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## History and Historiography on Women and Politics in Nigeria

Iyanda Kamoru Ahmed, PhD<sup>1</sup> and Mohammed Ibrahim Bare<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Gashua, Yobe State, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of History, Yobe State University, Damaturu, Yobe State, Nigeria.

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on women and politics in Nigeria. It is a well-known fact that women all over the world are catalysts for development and change. Yet in the study of twentieth century Nigerian political history, the role of women has tended to be regarded as insignificant (Olojede, 1990). In fact, it has been 'relegated to the footnotes' (Mba, 1997). This is because the public domain has traditionally been associated with men, and the private with women. Women have only been marginally involved in the public, formal process of government and they did not generally hold positions of visible political authority. So, as Mba rightly argues, their political activity in the period had consisted mainly of attempts to obtain influence over those who held- such authority. Although this, in itself, is a form of political power, it is indirect. It is not as strong as the access to political participation which women had through a 'complex and sophisticated network of relationships, rights and control of resources'.

**Keywords:** Women, Politics, Political Power, Colonial Period and Post-Colonial Period, Nigeria.

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### 1. Introduction

The change in societal attitudes and laws towards women in the western world began in the first half of the 1800s, the period of social and political revolutions. Even then, it did not result in a large number of women wielding power prominently in the political affairs of their nations. The changes came gradually and through prolonged and consistent struggle. In recent times, the extent of women increased participation in the politics of their country is an indication of their ability to -effectively influence the political development of the nation.

In several countries, women politicians have aspired to hold high positions and even been elected as leaders. On the global scene, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri-Lanka made history in 1960 as the first woman to become an elected Prime Minister in the world. At about the same period, Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi became elected Prime Ministers of Israel and India respectively.

From the 1970s, the world began to witness the emergence of women political figures like Margaret Thatcher of Britain, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Corazon Aquino of Philippines and Violetta de Chamorro of Nicaragua as leaders of their countries. Remarkably, Gloria Arroyo became the second female President of the Philippines. In the more recent times, Hsiu-lien Annette Lu has become the Vice-President of the Republic of China (Taiwan). In Japan, Faeue

Ota became the first elected female governor in the State of Osaka. In Africa, Ms Ruth Perry of Liberia became the first African woman to head a government in 1997. She is the first black woman to hold such an important position of repute in Liberia, Charles Taylor the present Liberian Head of State narrowly defeated Ellen Shileaf Johnson in the last presidential election. In addition, Dr Specioza Wandira-Kazibwe of Uganda became the first woman elected Vice-President in Africa followed by Mrs Isatou Njie Saidu who is the elected Vice-President of Gambia. Winnie Mandela is noted for her active role in the political emancipation of South Africa.

## **2. Pre-Colonial Era**

In the pre-colonial era, there were different ethnic groups in Nigeria each with their distinct social and political structures. Therefore, the role of women differed from one ethnic group to the other. In general, there was a clear division of labour between men and women. Men carried the responsibilities of public duties, making them dominant in politics. However, there were exceptions where women in some communities emerged and played prominent roles in the political life of the various societies. These were women leaders who represented not only women but also men in the decision-making of their communities. Women's political powers varied from one society to another. In some societies women shared equal power with men, while in others their roles were complementary or subordinate.

In some traditional Igbo societies, there existed a dual political system which reflected the position of women. The latter had structures of political participation equivalent or parallel to those of the men. In such traditional Igbo societies for instance, women did not act as individuals; instead they were represented by various women groups. Their political participation was generally as a group that represented women in community matters. This enabled their voices to be heard from household to communal level. One of the major groups was the *Otu Umuada*, which comprised all the *umuada* (married daughters) who were dynamic, powerful and well respected by the community. In Igboland, wealth, wisdom and eloquence were highly revered qualities which gained prominence when considering a person for leadership position irrespective of age. The *umuada* extended its jurisdiction even beyond the village boundaries as women were married outside the *umunna* (native towns) to other neighbouring towns. The *umuada* exercised considerable political influence. They were arbiters in quarrels and played very prominent roles in establishing peace in the market and the community at large. They compelled debtors to pay their debt and slanderers to pay fines. There were in addition, various women organisations, which were active in mobilizing women for the welfare of the society. In some cases, they participated in political decisions and actions or showed some form of disapproval of conduct of their political leaders. Also among the Ika people of Delta State, women participated actively in local politics, where they exercised considerable power and authority.

