

## **GENDER EQUALITY IN GOVERNANCE: IMPERATIVES FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

**Joseph Bekeh Undie<sup>1\*</sup>, Fidelis Isomkwo Aboh<sup>2</sup> & Cornelius Etianghe Omang<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Studies and Civic Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science,  
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department of Economics and Political Science Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science,  
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

\*josephbekeh49@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the critical role of gender equality in governance as a pathway to sustainable democracy and development in Nigeria. There is still, in perpetuation, gender bias in governance. This is largely due to the existing socio-cultural structure and practices that perpetuate anti-democratic ideals and hinder development in our contemporary world. Undoubtedly, these practices, which are self-injurious and retrogressive, terribly place women in a questionable incapacitation that makes them unable to harness their latent endowment for their benefit and the society at large. This has made it imperative to advocate for a departure from this archaic, primordial, and non-progressive practice of not allowing them to offer what they have in complementarity. Consequently, the paper focused on the plight of women in governance/political leadership; participation of women in governance/political leadership; patriarchy and other factors militating against women's participation in governance/political leadership; arguments against women's participation in governance/political leadership; and arguments for women's participation in governance/political leadership and strategic ways to encourage and increase women's participation in governance/political leadership.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Governance, Political Leadership, Democracy, Development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the ages of human society, women have suffered terrible consequences of the socio-cultural structure and practices that have undoubtedly affected the extent to which their potentials are harnessed in governance/political leadership. Even with the efforts of the UN, the reality of political inequality is still visible. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF, nd), women constitute 51% of the world's total population, which means they are the majority yet are powerless and suffer subjugation, discrimination, bias and exclusion in many spheres of life, not excluding governance/political leadership and industries as being established by cultural norms and practices, attitudes and values.

It is evident in many ancient and modern societies, as women have, from primordial times, been suffering from all these practices that have kept them incapacitated (Owofeso & Odeyemi, 2014), which, in a way, is seen in governance/political leadership and industries throughout ages and almost in all cultures. The African system, especially, is patriarchal and authoritarian and constitutes the bane of women's participation in governance/political leadership. These extant socio-cultural structures and practices, which perpetrate gender bias in governance/political leadership, are holistically responsible for the forms of trivialisation, marginalisation, and underrepresentation of women in governance/political leadership. Statistics gathered on the positions of women in governance and political leadership, as well as their underrepresentation, are not encouraging.

Gender, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018), is the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men (rather than biological). Thus, this paper focuses on one of the gender issues of women, which deals with practices that establish discrimination and gender role inequalities between men and women. Gender issues encompass all the inequalities that women suffer, and one of them is political inequality. Political inequality is seen in a political system where individuals or groups have greater influence and control over the political decision-making process and the unequal dividends that accompany that, which runs contrary to the basic tenet of a democratic culture that all citizens, irrespective of socioeconomic standing, gender, or political or religious affiliation, should be given equal opportunity to influence the decision-making process (Lawrence, 2025).

For democracy and development to thrive in a political system, the effort must be geared towards understanding how this gender inequality operates and strategising on how to enthrone gender equality. Gender equality, according to Gender Equality in Ireland (2014:1), is “when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and the decision-making process, and when the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of men and women are equally valued and favoured”. Gender equality, concerning the thrust of this paper, is achieved when there is equal representation of men and women in governance/political leadership positions and made possible when both genders are equally mobilised to participate in the decision-making process that determines who gets what in a governmental political system and industries. For gender equality to be guaranteed, it must be made on the agenda of the concerned and influential individuals, civil society, and the government.

