her book "Women in the Nineteenth century" maintained that individuals have unlimited capacities that, when people s' roles are define according to sex, then human development was severely limited. These women have distinguished themselves in their various callings.

Balogun (2007), corroborated that, the females who have been appointed to serve in key positions of government over the years in Nigeria have performed excellently when compared with their male counterparts. As such Nigeria women deserve more support and encouragement.

### **Re- strategizing to meet Contemporary Challenges**

For Nigeria women to meet the current challenges they must re-address the following pertinent issues such as education, politic as well as credit facilities available to women.

**Education:** Education remains a major factor that can enhance the emancipation of women as well as enhance their self- esteem. Poor education has impacted negatively on women's interest in politics. The education Nigerian women received during the colonial era contributed to lack of skills to compete effectively with their male counterpart in

politics. Women during the colonial days were only trained for vocational training like teaching, nursing and clerical work while men were trained as administrator and therefore exposed to public life. This to a large extent gave the man a great advantage over women.

Notwithstanding, educated women in Nigeria contribute in public life as doctors, engineers, judges, university lecturers/professors, bankers, administrators, accountant etc. these professional women according to Ekpo M. (2003) are barrier breakers who have defy the odd impose on them by society and have made and are still making valuable contributions to national development.

A more radical approach must be adopted to educate women in Nigeria. The importance of competent women for example in policy making can never be over- emphasized; they will assist ensure and promote the implementation of policies and programmes that will promote the welfare of women as well as make them participate in Nation building. The government of the day must take note and appoint more women into decision making bodies. Girl-child education is of utmost importance in our country Nigeria; it will help break the shackles of poverty and improve the dignity of the woman. The cultural and religious practices that serve as impediment to education of women must be abolish.

#### **b. Money Politic**

Despite the efforts of the past administration of Dr Goodluck Jonathan to increase the participation of women in politics (33%), but their presence is still describe as merely tokenism when we compare the population of their men counterpart involved in politics and occupying political positions (Sani 2005, Obafemi 2006 & Alubo 2012)

Women are excluded from strategic positions; they occupy positions that are not influential, as such, they lack the financial capability and power to control party goals and decisions, leaving the men to decide who gets what, where and how. Electioneering campaigns require huge amount of capital and women lack the financial strength to organize such campaigns. Also, God fathers of political parties are usually those who have invested so much in party politics most times the God fathers are the ones to decide who picks the ticket for election. They use their financial strength to continue to lead and dominate the political terrain. hence women must advocate for independent candidacy. Ifendu E. (2015)

Mrs Azeez on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014 during a television interview with Ayobe maintained that for Nigeria women to be able to command the financial muscle that men have they must be able to articulate, exhibit extra confidence in themselves and reach out especially to prominent women in private sector and women in Diaspora who may not be interested in contesting for political positions for sponsorship, mentoring and support. Also, the challenge of Nigerian women Trust Fund (NWTE), Women Affairs, NGO, Millennium Development Goal etc. have to do more in terms of support and education sensitization of women.

Unfavourable political environment has also contributed to poor participation of women in politics. Reasoning along this line, Alanana (2012) describe Nigerian politic as politic of do or die, mischief, wickedness and violence. For instance, during the may 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003 house of assembly elections Mrs Meimuna Joyce Katai a former commissioner for women affairs in Nasarawa state was brutally murdered when she attempted to prevent political thugs from seizing ballot boxes at a polling unit.

Therefore, the present Government, as a matter of urgency has to make the political environment favourable for Nigeria women. Criminalization, falsehood, evangelism of negativity and corruption must be fought to a standstill. Nigerian women are unable to Copt with the odd hours (12-3am) at which political meetings are held, most men are uncomfortable with their wives attending meetings at such odd hours Notwithstanding, women should form a formidable force, be optimistic and rather organize breakfast meetings to strategies and ensure that their plans work out.

