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Assessment of Women’s Participation in Community Leadership Role for Rural Development in Imo State

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The issue of advancement of women's rights and status is central to contemporary discourse in the quest for accelerated sustainable development. Community leadership is an important channel through which changes are affected in rural areas. The paper was an empirical study, which focused on women’s participation in community leadership in rural communities of Imo State. The leadership of Community Government Council (CGC) instituted by the Imo State government was the central focus. A well structured questionnaire was administered to capture the factors that constrained women’s participation in the leadership roles of Community Government Council (CGC) of Imo State. The data were analysed with simple descriptive statistical tools. The study found that women's participation in the Community Government Council leadership role was low and prejudice was among the most influential factors that constrained women's participation in the CGC leadership role. The paper recommended that robust advocacy and reorientation were crucial at the grassroots to reduce prejudice against women.

Key words: Women, Participation, Political leadership, leadership Role, Community Development.

INTRODUCTION

All over the globe, the issue of advancement of women’s rights and status in social, economic and political context is central to contemporary discourse in the quest for accelerated sustainable development. In Africa, women are acknowledged to constitute a significant proportion of the population. Their contribution towards human and society development cannot be ignored. In recognition of this, the United Nations declared the period 1976-1985 as a Decade for Women's Development, which culminated in the 1985 UN Nairobi conference in Nairobi Kenya (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). These were meant to advance the rights and status of women in all facets of life. The UN proclamation has motivated various other conventions aimed at improving the lots of women everywhere across the globe. Examples are the United Nation’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing China, in 1995, and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) among others. Since then, gender issues have been integrated in conferences, seminars and workshops at all levels to stimulate gender-sensitive approach to social, economic and political developments. Despite the various institutions, declarations and policies aimed at eliminating inequities in all facets of life, available literature showed that women are still under-represented in leadership positions in Nigeria (Ikpe 2004). This is regardless of existing evidence of various women's excellent performance in leadership positions both in the past and present.

Generally, although in contemporary society the male counterparts still dominate leadership positions, available literature showed that in some countries women have struggled to gain top political leadership positions. For instance, Mrs Margaret Thatcher became Great Britain’s first woman Prime Minister; Mrs Mary Robinson became a woman President in the Republic of Ireland; Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is presently the President of Liberia. It is also on record that women have successfully occupied topmost political leadership positions.
positions in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Philippines and Israel among others (Anifowose, 2004).

Similarly in Nigeria, although there is a continuing trend of male domination of leadership positions, some Nigerian women have successfully gained top positions that were exclusively reserved for men in all facets of life and excelled. For example, the excellent leadership qualities exemplified by Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi of Ile Ife, Daurama of Duara, and presently in the personalities of Janet Mba, Ndidi Okereke Onyiuke, Diezani Alison Madueke, Dora Akunyili and Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, to mention just a few, cannot be ignored. These women have variously proved in their respective domain that women possess unique potentials for leadership. This has negated the idea that the proper role of women is domestic, which includes marriage, procreation and family politics. It has also brought the persistent hegemony of men to question.

The Copenhagen (Denmark) Declaration on Social Development of 1995 stated among other things that (i) social and economic development cannot be secured in a sustainable way without the full participation of women and (ii) equality and equity between women and men is a priority for economic and social development (Unanka, 2013). It is also acknowledged that women are usually more totally committed to work and are less destructive and animalistic than their male counterpart (Olatundun, 2002). Nigerian women are also described as strong, intelligent and highly supportive of their male counterpart (Natsa, 2015). Ebosele (2015) observed that countries and companies with higher levels of gender equality have higher socio-economic growth and development.

On the other hand, studies have shown that societies with large, persistent gender disparities pay the price of more poverty and deprivations among other things (Nwagbara, 2003). In spite of these observations, available literature, for instance (Aina, 2004; Okafor and Akokuwebe, 2015), reveal that the level of participation of women in politics and leadership role is still low in Nigeria. Certain factors such as obnoxious socio-cultural practices, dehumanizing treatment of widows, exclusion from family inheritance, poor access to education (Aina, 2012), stereotype, traditional roles of women (Okafor et al., 2011), lack of funds, lack of family support, lack of party internal democracy, electoral violence, lack of self confidence, misconception that women do not get along or support each other (Natsa, 2015), have been identified as barriers to women's participation in Politics and leadership roles in Nigeria. Eliminating these barriers is a crucial step towards achieving meaningful rural development in Nigeria.

Rural development is a process of extending the benefits of development to rural areas in order to improve the socio-economic life of rural dwellers. Community Government Council (CGC) is a fourth tier government established by the government of Imo State on 16th of August 2012 for speedy rural development. Basically, this is aimed at involving the long neglected rural dwellers in grassroots government to determine their affairs for effective rural development. In relation with this idea, every autonomous community in Imo state was mandated to elect officers (leaders) to form the Community Government Council. The positions that were available to be filled in each community include: secretarial, women’ leadership, youth leadership and community leadership positions.

The importance of women’s participation in leadership roles for the socio-economic development of the society has been widely acknowledged by various researchers. The level of participation of women in the leadership roles of Community Government Council established by the present administration in Imo State is so far unknown. This calls for an empirical investigation to unravel the reality. The broad objective for this study therefore is to assess the level of women’s participation in community leadership role for rural development in Imo State.