In the context of this paper, governance and political leadership are used as parallels, though they have different original meanings. Governance, according to WordPress.com (2019), has been broadened in meaning by some authorities, not only the public sector (state actors and institutions) but also the private sector (households and companies) and civil society (non-governmental organisations), because their functions are interconnected in the process of governance. This description is good in this context, as gender inequality, which this paper is written against, is seen to be practised in all these sectors. Also, because it implies a departure from the traditional hierarchical exercise of power by the government to the contemporary meaning of 'dispersed and relational power in governance', which now means decentralisation, collective participation, facilitation and regulation and inter-sectoral management (WordPress, 2019:1). The source went

further also to state that the essence of governance is to steer all the governmental political mechanisms to harness and make effective use of the state's resources for the common good of all. This description of governance extends to the devolution and participatory (both men and women) steering of the governmental political mechanisms and apparatuses in society to achieve the will of the state.

It is imperative to understand that effective utilisation of resources in a state can only be possible when there is democracy in operation. Democracy welcomes popular participation where every adult citizen's voice, irrespective of background, status, and sex, counts. It is a system of government in which the supreme power in a political system resides with the populace and is exercised by them either directly or indirectly through elected representatives. It is only when there is democracy in operation in a political system that development can be guaranteed, especially now that, for some decades, we have not experienced any remarkable achievement but bad governance, as we are presently suffering from it.

Nigeria is variously blessed but ill-fated with bad leadership. The prevailing hardship suffered by Nigerians is a result of this. It is a consequence of the practice of anti-democratic ideals, which leads us to nowhere but retardation of national development. We have been on the path of retrogression owing to some undemocratic government policies. Policies that do not enable collective participation cannot allow the best to emerge as leaders but in a perpetual practice of inequality and exclusivity. How our leaders handle the issue of diversity and inequality leaves much to be questioned.

Development is a process and a phenomenon in which there is a remarkable improvement in the economy and political and socio-cultural life of the citizenry. According to Israel (2018), development is a process that creates growth, progress, positive change, or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social, and demographic components. How can development be experienced in a situation where women are conspicuously under-represented, marginalised, and discriminated against in workplaces and governance/political leadership? This practice has posed many problems by clogging the wheels of development in a nation, as it introduces dysfunction and retrogression in the society since their potentials are not maximally harnessed in this scenario. Perhaps our society is not yet better off with the bad leadership we are experiencing, which could be a consequence of the incapacitation of women in all the areas where they suffer in society.

It is safe to maintain that the possibility of having social peace, stability, progress, and development in a society without incorporating women into the mainstream is still, to some extent, a mirage. It is no surprise that, owing largely to the under-representation and exclusion of women in the political decision-making process, there now exists aberrational action. Until we understand that inequality threatens democracy, development, and effective leadership, we cannot achieve the right results. Inequality has always been a source of conflict, which often degenerates into insecurity, thereby occasioning political rancour, dysfunctional democratic mechanisms, and development becoming difficult to achieve amidst this, as well as the enthronement of bad leadership.

However, there has been increased advocacy and demand for gender equality in male-dominated areas. The United Nations is at the forefront of fighting to eliminate all practices that militate against women in their effort to harness their potential. In pursuing this, the UN has established agencies or bodies that attend to gender issues, together with the institution of various monumental conventions that are working on this cause.

### **The plight of women in governance/political leadership**

The case of political inequality in Nigeria is a paradox such that, despite the conventions, charter, policies, and constitutional provisions that the country is involved in their creation, women have not been fully involved in governance/political leadership as expected (Edinyang, Undie & Adams, 2018). Certainly, Nigeria is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration; approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the OAU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; and the National Policy on Women (NPW), which was adopted in 2000, but surprisingly, the educational, economic, social and political rights of women have not yet been remarkably achieved and guaranteed as ratified.

Evidence from our past elections has shown how women are underrepresented in politics. It is not even better in appointments: there has not been any woman as resident electoral commissioner, head of the army, navy or air force, and none as inspector-general of police. During Obasanjo's administration, 1999-2000, only 6 women were ministers, and 46 were men. Yar'Adua's administration had 37 ministers, out of which six were women.'. These are a few examples in Nigeria (Akpochofo, 2009).