Consequently, the obvious tokenism of women in government and decision making processes especially in the present an ministration of Muhammadu Buhari serve as a basis for evidence -based advocacy for equality to access government positions. Nigerian women over the years have succumbed to a narrow political scope (35%) in political appointment etc. even at that their hopes were dashed according to Ajayi. I (2016) when their much touted 35% affirmative action that was enshrined in the National Gender Policy of 2006 was dashed as only seven female were appointed as minister. The present structures should be change and the strategy redemption must go beyond the 35% in appointment. The present government must respect its commitment to the 17sustainable Development Goals aimed at transforming the world by 2030 of which goal 5 is specifically targeted at achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

Women must involve men in their issues and seek for justice and equitable representation of so that they can participate fully in policy making and governance. Hence, there is need for the government of Nigeria to incorporate the principle of equality of women and men in Nigeria's legal system and make the administration of justice system more women friendly. It is rather absurd that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century abducted Nigerian school girls are still languishing in Sambisa forest since 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2014faced with sexual harassment/ discrimination by their captors (Boko Haram).

Nigerian women as a matter of urgency must come together and rise to the occasion and form reform movements like their American counterpart during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to stop this inhuman treatment of women in our country. For Oby Ezekwensili former minister of education and leader of "bring back our girls" campaign of the chibok girls maintained that, Nigeria has to stop the culture of abduction. For her, abduction is a challenge to humanity and women in particular.

Therefore, there should be a revaluation of cultural views on the roles of women. The misleading notion that educated women are a threat to their husbands, society and associate should be erased.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

A survey of history shows that, in the past or the earlier forms of organization women occupied a preponderant position. In Africa legends and historical traditions especially among the Hausas of Nigeria women made wonderful exploits; they founded cities, conquered kingdoms and led migrations etc. The imposition of colonial system however, altered their role in the society as women found themselves systematically excluded from any form of participation in the affairs of the state. The material and psychological basis upon which the authority of women has rested crumbled and their privileges disappeared and the women were relegated to the background in all spheres of human endeavors (education, legal, politic, agriculture etc.)

After independence, concerted efforts were made to reposition Nigerian women and make them fully integrated in the society in order to participate fully in the development process. Dr (Mrs.) Babagida Better life programme for rural women (BLP) started this process by mobilizing women from rural areas for greater participation in the development processes. Subsequent administrations have made various attempts at empowerment of women especially, Mrs. Patience Jonathans' women for change Initiative was a good step in the right direction. She stated emphatically, during the lunch of this Initiative in July 2010 that the female gender must see themselves as agent of positive change and progress in the society which can be realized through her 35% Affirmative action. Significant achievements were made during their administration in appointment of women into executive, legislative and judicial positions.

Also, the efforts and contributions of women groups and ministries like National Council of women society (NCNC), Women in Nigeria (WIN), National Commission for Women (NCW), and Ministry of Women affairs and social Development, Nigeria women Trust Fund (NWTF) is quite commendable, they have worked assiduously to create avenue for women to be fully integrated and participate fully in the development process.

Therefore, 100years of Nigerian women has been a milestone, a period of long struggle to break the barrier imposed on them by the society. The believe that women can be seen not heard still lingers in the minds of most Nigerians therefore, there should be a continuous programme to engender the society to appreciate and commend the contributions of women, the Nigerian laws that are biased against women must be reviewed and there should be exhibition of women's' rights to increase public awareness.

Furthermore, as a matter of urgency Nigerian women must form themselves into formidable groups notwithstanding their differences in faith, language and tribe they must first and famous recognize their God given purpose in life and work harmoniously to achieve this purpose. Women should be intellectually liberated and should be bold and confident, and must aspire to use the opportunities before them to achieve their ambition in life. Women should also show keen interest and be fully involve in conflict resolution as insecurity, kidnapping and abduction remains a major challenge in Nigeria. The government should channels some of its resources from Paris club, fuel subsidy to finance



programme for women and children especially in the areas of agriculture, girl child education and training women on entrepreneurial skills as economic emancipation will transcend into other aspect of women development.

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