The specific objectives include to: (i) assess the level of participation of women in Community Government Council of Imo state (ii) identify the main factor that constrains women's participation in the leadership role of CGC and (iii) make recommendations based on the findings.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal feminism looks for explanation of gender inequalities in social and cultural attitudes (Giddens, 2006). For instance in Nigeria, generally women are believed to be inferior or second class creature. They are perceived as a weaker vessel, not capable of managing tough positions. Political culture and activities in Nigeria are characterized with violence. Consequently, people perceive women as not suitable to hold or manage leadership positions in such situation. Women are mainly encouraged and are known to play supportive role in Nigerian politics. Okafor and Akokuwebe (2015) observed that since independence in 1960 that women’s participation in electoral politics has been limited to providing support to male politicians. According to feminists’ liberal theory, males have traditionally occupied positions of power and authority in society and have an investment in maintaining their privileged roles (Giddens, 2006). Equal opportunities for women in political leadership role can therefore be secured through legislation and other democratic means. In conclusion, there is need to re-pattern the existing political system to gradually eliminate all discriminatory acts, beliefs and attitudes against women in Nigerian politics. The use of quota and
proportional representation (Okafor and Akokuwebe, 2015) is a critical step towards achieving equality in politics.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in rural areas of Imo State, Nigeria. Imo State occupies a total land mass of 5,100sq km and has a population of 3,934,899 (NPC, 2006). It has 27 local government areas grouped into three agricultural zones viz Orlu, Owerri and Oyigwe. The data were collected through official documentary source that contains a list of the appointees of Community Government Council (CGC) instituted by the Imo State government in the 637 autonomous communities of Imo State. This was used to assess the level of women’s participation in the leadership positions. Further, a total of 300 copies of a well structured questionnaire were distributed to elicit information on the main factor that hinders women’s occupation of leadership positions. Due to financial constraint, twelve local government areas were randomly selected out of the twenty seven local government areas in Imo State. These include Ideato North, Isiaba Mbano, Ikeduru, Isu, Mbetaoli, Nkwerre, Oguta, Aboh Mbaese, Owerri North, and Onuimo local government areas. Two autonomous communities were randomly selected from each of the selected local government areas. 15 opinion leaders, which included males and females, were selected from each of the selected autonomous communities, using snow ball sampling technique. This gave a total of 300 respondents that were used for the study. However, at the end a total of 287 were completed and returned, and this formed the sample size for the second part of the study. The data were analysed with simple descriptive (frequency, percentage and bar chart) statistical tools.

RESULT

The result in the table below shows that the level of participation of women in the leadership role of CGC was very low, only 26.8% of the leadership positions were occupied by women while 72.7% of the leadership positions were occupied by their male counterparts. This confirms the findings of (Aina, 2004; Aniwofose, 2004; Okafor and Akokuwebe, 2015) that the level of participation of women in politics and leadership roles is still low in Nigeria.

The result from the bar chart below shows that among the factors identified as limiting women’s participation in leadership positions, traditional beliefs that encourage gender stereotype and prejudice against women, was the greatest, accounting for, 74.4% of the responses. Other factors identified in their order of importance include: apathy on the side of women, 5.8%, disunity among women, 4.6%, women’s poor economic status, 3.4%, and low educational qualification which accounted for only 2.4% of the responses. However these other factors were found to be insignificant as factors limiting women’s participation in the leadership role of CGC.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Aniwofose (2004) observed that the representation of women in positions of leadership in the three tiers of government in Nigeria in the last three decades has been low, hovering around 2%. He was of the view that the appointment of women into political offices, has been characterized and motivated by “tokenism” and that women in positions of authority find themselves working in groups that are predominantly male, thereby aggravating their feeling of marginality. According to Ritzer (2008) women are situationally less empowered than men for self-actualization. He also argued that women’s location is not only different from, but also less privileged than or unequal to that of men. Men and women assume different positions in terms of power, prestige and wealth irrespective of the fact that both of them make important contributions to the survival of human society.

Similarly, the findings of this paper confirmed that the level of participation of women in the leadership role of Community Government Council of Imo State was very low. Considering the numerical strength and enormous contributions of women in the socio-economic wellbeing of rural people, improving women’s participation in the leadership of Community Government Council is more promising for the development of rural communities. Women's participation in the leadership role is more likely to engender decisions that can reduce poverty, protect family life, raise educational and moral standards, fight corruption and is less likely to tolerate violence, corruption and war in rural communities. There is therefore urgent need to correct this anomaly in the composition of the Community Government Council of Imo State if we desire to achieve a meaningful rural development. Based on this, it is recommended that all forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against women should be discouraged through advocacy, re-orientation and policy institutions, especially through religious leaders, traditional rulers, opinion leaders and community organizations. This is to encourage the female folks to be more actively involved in leadership roles in their communities. All policies instituted in relation to this should be strictly implemented. Women on their part should shelve the spirit of apathy and be more determined to improve their lots politically and otherwise. They should also
Table representing Gender Distribution of CGC leaders in 637 Autonomous Communities of Imo State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Leader</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Leader</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Leader</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bar chart Representing factors that constrain women’s occupation of leadership positions

encourage and support one another to participate in political leadership roles where they can take part in making decisions that concern them.

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