Punchng.com (2019) reported that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) expressed its disappointment concerning the low level of women in politics despite the efforts to facilitate their participation. INEC stated that out of 292 women who contested for different political offices in the 2019 general elections, only 62 were elected. This constrains growth and effort in the reduction of poverty. Thus, the breakdown of the figures given by INEC: 7 women were elected into the Senate; 11 were elected into the House of Representatives; 4 were elected as deputy governors; and 40 were elected into the 36 Houses of Assembly. In comparative percentage representation, we have 4.17% in the 2019 general elections against 5.65% in the 2015 general elections to the National Assembly. From the figures, it should be understood that more effort needs to be put into reversing the trend. The plight is still the same in Tinubu's administration until 2025. In his attempt to reconstitute his cabinet for efficiency, he ended up as a setback for women in politics. Seven women in his cabinet represent 15 per cent, below the 35 per cent threshold he has pledged during his campaign. This limited representation portrays a persisting challenge in Nigerian politics, which borders on the underrepresentation of women in political offices in Nigeria (The Pointer, 2024).

More so, it is ironic that women, who make up a greater percentage of the world's population than men, are sitting on the fence due to their under-representation or non-involvement in governance/political leadership, as caused by socio-cultural structure and practices.

**Patriarchy and other factors militating against women's participation in governance/political leadership**

It is noted, as already stated, that in the world over, there exists gender bias in the encouragement and involvement of women folk in governance/political leadership. This is blamed on patriarchy expressed in cultural norms, practices, attitudes and values we operate in a society that dictates the authoritarian nature of our society (Edinyang, Undie & Adams, 2018). Nigeria is not an exception as a country where women have gone through questionable ordeals right from the beginning of human society. Patriarchy is a socio-cultural practice in which a man exercises his authority over a woman. In this, a man dominates a woman by even dictating to her how she lives her life, as he is the head of the family. The woman has no volition to act contrarily to the man. In the event of acting otherwise, it results in some discipline and punishment. This sociocultural structure and these practices have made women vulnerable, marginalised, excluded and rudely subjugated to a level in which they are found in no impressive numbers in governance/political leadership.

Women in Third World countries are largely treated as second-class citizens, facing all forms of discrimination in governance/political leadership. In a patriarchal society, women lack the temerity to question the gender bias practised in governance/political leadership, which perpetuates the inequality seen in incapacitating them in a suffocating manner. As a result of this, we now have the feminists' struggle.

Religion is an impediment that prevents women from participating in governance/political leadership. Islamism has usually been accused of this practice. However, many Islamic states have begun to see the need for women's participation as complementary and not a form of equality (Tonnessen, 2018). Some dominant Christian faiths also abhor the political participation of both men and women. Relevant facts on the question of the plight of women that hinder them are extracted from the United Nations publication in Akpochafo (2009):

- 70% of the world's 1.3 billion poor people are women (whereas politics, especially in Nigeria, requires financial and material resources).
- Women (only) hold 11.7% of the seats in the world's parliament.
- 60% of the world's nearly one billion illiterate adults are women (whereas literacy is a necessity for effective representation and participation in governance/political leadership).
- 130 million children worldwide are not in school, and two-thirds are girls.
- Women are not allowed in some establishments to get married or pregnant because it is believed that it will reduce their productivity.
- Women have fewer choices, control, autonomy, and lifestyle.
- Women have less access to resources: money, credit, training, free time, and employment.
- More so, other ancillary causes, as summarised by Akpochafo (2009), are as follows:
- The combined effects of religion, culture and tradition. E.g., Muslim women's purdah incapacitates their involvement in politics.
- Ignorance of their (women's) rights limits their possibilities and chances in politics. Two-thirds of the children who are not in school are girls.
- Lack of money to finance electioneering activities.

- Politics is time-consuming, and combining it with their roles as wives and mothers is difficult to practice. Again, no man easily allows his wife to attend political meetings at night, especially with the playing of politics of vendetta, evident in the encouragement, recruitment and sponsoring of political propagandists and thugs to maim and kill their political opponents (Undie, 2016). These political godfathers have monopolised political power and influence in the oppression of others (Enu, Undie, Odey, 2019).
- Disunity, lack of support, and resentment of feminine leadership are common among them.