## **3. Colonial Era**

The colonial era, which officially began around 1900 brought with it new policies that had detrimental effects on women. In 1914, Lord Lugard brought the Northern and Southern Protectorates together, leading to the amalgamation. As a result of this, different ethnic groups with different political concepts were merged together. The colonial rulers introduced new rules and regulations to govern their own colonies, and this drastically reduced women's participation in traditional political activities. The *Victorian* concept of the place of women in

society was introduced and this greatly contracted the public space which women occupied among different ethnic groups. As Olojede succinctly puts it, "Britain ruled its new territory based on its gender ideology of separate spheres for men and women" (1990: 84).

The colonial masters did not entertain or appreciate the political contribution of women. Women were denied access to education and participation in public affairs of the society. Co-education was not allowed. The missionaries established mainly boys' schools. The first boys' secondary school in Nigeria, the CMS Grammar School, was established in Lagos in 1859, while the first girls' institution was not-established until 1872. In fact, this was in response to the demand of parents in Lagos who wanted academic educational facilities for their daughters as well as their sons.

In the southern part of the country, women undertook activities of a more political nature. In 1929, there were women uprising and protests in the eastern part of the country. The Aba Women's Riot against the British Government was because of its apparent attempt to tax market women and its census counting. The reason adduced for the Aba Women's Riot appears to have been their political and cultural objection to taxation of women (Afigbo, 1966, 1972 in Mba, 1997), as well as their abhorrence of the system of indirect rule.

They also objected to the taxation of their men on economic grounds since they shared, the burden of taxation. Women were compelled to take this action because the colonial administration allowed them no other means of expressing their grievances. They rejected the whole system of indirect rule and employed their own traditional methods of protest, "*sitting on a man* to regain the political participation they had had in the pre-colonial society (Mba, 1997). The Aba Women's Riot of 1929 demonstrated the zeal of Igbo women to participate in the political life of their country and gain economic independence. It can be rightly stated that the Aba Women's Riot accelerated the women's demand for their political right.

In Western Nigeria, the colonial system of indirect rule had conferred unprecedented power on the traditional ruler's and excluded women from decision-making. The women took the initiative of organizing for political action through the Abeokuta Ladies' Club of Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, which later transformed into the Abeokuta Women's Union in 1946. This comprised both educated and illiterate market women. The objectives of this union were to, *inter alia*, 'help in raising the standard of womanhood in Abeokuta help in encouraging; learning among the adults and thereby wipe out illiteracy' (Mba, 1997: I 43).

The colonial administration did not recognize the role of *iyalode* as a link between the women and the government. Generally, the colonialists did not accept other women titles. Towards the end of the colonial era, women mounted more pressure on British officials through the use of petitions, propaganda, legal processes and the press to improve the positions of Nigerian women. The important feature of this period was that despite constraints and the marginalization, women in many parts of the country were able to fight for their rights. They succeeded in being acknowledged as a potent force in political issues. The emerging political parties encouraged women to join the movement. For example, Madam Pelewura's market women entered into an alliance with the Nigerian National Democratic Party led by Herbert Macauley. There were women like Hajiya Gambo Sawaba, Chief Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Humoani Alaga, Wuraola Esan, Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu who were part of the

political force that deliberated on our constitution and subsequently fought for Independence.

### **1. Post-Colonial Era: First Republic**

Nigeria became Independent in October 1960. The First Republic ushered in a renewed interest of women in politics. The potential political contribution of women was so valued that all the four major political parties had women's wings. Notable women like Hauwa Kulu Abata, and

Mrs Oyibo Odinamadu headed these women's wings. These women fought to secure a place of prominence in the political scene of the country. It was however, unfortunate that only few women emerged at the regional and federal levels when Nigerians became masters of their affairs after 1960.