### **Argument against women's participation in governance/political leadership**

Here are some arguments against women's participation in governance/political leadership. To start with, some sociologists cling to the idea that to justify the position of women in society, women introduced sin to mankind in the Garden of Eden; therefore, God pronounced judgment (Genesis 3:16):

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. 3:16

This has provided a clue and justified the male chauvinists in their perpetuation of subordinating women to men and ensuring their under-representation in the governance/political world. Understandably, women have become complacent with their plight, as some have been made to believe that their plight is primordial and divinely instituted. This makes many shy away from confronting and challenging the status quo, making them lack confidence, which incapacitates their participation in governance/political leadership.

### **Imperativeness and arguments for women's participation in governance/political leadership**

Women are agents of change. They are complementarities to men, as men cannot do it alone. For a nation to develop with good governance, it must be encouraged by removing all barriers that put it in a difficult situation. Nigeria has not developed as expected because human resources have not been fully utilised, considering the exclusion of women in the governmental political system. For democratic dividends to be maximally harnessed, women must be encouraged to participate keenly in governance/political leadership. This helps to strengthen political institutions to exist up to their responsibilities as well, making these institutions function within the ambit of ethics and morality (Enu, Undie & Odey, 2019).

It has become a global concern for women to have meaningful participation in governance/political leadership, starting from the grassroots to the state and national levels. The fight for the inclusion of women in governance/political leadership is a worthwhile struggle and a necessity. Pepera (2018: 1) agreed that 'women's political participation results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizens' needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines and a more sustainable future'. Furthermore, the involvement of women in public affairs has helped bring about policy decisions that are specific to women, which, otherwise, would have been left unaddressed.



The Australian Human Rights Commission (2011) states that the complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields. More so, involving women in economic, social, and political life is imperative in the reduction of poverty, improving the well-being of women and putting in place fair, safe and secure communities. It is undoubtedly known that idle youths are tools in the hands of recruiters of enemies of the state; therefore, involving women in governance makes them become economically empowered as this helps the labour market (Undie, 2015). Also, this enables women's voices to be heard at all levels and stages of the peace process.

Regent Business School (2024) maintained that women leaders lead by embracing empathy, improving communication, and promoting inclusivity, making organisations better positioned to thrive in a dynamic environment that fosters greater inclusivity, innovation and overall success. This has benefited male leaders who have adopted these practices, as they have been successful. In the same vein, Wyser (2024) asserted that numerous studies support the assertion that women possess unique strengths beneficial to leadership. Collaboration is the hallmark of effective leadership, and women naturally excel in this area, while inclusivity, innovative culture, emotional intelligence, and effective communication, which women leaders possess, are not left out.

The importance of involving women in governance can be seen in the few examples of a few notable women in colonial Nigeria, namely Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, and Margaret Ekpo, who participated in the Aba Women's Riot of 1929. In modern times, we can experience how women's involvement during Obasanjo's administration (1999-2007) improved governance outcomes, diversity and representation. We had women of integrity and abilities whose leadership in governance had impacted so much in our society: Dora Akunyili of blessed memory, Ngozi Iweala, Patricia Ette, among other unannounced women of substance; in the Diaspora, Margaret Thatcher of Britain, Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia (Edinyang, Undie & Adams, 2018). It is evident enough to understand that men cannot do it alone. Once more, women are an indispensable complement in governance/political leadership.

### **Way forward on how to encourage and increase women's participation in governance/political leadership**

Fundamentally, education remains one of the most effective instruments for correcting social problems. Education equips women with the knowledge and skills needed to fight their cause. Thus, to ensure a remarkable increase in the literacy and educational attainment of girl-children in schools that will make them politically conscious and active, it is understood that women suffer inequalities because they lack the education that would have given them the political, economic and socio-cultural power to compete favourably with men in all walks of life. If they were not incapacitated to a level where they are bereft of the powers above, some would have been important figures in society with transnational impact. More so, if they were oriented to see the importance of education and enabling and effective policies and systems instituted to favour their education, some of the problems, ranging from personal, family to societal, would not have been on the scale they are.

However, the following efforts must be put in place:

- Justice and equity should be highly considered when distributing educational opportunities.
- Quotas of scholarships and bursaries should favour female children rather than males.
- Aggressive public enlightenment and sensitisation on the indispensability of girl-child education should be carried out with all commitment and seriousness.
- Ways of dispensing and running adult basic education targeted at women should be devised, and existing ones overhauled.
- If we are serious, there should be a purposeful and committed policy put in place to recruit and train committed teachers who are sensitive to the plight of women, bordering on the inequalities they suffer. These teachers may be role models to them and will teach them to move away from being politically hesitant and inactive to being politically conscious and active. Also, they should be taught to be adequately aware of their rights and ways in which they can defend themselves when they are violated.
- Agents of socialisation should intensify their efforts to enlighten, orient, motivate, and boost the morale of female children so that they consider education an indispensable option in their lives.
- Concerned private individuals, groups, and humanitarian/civil society organisations with education-related mandates should work synergistically to increase awareness of the need for girl-child education.

For maximum utilisation of their potential in governance, the following steps are to be taken that can guarantee increased participation of women in governance/political leadership:

- A 35% affirmative action statute ratified to improve and increase women's opportunities to be represented in government offices and political offices should be backed by effective political will and made to be followed strictly, not in principle, as it is obtainable in our political system.
- Sensitising the men who operate the system that puts women at a disadvantage is needed. They should be made to know that this practice is no longer fitting in this contemporary society, as it is self-injurious and regresses society in many aspects.
- Effective legislation and policies are needed to prevent early marriages. Early marriage likely kills and makes it dormant and under-develops the leadership potential of the victims of this practice.
- Civil society organisations, especially gender-based ones, should intensify and expand their modes of operation and ways of propagating the message to end this.
- There should be electoral reforms in our polity and in every organisation that will guarantee proportional representation systems.
- Deliberate leadership training should be organised for women regularly at all levels of society.
- Community mobilisation of women should be organised by forming women's groups and advocacy programmes.
- In gender-sensitive institutions, women's causes and committees can be constituted.
- Providing economic opportunities by supporting women's entrepreneurship and special recruitment exercises can go a long way.



- All women's associations fighting for this cause should form a synergy to become more formidable in their cause of action. Female elites/leaders have a significant role in actualising this cause.
- The media must set an agenda, particularly on women's participation in governance and politics, to galvanise women toward the actualisation of this mandate.

## Conclusion

Efforts have been directed to considering what has placed women in the circumstances they find themselves in in our society. The patriarchal and authoritarian socio-cultural structure is the bane of women. Existing in a civilised society, it calls for the abandonment of these practices that are doing us no good but occasioning retardation of democratic process and development in all aspects of life, which is all about gender inequality, discrimination, roles and bias. Development in a nation cannot be complete without women's potential as a complement to men's efforts. The societal burden would continuously be too heavy for the men to bear if the women are not incorporated into the mainstream to contribute their quota to national development, especially now that Nigeria is ill-fated with bad governance. Thus, urgent and aggressive efforts are strongly required to eliminate these practices that perpetuate the bane of women. At the same time, it is also pertinent for women to apply caution in their struggle for emancipation. This is due to the patriarchal and authoritarian structure in our society, which would always see feminism practised in the extreme as aberrational.

If the way forward, as advanced herein, is committedly prosecuted, there will certainly come a time again when the likes of Dora Akunyili, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and others whose potentials have not yet been brought to the limelight will come to rescue and galvanise our governance and political system, allowing the dividends of democracy to be maximally achieved and development felt in all aspects of our national life.

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