In Southern Nigeria, women were given voting right in 1959. However, the marginalization of women prior to Independence resulted from lack of formal western education, and consequently access to elective office. It is worth noting that only Chief (Mrs) Wuraola Esan and Mrs Beatrice Kwango were nominated as senators in the First Republic.

### **1. The Second Republic**

The post-Independence Nigerian Constitution of 1979 established equal political rights for both male and female. It declared that every Nigerian who attained the age of eighteen is eligible to vote and be voted for. This new rule removed the gender discrimination in political participation, which the colonial administrators introduced and practised. During the Second Republic, Nigerian women were more involved in politics. There was a marginal increase in the number of female legislators at the federal level with the election of Princess Franca Hadiza Afegbua as the only female Senate member of that Republic.

It is very interesting to note that Senator Afegbua went into politics due to her humanitarian tendency, she felt compelled to enter the political arena in order to attract federal influence to her local government area, which lacked virtually all the basic necessities of modern living at that time. She launched the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in her ward in Ftsako Local Government Area of the then Bendel State. She became the women leader in her LGA and state and was also a member of the state and national executive councils of the party. She won the nomination from among eight interested candidates in her senatorial district. She later won her districts senatorial seat in the National Assembly, thus becoming the first democratically elected female Senator in Africa. While in the Senate, she served -in the Ministerial Screening Committee, and was very active. There were two female House of Representatives members. In the Second Republic, the first set of women ministers emerged. These included Mrs AdenikeEgun Oyagbola, Minister of National Planning, the first woman cabinet member; late Mrs Janet Akinrinade, Minister of State for Internal Affairs; Mrs Elizabeth Ivase, Minister of State for Education, late Dr Simi Johnson, and Youth and Social Development and Mrs Asinobi, Minister of State for Internal Affairs. It is pertinent to note that during the Interim National

Government of Chief Ernest Shonekan, women served as Secretaries of State which is equivalent to Ministers of States. These included Chief (Mrs) Bola Kuforiji-Olubi (Commerce), Mrs Laraba Dagash (Health) and Bimbo Akintola. In Northern Nigeria, there was a remarkable increase in the participation of women in politics.

For example, during the 1983 election, at least three women were elected into the Federal House of Representatives. These were Hajiya Kande Balarabe from Kano State (secretary general of the women's wing of the PRP), Mrs Sarah Dokotri and Mrs Elizabeth Wuyeb both from Plateau State. Also in the South, Mrs Sylvia Aisha Bakari from Cross River and Mrs Olivia Ogbajoh were elected into the legislative arm of government. Indeed, the national election of 1983 showed that the number of women in the House of Representatives increased and in fact more than doubled; from three in 1979 to eight in 1983.

At this time, women like Alhaja Basirat Ajiborisha became prominent politicians in Lagos and she was the first woman who contested for gubernatorial election in Lagos State under PRP. On the international scene, the 1985 Women's Conference in Kenya, which marked the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), re-echoed the international attention focused on women. The Conference urged member states to come to terms with the reality of women's participation in public and political life. In Nigeria, this resulted in a positive response at the national level. In 1986, the Babangida administration set up a political bureau, which drew up a political agenda for the return of the country to democratic rule. The Bureau of 19 members which had two women became a relevant organ for canvassing opinion from a wide spectrum of the Nigerian society on the socio-economic and political future of the country.

### **1. The Third Republic**

By the Third Republic, Nigerian women's participation in politics had greatly improved. Women mobilized themselves through seminars and conferences to gear themselves towards the transition programme. The long transition period witnessed a radical change in the involvement of Nigerian women in politics from the grass roots to the apex of executive offices.

Their zeal and commitment were demonstrated by the fact that at a time, three women were leading the National Republican Convention in Plateau, Lagos and Benue states. They were Helen Gomwalk - Plateau, Abosede Osinowo - Lagos and Susan Adagio - Benue. Although women were actively participating in the ongoing party politics, only three women emerged as governorship aspirants. Chief (Mrs) Titi Ajanaku of the Social Democratic Party came third in the governorship election in Ogun State out of ten male aspirants.

Chief Segun Osoba eventually became the governor. Mrs Oluremi Adiukwu of the National Republican Convention came second in the governorship election in Lagos State out of six male aspirants. Michael Otedola who eventually became the governor narrowly defeated her. Mrs Hanatu Chollom contested the gubernatorial election in Plateau State under NRC. In Cross River State, Cecilia Ekpenyong became deputy governor.

Nevertheless, there were fourteen elected women representatives in the National Assembly, one Senator and thirteen in the House of Representatives in the Third Republic (see Table 4 below).

**Table 4:** Name of female members **in the Nigerian National** Assembly 1992-1993.

#### ***SENATE***

| STATE        | NAME                        | NUMBER   |
|--------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Lagos        | Senator Kofo Bucknor Akerel | 1        |
| <b>Total</b> |                             | <b>1</b> |

### House of Representatives

| STATE        | NAME  | NUMBER    |
|--------------|---|-----------|
| Akwa-Ibon    | Hon Christine Akpan                           | 1         |
| Anambra      | Hon Iffeoma Chinwuba                          | 1         |
| Benue        | Hon (Mrs) Rebecca Apedzam Hon (Miss) Ada Mark | 2         |
| Borno        | Hon (Hajiya) Rabi Allamin                     | 1         |
| Cross River  | Hon (Mrs) Florence I. Ita-Giwa                | 1         |
| Edo          | Hon (Mrs) O. E. Giwa-Osagie                   | 1         |
| Katsina      | Hon Mariya Abdullahi                          | 1         |
| Niger        | Hon (Mrs) Hajara L. Usman                     | 1         |
| Ogun         | Hon (Mrs) O. O. Abiola                        | 1         |
| Osun         | Hon (Hajiya) Bola Sarumi                      | 1         |
| Plateau      | Hon (Hajiya) Amina M. Aliyu                   | 1         |
| Rivers       | Hon Dr Bolare Ketebu-Nwokefor                 | 1         |
| <b>Total</b> |   | <b>13</b> |

*Source:* Nigerian Women in Politics (1986-1993: 124).

The political activities of women in the Third Republic, can be summarized as follows: In 1992 out of 3 00 gubernatorial aspirants, nine were women and none of them won. Women held only four per cent of party executive posts. In 1991, only 27 (2.3%) of ' 1,172 legislators in the various Houses of Assembly were women. At all levels, women constituted only 3.99 per cent of SDP party executive and 4.32 per cent of NRC. Women constituted only two " per cent of members of House of Representatives in 1992, up from less than, one per cent in 1980.

### 1. The Fourth Republic

In the Fourth Republic, women showed great interest in contesting for elective public offices.

In the aborted transition programme of late Gen Sani Abacha, there were a number of women elected as councilors, local government chairmen, state and federal legislators. One of such women is Princess Vivian Anazodo who contested and won the chairmanship election for the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), In Lagos State, a total number of 12 women from the five registered political parties contested the election and four won. This level of participation and success represented about 30 per cent, an astronomical leap from less than one per cent recorded during the local government election.

Hajiya Mairo Habib and Hajiya Fati Tagwai contested the gubernatorial elections in Kaduna and Kano States respectively. Also, four women contested the State House of Assembly election and won in Imo State under the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP). In Kano State, Hajiya Naja'atu Mohammed emerged as the first female elected Senator under UNCP.

Hajiya Zainab Ogar was elected as a member of the Federal House of Representatives from Nasarawa State. In the FCT six women won in the House of Representatives election, including Hon Mrs Esther Audu. It could be argued by any standard, that Nigerian women had begun to muster the resources necessary for the attainment of their political goals. Women had begun to close the political gap between them and men, given their unprecedented success at the elections.

The noticeable fall, in comparison with flu- situation in the aborted Third Republic, can, be attributed to the fact that most of the women politicians had exhausted their resources in the previously cancelled primaries. This resulted in their financial incapability to compete with their male counterparts. In the December 5, 1998 local government and councillorship election, out of 8,810 councillors, only 143 were women, and out of 774 chairmen, only nine were women. This trend continued, in the subsequent election of governors and members of the House of Assembly. It is noteworthy that no woman emerged as governor. The State Houses of Assembly elections resulted in 12 women being elected out of a total of 983 members.. She is also the first female Speaker in Africa. The figures for elected officers by sex are shown in Table 5. **Table 5: Number of women elected in 1999 election**

| Election                 | Male  | Female | Total |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| L.G. Councillors         | 8,667 | 143    | 8,810 |
| Chairmanship             | 765   | 9      | 774   |
| State Houses Of Assembly | 971   | 12     | 983   |
| Deputy Governors         | 35    | 1      | 36    |
| Governors                | 36    | 0      | 36    |
| House Of Representative  | 343   | 12     | 355   |
| Senate                   | 105   | 3      | 108   |
| Vice President           | 1     | 0      | 1     |
| President                | 1     | 0      | 1     |

Sources: Independent National Electoral Commission, 1999.

Despite the spirited efforts put up by prominent women pol like Chief (Mrs) Titi Ajanaku, Chief Iyabo Anisulowo, Laila I Chief Joy Emordi, Oluremi Adiukwu and Dr Stella O. Dor woman emerged as governor. There is however, one femalegovernor in the person of Chief (Mrs) Kofo Akerele Bucki Lagos State, three Senators - Mrs Khairat Abdulrazaq-Gv (Abuja Municipal Area Council), Chief (Mrs) Ita Giwa River' State) and Mrs Stella Omu (Delta Central). Out members, there are only twelve female legislators in the He Representatives namely, Lynda Ikpeazu (APP, Anambra), P Oyefoluke Ette (AD, Osun), Febisola Adeyemi (AD, Ondo), Almona-Isei (APP, Delta), Binta Garba-Koji (APP, Kaduna), I Odujinrin (AD, Lagos), Iquo Inyang (PDF, Akwa- Ibom), Gbe Fowora (APP, Kwara), Temi Harriman (APP, Delta), Or Abiola-Edewor (AD, Lagos), Florence D. Aya (PDP, Kadun Mary Edoni (PDP, Bayelsa). A total of twelve women emerged members of State Houses of Assembly. Also, out of 765 *chairman of* local government council, only nine are women while 143 emerged as councillors. The above figures show a considerable commitment to, and indication of, a move

towards the integration of women into the mainstream of national development. A cabinet reshuffle in February, 2001 ushered in Ms Boma Bromilow Jack as the Minister of Culture and Tourism, bringing the number of female cabinet Ministers in this administration to three.

This recent development has shown that women are now being regarded as capable of heading important and sensitive ministries in Nigeria. For instance, in the last military regime, Chief (Mrs) Onikepo Akande was Minister of Industry, the first female in the nation's history to occupy such position. DrKema Chikwe became the first female Minister of Transport and now of Aviation. This is remarkable because men have for a long time dominated these ministries. At the state level, there is a good number of women as commissioners. Also, at the local government level, there are elected female councillors, supervisory councillors and chairpersons.

## **2. Conclusion: Problems and Prospects**

The reason for the relatively marginal increase in the participation of women in active politics from the pre-colonial period to the present day, may be attributed to several factors, particularly "the aura of roughness associated with partisan politics, the heavy capitalization of electioneering campaign and the traditional and eukural attitudes to politics" (Sani, 1998: 4). These factors have impacted so negatively on women's interest in politics that few women want to contest for seats in the Senate, House of Representatives, and run for governorships as well as local government councillorships. The issue of women under-representation in politics can be first and foremost linked to the attitude of the colonial administrators. On the other hand, many women lack the skills to compete effectively with men in politics as a result of the advantage men have over women with regard to early formal education.

In conclusion, no one will dispute the fact that women are grossly under-represented in our political setting. It is also important to note that Nigerian women are politically active, but their activism has not always been rewarded with commensurate share of political power. Neither in party political positions nor in elective positions do we find women in a number comparable to their numerical strength in the national population.

Finally, the time has come in this twenty first century for Nigerian women to rise up to the task of protecting their interests and galvanizing each other to ensure more relevance within the political system of the country.

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